

July 26, 2011

The headlines in last week's paper announced that Muscogee County Schools were "among the worst." On behalf of the district's educators I must respond.

Under No Child Left Behind, states must set annual goals for schools to meet. The students in each school are then divided into subgroups: black, white, Asian, Hispanic, students with disabilities, English-language learners, and economically disadvantaged. Each subgroup must meet the goal in order for the school to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). If one subgroup of students fails to meet the goal, the whole school fails to make AYP. The overall goal is for all schools to have 100% of their students meet standards by 2014.

The Preliminary Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) data is clear. The percentage of schools in the Muscogee County School District which met the new AYP goals on the preliminary report is in line with those Districts having the lowest percentage of their schools meeting the goals. We know that several more of our schools will make AYP on the final determination. Some of them missed the goal by fewer than ten students on a single indicator and, after retests are considered and appeals have been determined, more of our schools will make AYP.

Unless you live in this world of AYP with us, you cannot imagine the heartbreak when teachers literally have counted students all year as they have met their formative goals and have mastered standards, only to find that on the test, their school missed the goal by a single student, in a single subgroup. Principals face huge disappointment upon finding out that they needed three more of the students who began ninth grade four years ago to have graduated this year, causing their school to miss the graduation rate goal by less than one percent. A perfect example of this is at Muscogee Elementary School. Muscogee Elementary would have made AYP by reducing the number of students who did not pass the math test by 0.23 percent. That is fewer than one student.

Since there is not enough space here to go through every school and discuss their scores, I want to focus on the data of a few from all over the district which did not make Adequate Yearly Progress in the preliminary determination.

At Midland Middle, 86.8 percent of all students met the standard in math; 93.2 percent of all students met the standard in English/Language Arts. This is not among the worst.

At North Columbus Elementary, 81.9 percent of all students met the standard in math; 93.2 percent of all students met the standard in English/Language Arts. This is not among the worst.

Shaw High School met the bar in percentage of students meeting the standard in math and 92 percent of all students met the standard in English/Language Arts. With laser focus, the teachers and students worked on this goal. This resulted in Shaw making AYP in Academic Achievement but missed AYP on Graduation Rate by 3.5 percent. That is not among the worst.

Veterans Memorial Middle School had 82.9 percent of all students meeting the goal in math; 94.2 percent in English/Language Arts. That is not among the worst.

Fort Middle School had 88.5 percent of all students meeting the standard in English/Language Arts. That is not among the worst.

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Gentian Elementary had 89.8 percent of students meeting the goal in English/Language Arts. That is not among the worst.

Carver High School met the standard in math and had 84.8 percent of all students meeting the standard in English/Language Arts, missing AYP by one subgroup. This is not among the worst.

In our twelve middle schools, let's review the scores. In sixth grade: nine schools increased percentage of students meeting standards in reading; six schools increased in science; eight schools increased in social studies. In seventh grade, nine out of the twelve schools increased scores in reading; five increased in language arts; nine increased in math; ten increased in science; and nine increased in social studies. In eighth grade, eight out of twelve schools increased in reading; five increased in language arts; eleven increased in math; six increased in science and five increased in social studies. Is this not adequate progress?

Spencer High School has gone from having only 50 percent of the students meeting the standards in math in 2009 to 69.7 percent meeting the standards this year. Is that not adequate progress?

The graduation rate for students in the Muscogee County School District continues to improve. Last year we had 82.2 percent; this year we have 83.6 percent. The state average for this year is 79.5 percent. Is this not adequate progress?

Are there some schools in our district which need intensive care and improvement? Yes.

Do we have to review the data with renewed intensity and an increased sense of urgency? Yes.

Do we need to expand our efforts to assist students with disabilities in order to improve their academic achievement? Yes.

Do we have some schools which score significantly higher than others and we need to focus on replicating those promising practices throughout the district? Yes.

We accept that we have much work to do; we accept that our AYP determination at this point puts us in poor company. We accept that we have some great challenges. We do *not* accept that we are "among the worst."

We know how important public education is to this community, to this State, and to this Nation. We do not take that obligation lightly. We will face the brutal facts, we will rework our plans for moving forward, and we will continue to make progress. The community should continue to hold us accountable for the work that we do.

In closing, I must ask one more question. Do we have many schools in the Muscogee County School District that are "among the best?" The answer to that question is a resounding YES!

School begins on August 8. We invite you to visit a public school in Muscogee County. You will be pleased with what you see.

Sincerely,

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Susan C. Andrews, Ed.D.  
Superintendent of Education

Cathy Williams, Chair and Member at Large  
Muscogee County Board of Education