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AYP unfit measure, schools contend

by Alonzo Weston
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Edison Elementary School missed making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) by about 8 percent, said Cheri Patterson, associate St. Joseph School District superintendent. That roughly translates into about five students not answering three or more test questions correctly.

Hardly the definition of a failing school, she added.

"It's basically saying a school is good, bad or indifferent, based on one test given in the spring of the year," Ms. Patterson said. "It's not taking into account the multitude of facts that makes a school a successful school."

AYP is an accountability system mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 that requires each state to ensure that all schools and districts make adequate yearly progress at a predetermined rate. For two years in a row, students' MAP (Missouri Assessment Program) test scores at Hall, Noyes and Edison did not meet the federal AYP requirements.

Students from those schools could request transfers to Coleman, Eugene Field, Hyde or Pershing, schools that for two consecutive years met the federal standards.

Already dealing with public backlash as a result of recent boundary redistricting, the school district finds itself in somewhat of a growing quandary. But it is not alone.

With proficiency targets increasing each year until the year 2014, when 100 percent of students must be at adequate or proficient levels, many school districts face similar problems. At the rate schools are not meeting requirements, many could in a few years not have the room to allow transfers.

"What if we have one school standing?" asked Ms. Patterson, adding that every parent would have the choice to send their child there, "no matter if it means that school population is 1,000 or it means we have to put 25 trailers out there."

According to information from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 64 percent of the 2,210 schools in the state did not meet AYP thresholds. That leaves some school officials and education experts questioning the effectiveness and accuracy of No Child Left Behind AYP testing.

MAP testing differs from state to state. Some states have higher benchmarks than others. Missouri is one of those states with higher standards, said Stan Johnson, assistant commissioner for school improvement with the DESE.

"You'll see states that have a higher percent of proficiency than Missouri, but there is no comparison because it depends on where you put that benchmark," he said.

Mr. Johnson said there is talk of reauthorization of the law. When that happens, the accountability piece will get a second look. This time, he hopes, with an accountability measure geared toward growth.

Don Lawrence, Savannah R-III School District superintendent, said Amazonia Elementary School did not meet AYP standards last year. It reached the bar this year, however. In April, the district was recognized by achieving a Distinction in Performance award, its seventh in eight years.

He said a school should be graded on a number of standards.

"The way the law is written, the vast majority of students can be performing at the expected level, and yet the school or district be considered in need of improvement because one or more of their subcategories isn't performing at the expected level," he said in a report.

Allan Markley, superintendent of the Raytown C-2 school district, also had some schools that didn't meet AYP requirements.

"We sent letters, allowing parents to transfer their kid if they wanted to," Mr. Markley said. "It's amazing that the schools that were in corrective action, they're all making progress, but not enough to satisfy that lofty federal goal."

He said the AYP rating system is extremely complicated. "Unless you're in the education business, you're not going to understand what Adequate Yearly Progress is, except for the fact you met it or you didn't," he said.

The Raytown School District also redrew its boundaries last spring. It helped that the district had a new-school night where students and parents got acquainted with their new schools and

teachers.

"One of the most important things we do here in our district ... is communicate to our parents and our patrons about what is occurring in the schools," he said.

Doug Clements, a University of Buffalo professor who has studied No Child Left Behind, agreed that the reason behind the measure was a noble one. But it fails to take into account the disparity of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, compared to their more affluent counterparts.

He used the analogy of comparing a dentist working in a poor Appalachian county, where the residents had poor dental hygiene, to one working in a more affluent, health-conscious area.

"It's going to take a long time before the dental health of those people approach the dental health of the people that had the advantages their whole life," he said.

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