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Md. students fare better

More schools meet federal target

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A greater percentage of Maryland 's elementary and middle schools met federal achievement standards than in recent years, even as the state raised the bar by requiring more students in each school to pass the yearly tests in reading and math.

Education officials released yesterday the state's annual report of school progress under the No Child Left Behind Act, with about 84 percent meeting targets. Maryland put 169 of 1,129 elementary and middle schools on a list of schools that need improvement, compared with 176 the year before.

In seven school systems - including Carroll County - every school met the standards. But the state's new way of categorizing schools also illuminated the entrenched failure at 59 of the state's troubled schools, many in Baltimore and Prince George 's County. Those schools have failed to meet the standards for at least five years in a row and some for as much as a decade despite repeated attempts at reform.

The state now puts schools that need improvement into categories

of those with comprehensive issues and those that have selected problems among small groups of students. The latter include children in special education classes, those who are learning English, and poor or minority students.

Seventy-seven of the 169 schools statewide that need improvement had just a handful of students that failed the Maryland School Assessment. "I think the subgroup that has the greatest challenges based on our results are in special education. They are followed by English-language learners," said state school Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick.

The state's new system of categorizing schools is intended to address the fact that some schools with small numbers of failing students were subjected to the same draconian measures as those with systemic problems. A school like Hampstead Hill in the city, which has failed to meet the standard for several years because of the passing rates of a few special education students, will not be treated the same as one that has a majority of all its students who are failing.

"They aren't going to say dump all the teachers, change the school leadership," said Ben Feldman, head of testing in the city. Instead, he said, the new system "enables us to do something surgical and strategic" for those special education students.

In Baltimore County, 13 middle schools are categorized as needing improvement, but three of them - Arbutus, Dundalk and Woodlawn - improved their performance enough so that they met the standard this year. A school must meet standards for two years in a row before it can be removed from the list.

Damien Ingram, Woodlawn's principal, attributed the school's progress in part to a mutual commitment from teachers and

students to put forth their best effort and improve daily. "Our teachers' attitude toward being successful was incredible," Ingram said, adding that tutorial programs and the use of "short-cycle assessments" - instruction zeroing in on student needs - also contributed. A school for special education students, White Oak, was on the list of Baltimore County schools that need improving as well.

For Baltimore City, the results were mixed. For the first time, the majority of Baltimore City elementary schools, or 82 of 153 schools, met the federal standards. Last year, only 65 made sufficient progress. "It shows that we are making tremendous growth here," said Mary Minter, the city school system's chief academic officer. "We are going to get better every year."

But 20 of the city's 22 middle schools were on the list of those needing improvement. The only two to meet the standards, Crossroads and KIPP, are charter schools.

In Anne Arundel County, seven of 19 middle schools, two of 77 elementary schools and one alternative school failed to make adequate yearly progress, a virtually stagnant result from last year's figures, according to statistics the county released yesterday.

Though a stubborn pattern among the county's middle schools persisted, with a third failing to meet the federal benchmark, school system officials heralded the success of two middle schools - Lindale and Marley - for making the standard. That means they are being taken off the list of schools needing improvement.

"We still have work to do at some of our schools, particularly at the middle school level, but I am pleased that the large majority of our schools are doing what it takes to meet standards, which rise every year," superintendent Kevin M. Maxwell said in a statement.

Of the seven Anne Arundel schools that need improvement, only Annapolis Middle School and J. Albert Adams Academy had students from across the school who failed to meet the federal standard. Annapolis Middle School is in a category that could require significant changes at the school.

Carroll schools put in a repeat performance this year, with no schools failing to meet adequate yearly progress. Gregory Bricca, Carroll's director of research and accountability, said the accomplishment reflects the district's expectations. "It really is a cumulation of the MSA results that we got weeks ago," Bricca said. Five schools in Howard County - two elementary and three middle - did not meet federal standards this year. The schools are: Bollman Bridge Elementary, Stevens Forest Elementary, Harpers Choice Middle, Patuxent Valley Middle and Oakland Mills Middle. School system officials said that there are plans to redirect additional support to them. "There are forces in place with curriculum [department] to deal with the schools," said Portia White, Howard County 's coordinator of testing. "This system has rallied around these schools and has put the [measures] in place to help them succeed next year."

Superintendent Sydney L. Cousin said there was no need for alarm.

"All of these schools have successfully met our local standard of having 70 percent or more of their students scoring at proficient or above in both reading and mathematics," Cousin said. In Harford County , only Aberdeen and Edgewood Middle schools are on the list of schools needing improvement and each has only a small group of students who did not pass the Maryland School Assessment.

Parents whose children are at schools that do not meet progress for

several years in a row can ask for free tutoring services for their children or can request a transfer to a school not on the list.

School systems will mail out letters to those students who qualify in the next few weeks.

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