

426 Minnesota schools on need improvement 'list'

James Walsh, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*

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Starting today, more than 400 Minnesota elementary schools will hear for the first time that they will likely be tagged as needing improvement under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, according to a computer analysis by the state education department.

While educators have for months predicted that many schools will make the list, state officials will release details of a computer simulation showing that 426 of Minnesota's 1,007 elementary schools need to improve.

Education Commissioner Cheri Pierson Yecke said the information will be used during training sessions this summer for school district personnel on implementing the law.

State officials stressed that the data are only preliminary -- the first real list based on the most recent test results will be released July 31. But this analysis will help schools get a jump on improving, Yecke said.

And it may startle those who think Minnesota schools are doing just fine -- especially when they see wide and pervasive achievement gaps between white students and minority and poor students.

The findings, based on 2001-02 Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment results for third-and fifth-grade reading and math tests show:

- Ninety percent of elementary schools in Minneapolis and St. Paul need improvement, based on not meeting adequate yearly progress required by No Child Left Behind.
- Urban schools are not alone. Forty-seven percent of suburban elementary schools and 47 percent of large rural-area schools also are expected to fall short. Just 10 percent of small rural schools need improvement.
- Most Minnesota schools need to improve the progress of special-education, poor and minority students. Consider: 55 percent of schools' special-education student scores need improvement, 64 percent of schools' low-income students' scores need improvement and more than 25 percent of schools need improvement based on the scores of black students. Fewer than 2 percent of the schools were identified as needing improvement based on white students' scores alone.
- Fifty-seven Minnesota schools could be required to use money to provide supplemental services to students if they fail to make adequate yearly progress this year. The act requires schools that receive federal Title I money -- based on the number of poor children in the school -- to set aside an amount equal to 20 percent of that for services such as after-school tutoring if they fail to make adequate yearly progress for three years.

Minnesota is developing annual tests for students in third through eighth grade to meet No Child Left Behind requirements. Those tests are expected to be in place in 2005, Yecke said. For now, the state is using the existing state assessments.

A school or school district can "not make adequate yearly progress" in any one of 18 different categories or "cells," state education officials said. Students are tested in math and reading and reported in nine categories: all students; American Indian/Alaskan Native; Asian/Pacific Islander; Hispanic; black; white; limited English proficient; special education, and free/reduced price meals.

Nearly half the schools identified as needing improvement fell short in just one or two categories. That has led some Minnesota educators to question the validity of a law that would label a school as a failure even if the majority of its students are succeeding. But Yecke lauded the act's potential to identify real and specific problems -- not just on average, but for specific groups of students.

To make the act work for Minnesota, she said, the state Department of Children, Families and Learning will be taking three steps:

First, on June 9, department officials will begin holding meetings to help teachers and administrators become familiar with new state academic standards in language arts and math -- as well as in-depth workshops on how the act will work here.

Second, state officials will implement online training to assist schools in identifying weaknesses and putting together a team to manage an improvement plan.

Third, Yecke said, the department will be more aggressive in going after federal grants to fund teacher training and to encourage school innovation.

The state also is moving ahead to implement the federal law.

New academic standards in math and language arts have just become state law. New standards in science and social studies are expected to be developed before the end of the year. The new federal tests will closely align with those standards, Yecke said. And officials will be able to track the year-to-year performance of all students -- even if they change schools or districts -- with the new tests.

Knowing where they fall short with specific groups of students will help educators finally begin to close the achievement gap, Yecke said.

Earlier Thursday, while addressing the wide gap in test scores and graduation rates between white students and other groups, Yecke stressed that educators shouldn't be afraid of higher expectations and tougher requirements. They should embrace them. Following these steps will lead to success, she said.

Yecke referred to a recent newspaper report when she said: "I'm not the first education commissioner in Minnesota to talk about the achievement gap, but I sure would like to be the first one to say we are well on our way to ending it."

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