

washingtonpost.com

For Some Schools, Progress -- but Not Enough

97 Fail to Meet Federal 'No Child Left Behind' Standards, Raising Questions of Benchmark's Validity

By S. Mitra Kalita
Washington Post Staff Writer
Thursday, September 18, 2003; Page VA03

As soon as Parklawn Elementary School's test scores came in last spring, Principal Susan Akroyd started planning a party. There would be arts and crafts and karaoke. Every child would receive a book and candy.

Akroyd even tracked down the Hershey's Kissmobile and persuaded it to stop by as it toured the East Coast.

But days before the party came the bad news: Despite its progress, Parklawn had not met the targets needed to comply with the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

Still, the party was held Monday as Akroyd thanked teachers and students for their hard work. But in the back of Akroyd's mind lurked the designation of her school as one that failed.

She is not alone. Across Fairfax County, 97 schools failed to make "adequate yearly progress," an individual benchmark schools nationwide must meet to comply with the new law. Virginia schools' assessments are based on their Standards of Learning exam scores.

Schools across Northern Virginia now find themselves in a predicament similar to Park-lawn.

Five years after the SOL tests began, the school in the Alexandria section of the county is just starting to make strides it can measure -- and celebrate. But the progress is not enough to meet the federal requirements.

In fact, not a single school system in Northern Virginia -- an area many families flock to based on the reputation of its schools -- met the federal mark. Most that fell short attribute it to special education and immigrant students who scored poorly on the tests.

The law requires schools to track the scores of subgroups of students -- including whites, blacks, Hispanics and children from low-income families -- and each group must hit the target pass rate on the tests. The target will rise gradually until 2014, when the law mandates reading and math proficiency for 100 percent of students in public schools.

In Fairfax, the list of schools meeting the benchmark was not predictable. Among the schools failing to meet targets were several of the county's higher-performing high schools, such as Langley in McLean, where nine in 10 graduating seniors typically go on to college.

Meanwhile, the 83 schools that met the annual progress requirement included Bryant Alternative High School, whose nontraditional students include teenage mothers and students with behavior problems.

At a news conference last week, Superintendent Daniel A. Domenech pointed to the disparity as proof that an entire school system could not be judged on whether it met the targets.

Many schools, he said, failed because they did not test enough students.

"There's a question mark as to what the validity of this means," Domenech said. "Achievement becomes a small part of this. This erroneously labels schools without the proper validity."

Educators at Woodson High School in Fairfax probably would agree. The school made progress in every category except one -- English for special education students. If a few more students had taken the test and passed, the school would have met the federal requirement, Principal Robert Elliott said. He said school officials plan to appeal the designation because it appears two students who were not counted toward Woodson's progress actually did take the test.

"We're hopeful the state will be able to validate what we are looking at," Elliott said. "The goals of the law are laudable. . . . But the devil is not in the details. The devil is the details."

Indeed, passing and failing becomes a numbers game. Each of the city of Falls Church's four public schools made adequate yearly progress, for example, but the district as a whole did not because its subgroups did not meet the marks.

"The schools are using the information to identify those student groups and look at the curriculum and address any issues that might be there," said Falls Church schools spokeswoman Vicki Knickerbocker.

Many schools failed because they did not test enough immigrant children. More than 40 percent of the state's limited English proficiency students, or 20,974, attend Fairfax County schools, Domenech said. In May, Fairfax followed a state precedent in exempting many immigrant students from the Virginia Standards of Learning exams. The federal government later said it should not have.

"The participation issue will have to be resolved next year," Domenech said. "We're confident that if many of those youngsters had been tested, they would be fine."

Still, the district and principals plan to take the numbers seriously.

In her message congratulating students on Monday, Parklawn's principal was sure to tell students, who tested their way to double-digit improvement in science scores, to work even harder. "We need to keep making improvements!" Akroyd exclaimed to the applause of little hands.

She said she plans a number of coffee meetings with small groups of parents to stress how important the SOL tests are. Some meetings will be held in Spanish; 48 percent of Parklawn's students identify themselves as Hispanic.

The county also has distributed to parents a guide called "Test UP!," which stands for "Take every step to understand and prepare for success." It also plans to begin special test-prep courses in some schools.

Saying he agreed with the spirit and intent of the No Child Left Behind Act, Domenech said he wished the federal government backed up its edicts with resources.

"Part of what we have had to do in Fairfax has been somewhat of a Robin Hood approach," he said, referring to the juggling act schools do to ensure needier students receive resources. "Nowhere is there any funds being directed for this mandate."

ADVERTISER LINKS

[What's this?](#)

Online PSSA Preparation

Try Study Island's online PSSA test preparation today!

www.studyisland.com

OGT/Proficiency Test Help

Guaranteed to raise your OGT & High School Proficiency Test scores

www.ohio-test.com