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Gaps persist despite No Child Left Behind law

By Todd Silberman, Staff Writer

Four years of prodding from the federal government has done little to boost student performance or narrow the achievement gap in North Carolina's schools.

Except for the first year of the No Child Left Behind Act -- the biggest federal foray into public education in more than a generation -- overall student scores on state exams have remained largely unchanged since spring 2003.

Instead, the effort to hold schools accountable for the success of all students has done more to expose disparities in achievement among various groups of students than it has to narrow the divide.

"We have plateaued," said June Atkinson, state superintendent of schools.

If the promise of No Child Left Behind is realized, every student in every school nationwide will be passing his or her state's exams in reading and math by 2014. To some, those are performance levels attainable only in Lake Wobegon, the mythical place where all children are



Omar Gutierrez is ready to answer a question from Donna Ariosa at Merrick-Moore Elementary in Durham.

Staff Photo by Harry Lynch

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above average.

North Carolina, like many states, must make unprecedented progress to achieve that ambitious goal.

And schools with the biggest challenges in the classroom -- those with greater numbers of poor children -- must also make the most progress. But statewide, more of those schools are coming under fire for falling short of yearly goals for student achievement. A growing number of the schools, which receive federal funds to help low-income students, face the prospect of increasingly harsh sanctions for continuing to miss those annual performance targets.

The first sanction allows students to transfer to higher-scoring schools. The final sanction mandates such sweeping changes as replacing the entire faculty and principal and changes in governance that could mean state takeover or conversion to a charter school. While schools that don't receive the federal funds for poor students must report their yearly performance, they are not subject to penalties.

About 300 of North Carolina's schools that receive the federal money -- more than a quarter of all that qualify for the aid -- have been sanctioned at the first level. That's almost twice the number of high-poverty schools that faced sanctions two years ago and 100 more schools than last year. Nearly two dozen schools in the Triangle now must offer students at least the option of transferring elsewhere.

Merrick-Moore Elementary School in East Durham is among those schools. About 90 percent of the students at the school are minorities, and about 70 percent are from low-income families. The school met the state's expectations for yearly progress but fell shy of the federal standard.

Special education students, like those at many schools, struggled to pass state exams at Merrick-Moore. No Child Left Behind requires that every group of students meet federal standards.

Kathy Kirkpatrick, the principal at Merrick-Moore, said she agrees with the concept of No Child Left Behind but, like many educators, worries about its single focus on testing.

"It's a harsh way of looking at schools," Kirkpatrick said.

Still, as a school receiving the federal money, Merrick-Moore is subject to the law's sanctions. Last year, it was required to let students transfer to other schools that had met the federal standard, although few left. And this year, the school must use some of its federal money to pay for private tutoring for low-income students whose parents choose it.

It's unclear that the private tutoring is helping to improve test scores. Of 65 schools statewide last year required to offer tutoring in reading, 47 didn't make enough progress to reach the required passing rate. Some 6,550 students of the 33,153 statewide who were eligible for tutoring last year were enrolled, at a total cost between \$7 million and \$8 million.

Overall, federal funding for Title I assistance for low-income students in North Carolina has increased about 37 percent since the 2002-03 school year, from \$214 million to \$293 million this year.

Demanding program

Schools are falling under the cloud of No Child Left Behind largely because of the program's demanding requirements. Schools must not only meet yearly passing rates as a whole, they also must meet those same targets for individual groups of students, defined by race, poverty and educational disadvantage. An entire school falls short if just one group of students fails to reach expected passing rates in reading or math.

All schools -- elementary, middle and high -- face that same standard. But since few high schools in North Carolina receive the federal funds covered by the law, few are under sanctions. The law's focus on individual groups of students is intended -- as its

name suggests -- to ensure that even those students who have traditionally lagged are making satisfactory progress toward proficiency.

Some Triangle districts have seen slight progress over the past four years, and some individual groups of students have shown significant gains. In Triangle districts, the passing rate for Hispanic students has increased by as much as 10 percentage points on reading exams. Almost 80 percent of Hispanic students in Johnston County and the Chapel Hill-Carrboro district passed the test.

But the increase in passing rates on reading tests among black students has totaled four points or less in Triangle districts since 2003. Statewide, the passing rate in 2005 -- the latest data available -- was slightly less than 75 percent.

Passing rates on math tests dropped for most groups of students, largely because the state set higher grade-level standards this spring. Minority groups saw the biggest dip in performance.

To Joyce Forte, a third-grade teacher at Merrick-Moore, the law has been more help than hindrance. Even though the school has fallen short of the federal standard, she thinks the school is making headway and students are making progress.

"I still feel that we are moving in a positive direction," Forte said. "We are doing more with No Child Left Behind than without it."

Merrick-Moore uses a literacy program aimed at making sure that all students become proficient readers.

Each day at 9 a.m., all classes from kindergarten through second grade provide intensive reading instruction in groups as small as three or four students. Teachers and educators with duties outside the regular classrooms double up in each class to teach reading.

"We're seeing great gains in our kids," Kirkpatrick said. "It's just not to the proficiency level [expected by No Child Left Behind]."

Statewide, evidence of success is also limited. Just 22 of the 193 Title I schools that faced sanctions last year were removed from that list this year. A school needs to meet the federal standards two consecutive years to get a clean bill of health.

Lynn Road Elementary in Raleigh was one of the 22 schools, but it also was no longer accountable for the performance of special education students, one of two groups that had fallen short of the proficiency hurdle. Schools are accountable only for those

groups of students with at least 40 students in third through eighth grades. Lynn Road didn't have to count those students during the past two years because there were fewer than 40.

Jamee Lynch, principal of Hodge Road Elementary School in Knightdale, said schools need to be held accountable for all students, but she disagrees with the federal approach. Hodge Road Elementary, one of two Wake schools facing sanctions this year, spent \$300,000 in federal money last year on private tutoring. The school met the federal standard last year, but it must do so again this year to emerge from sanctions.

"I don't think punishing schools in the way they have improves schools," said Lynch, Wake County's principal of the year. "When you get a label on your school, there's no way to make that positive."

Unlike the state's accountability system, which rewards schools for the progress students make, No Child Left Behind is largely punitive, said David Holdzkom, Wake's assistant superintendent for evaluation and research.

"I really don't think it's helped much," he said. "Threats and intimidation are not the best way to motivate teachers and principals to do a better job."

Yet, defenders of the law say it has pushed the issue of equity to the forefront of the national debate about education.

"That we're not on target to the goal doesn't mean that No Child Left Behind is a failure," said Ross Weiner, a vice president of the Education Trust, a Washington organization that supports the law. Schools, he said, must figure out how to do better.

"What's it going to take to get more people to be innovative," Weiner said, "instead of throwing up our hands and saying the law doesn't work."

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND: A PRIMER

WHAT IT IS: A federal law, enacted in 2002, requires schools to improve student achievement and close achievement gaps among various groups of students. The law requires schools to make progress each year toward having all students proficient in reading and math, based on state tests, by 2013-14. Schools are accountable not only for overall performance but for the performance of specific groups of students: white, black, Hispanic, American Indian, Asian, multiracial, economically disadvantaged, non-English speakers and students with educational disabilities.

NCLB VS. ABCS: North Carolina schools are also evaluated each year under the state's own accountability yardstick, called the ABCs of Public Education. It uses the results from the same year-end tests, but the emphasis is on the progress students overall make from year to year.

ADEQUATE YEARLY PROGRESS: This is the standard that the federal government uses under NCLB to measure school performance. A school's test results are compared with statewide targets, and those targets are raised every three years. The targets must be met by the school and by the groups with at least 40 students in grades in which state tests were given.

FAILURE TO MAKE ADEQUATE PROGRESS: If a school receives federal Title I funding for students from low-income families, it faces sanctions for failure. About half the schools in North Carolina get Title I money. After missing passing-rate targets in the same subject two years in a row, these schools must allow parents to transfer their children to a higher-performing school. After three consecutive years of missing targets, schools also must provide outside tutoring. Schools that continue to fall short must begin taking steps that will lead to changes in leadership, staff and structure.

SCHOOLS THAT DON'T GET TITLE I MONEY: They are not subject to federal sanctions but do risk a tarnished reputation. And under state policy, they are required to revise their master improvement plans.

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