

Countywide views of new state school measures vary

BY SUE BUCK
STAFF WRITER

Ernie Bauer, a consultant for research, evaluation and assessment for Oakland Schools, compared a new federal standard for schools success to medicine during a panel discussion on the topic April 9.

Only Title I schools, which receive federal funding to help close the achievement gap for low income students, will be affected by No Child Left Behind sanctions for not meeting adequate yearly progress on assessment tests.

"It's like the federal government coming into doctors and saying all doctors must be proficient in healing all their patients by the year 2013-2014," Bauer said. "But only you doctors who serve low-income patients will be sanctioned if you don't proficiently treat all your patients by 2013-2014."

All Title I schools have been tracking AYP since 1996, said Larry Thomas, director of school quality for Oakland

Schools. Until this year, it was calculated using a completely different formula and in all four content areas - reading, math, science and social studies, Thomas said.

Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, by which NCLB is also known, added accountability, flexibility, parental choices and research-based reform pieces, he added. AYP comprises the "teeth" of accountability. The state-defined assessment is the Michigan Educational Assessment Program.

Bauer projects that by 2013 every district in Oakland County will probably be identified for school improvement. "This does not mean the school is failing," Bauer said. "That's not what the legislation says."

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Dave Belter, assistant superintendent for curriculum for Lake Orion Community Schools, said his district is focused on school improve-

ment. He'd like to see private schools included in the process because now only public and charter schools are involved.

"We believe educating a child takes an enormous parameter of different things, with art, music, physical education, activity programs, and athletics, and all these other components," Belter said. "By only saying that we are testing reading and math, it gives a message to the district of where school improvement should be. That's bothersome to me during budgetary times. We desperately need to get our parents involved in this process."

Teachers are fearful that they might be out of a job in four or five years, Belter said. Sanctions for failure to meet AYP after four to six years could force schools to undergo complete reorganization.

Included in the list of possibilities are firing staff members, significantly reducing administration, reorganizing as a charter school or lengthening the school day or year. Even at two or three years,

districts will be required to use Title I funds to provide transportation to students who exercise their option to move to a school within the district that meets AYP.

LIMITED RESOURCES

Districts have limited resources, said Bill Hamilton, assistant superintendent for curriculum for the Walled Lake Consolidated School District.

"When your focus is so strong on these areas and you only have a certain number of dollars to go around, what gives?" he asked. "A lot of our administrators are wondering, 'What happens to the fine arts program, things that are important to students, parents and the fine arts community?'"

Hamilton advises looking at AYP with caution. "The playing field is not the same for those buildings which are not Title I buildings and those which are," Hamilton said.

When this legislation went through, even noted liberal

Democrat Sen. Edward Kennedy did not have objections to this, nor did education watchdog groups, Belter said.

"The devil is in the details and the details are so maximized," Austin said. "Taking resources from the schools which need it the most first is not addressing the big picture."

Everyone should write their legislators, Belter said. "You will see parents rising up as they see programs being eliminated because the focus in the district will have to shift. Local control has been, 'We want it and the local board puts it in place.'"

"Now our boss is the state and federal government telling us, 'You will do this,'"

Austin advised media who attended the panel discussion to get beyond the nine-word "sound bites" and look at what is really included in the legislation.

ANOTHER VIEW

Tony Dereziński, associate executive director for government relations for the

Michigan Association of School Boards, spoke on the issue at the April 18 Farmington School Board meeting.

"There's a rhetoric issue here," he said, referring to language used in wide-spread media attention on the subject.

The law describes schools as those which are in need of improvement, and doesn't describe them as "failing" schools. "The press always seems to say they are failing schools and that's not what the statute says," Dereziński said.

Dereziński is asking local school districts to write him about any problems they see with NCLB, the effect it is already having, and come up with solutions and recommendations. He believes the Act has flaws and needs to be amended. "There is no funding for a lot of the services, the supplemental services and transportation services," he said. "We're not saying it should be repealed, but it does need fixing."

Tony Dereziński, associate executive director for government relations for the

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SCHOOLS

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annual state objective threshold.

For reading and English language arts, scores needed to reflect at least 38 percent at the elementary school level and 31 percent on the middle school level. In the mathematics category the cutoff was 47 percent for elementary and 31 percent for middle schools.

"It varies from building to building, but we are well above," said Kris Gekiere, director of school improvement and accreditation for Farmington Public Schools. The state came to those cut-

off numbers by ranking all elementary schools based on their scores. Then they came up to the 20th percentile and that's where they set the standard, Gekiere said.

High school reports are expected in the fall.

"They are waiting for enough data. They have to be able to go back three years of data and they don't have enough data together."

The newly released scores are especially important for Title I elementary schools William Grace, Beechview, Langston and Wood Creek. Only the Title I schools would be subject to sanctions that increase in severity for each year the school does not make AYP.

"They were higher than the mark," Gekiere said of those buildings.

Title I is a federal program designed to help close the achievement gap for low-income students. Schools in communities that meet federal income requirements are eligible for Title I funds. The funds are used to help provide a variety of services to students.

Schools can implement Title I programs as either "Targeted Assistance," for identified students only, or "Schoolwide," which focuses services on all students. Title I programs have a strong parent component in addition to the education component for students. There aren't similar man-

dates for private schools.

"They can only force you to do something when it is tied to funding," Gekiere said. "They can't make mandates on you if they don't fund it. That's why the only clout that they have is with Title I, because of the funding."

Sanctions for Title I schools begin with school improvement plans, corrective action or restructuring.

In Phase II, for example, the school district must offer students who are enrolled in the school the option to transfer to other schools in the district not identified for improvement, on a space available basis, and provide or pay for transportation within certain cost limits.

In Phase V restructuring, the school district must continue to offer the transfer option and supplemental services. It must choose one of five actions which include: reopening the school as a charter school; replacing all or most of the school staff who are relevant to the failure to make AYP; enter into a contract to have an outside organization with a record of effectiveness operate the school; turn the operation of the school over to the state, if the state agrees; or restructure the school's governance arrangements in another way that makes fundamental reforms.

In June, the 2002 and 2003 reports will be issued for the elementary and middle school

levels, Gekiere said.

Gekiere said she and Samir Haddad, director of bilingual education, have attended every meeting on NCLB.

She doesn't anticipate any problems in the future. "We should be fine," she said. "When it really comes into play for the higher achieving school districts are 2009 and 2010 when they start to get up toward 100 percent."

However, the Elementary and Secondary Educational Act must be re-authorized prior to the 2013-14 school year deadline. "Who knows, it may change again," Gekiere said.

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