

Journal 10

August 14, 2009

Hello, I'm Del Burns, superintendent of the Wake County Public School System.

The North Carolina State Board of Education released its annual report on school performance last week. Their standards for our schools are called "The ABCs of Public Education," and I want to take a moment to explain where they came from before talking about our own results.

The state's ABCs program grew from an effort during the mid-1990s to emphasize Accountability, a Basic or core curriculum, and local Control. Of course, many things have changed in our school environment since then, from No Child Left Behind to an emphasis on 21st Century Learning, as I discussed last week -- and those have had an impact on the state's standards over time. But what's been consistent in the ABCs is a year-end evaluation of our schools asking two questions: What percentage of your students are performing at or above grade level, and How much progress are your students making from year to year? You may have heard this commonly talked about as growth.

So the schools who earn the highest recognition in the ABCs program -- Schools of Excellence -- are those with 90 percent of their students performing at grade level and are learning more than would be expected of them during a school year. Only five percent of all schools in North Carolina earned that designation, but here in Wake County, eight percent of our schools did so. Schools which have more than 80 percent of their students at or above grade level while meeting growth expectations are called Schools of Distinction. This year, 33 percent of our schools met this goal compared to just 20 percent state-wide.

That kind of performance is a credit to our students, educators, families, and community leaders who are committed to the idea that our children deserve the kind of education that will prepare them for the future and enable them to be lifelong learners.

Tied to last week's announcement of the ABCs was the release about our performance under the federal No Child Left Behind Act's Adequate Yearly Progress standard, which measures the percentage of students in subgroups being proficient in reading and math with an ultimate goal of 100 percent proficiency by 2014.

That's a very high bar. In fact, it's an all or nothing proposition. If a school misses just one of its 19 or 23 or even 29 subgroup targets, it fails to meet AYP. This year, 73 of 99 elementary schools made AYP, with another 18 missing only one or two targeted subgroups. Twenty-one of 30 middle schools met all their subgroup expectations, with another eight missing only one or two. These are results to be proud of.

There were interesting circumstances behind the high school results, however. One of the standards for a school to make AYP is for 95 percent of the students to take the tests, but this year, the federal government decided that our state's alternative test for students in the Occupational course of study wasn't an acceptable substitute for the EOC. So that meant that any of our high schools with more than five percent of their population on the Occupational course of

study failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress based on that standard alone. When we look at our high school performance, two of our 23 high schools met all targets, with another 8 missing only one or two.

Between this strong data from our schools, and the narrowing of the achievement gap I described in my July 24 journal, we know that our schools are moving in the right direction. It's up to us to maintain that progress in meeting our Board's goal -- which is success for not only most children, but every child.

Thanks, and I will talk to you again soon.