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EDITORIALS

Puzzling school measures

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Confused about school achievement reports? With good reason – parallel federal and state accountability systems, combined with a new growth-model system and a proposed letter-grade system, create a baffling picture of Indiana school performance. The Indiana State Board of Education addressed results on the accountability measures this week. Here's what they mean, and why it matters:

AYP versus P.L. 221

Simply put, adequate yearly progress is the standard required under the *federal* No Child Left Behind accountability law; Public Law 221 is the *state's* own accountability law, assigning each Indiana school to one of five categories based on three measures – one of which is AYP.

This week, the state board released the federal AYP data for each school and also approved P.L. 221 category placements.

The consequences

No Child Left Behind was the signature education law for the Bush administration. It is up for reauthorization, but progress on an overhaul of the controversial law is stalled. That leaves the current law in effect, including the requirement for all students to pass state tests in English/language arts and math by 2013-14.

More and more schools are being hit by sanctions for not meeting achievement targets under No Child Left Behind, but the consequences apply only to Title I schools, those that receive federal dollars based on the percentage of students they serve from low-income families. When a Title I school fails to make AYP for two consecutive years, it falls into improvement status, with progressively tougher sanctions each year it fails to improve sufficiently. More than half of Indiana's 1,817 schools are subject to the consequences.

P.L. 221, however, applies to *all* Indiana schools. Schools are designated as "exemplary," "commendable progress," "academic progress," "academic watch" or "academic probation" based on ISTEP+ performance or, in the case of high schoolers, performance on English and algebra End-of-Course Assessments. In addition, schools are measured on improvement in the percentage of students who pass the tests and on their AYP status. A school that fails to make AYP for two consecutive years can place no higher than academic progress.

Takeover threat

The most worrisome prospect for school officials is the reach of P.L. 221. When schools have been assigned to the academic probation category for four years, the state sends in a review team and requires an intensive improvement plan. Five Allen County schools were in that lowest category last year; North Side, South Side and Paul Harding high schools reached their fifth year with test results from the past school year, while the remaining two schools, Prince Chapman Academy and Village Elementary, improved.

State Superintendent Tony Bennett indicated in a meeting last week that he's pleased with the LEAD school program Fort Wayne Community Schools launched to address its low-performing schools and that it would give the district some "breathing room" before intervening, as it could under P.L. 221 if

the schools are again placed on probation next fall.

Under a plan approved last month by the East Allen County Schools board, Harding would have been closed next fall and restructured as a magnet school – removing it from the possibility of state sanctions. But a referendum to pay for a district-wide redesign failed Nov. 2, and the Harding closing is off the table for now.

Progress report

Two East Allen schools – Village Elementary and Prince Chapman Academy – showed significant improvement in test scores last spring so that they advanced two categories to academic progress. EACS officials should accept the improvement as evidence that the schools were on the right track.

The district contracted with the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education to overhaul instruction, using a process called “dynamic assessment,” which helps teachers determine what students know and what to do if they haven’t mastered a concept. The contract with the New York-based consultant has ended, but East Allen officials should consider continuing the approach, which clearly showed promise.

Some Fort Wayne schools showed impressive progress, as well. Five FWCS elementary schools moved from academic watch to the exemplary category.

Under the federal accountability system, 25 schools made AYP. Portage Middle School reached the mark for the first time, as did the school district overall.

Continuing confusion

State officials aren’t finished tinkering with the accountability system. Tuesday, Bennett expressed concern that the P.L. 221 measures assigned only 23 schools to the fourth and fifth years of probation – about 1 percent of Indiana’s 1,817 schools. The state should be intervening in the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools, he said.

“The argument can be made that we are not addressing the level you should be,” he told the state board.

But the work the state is doing toward assigning a letter-grade system to schools is far from ready. Under a simulation based on performance alone, only five Indiana high schools would receive an A or B. Of 382 public high schools, 118 would receive a D+.

Pushing ahead with the grade system should raise concerns among lawmakers. In a still-faltering economy, does Indiana really want to suggest to potential employers that its schools are substandard? It’s one thing to push for improvement, it’s another to label your schools as failures under measures that exist nowhere else.

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