

The challenge of 'persistently low achieving' schools

By Brent McKim
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As Dr. Donna Hargens begins her tenure as superintendent of the Jefferson County Public Schools, it would be worthwhile for the community to pause a moment and consider the challenges we face with her in helping all of our schools succeed, but particularly our schools which are now labeled by the state as "persistently low achieving."

The 5,700 teacher members of the Jefferson County Teachers Association are proud that we have taken bold steps to assist our most challenged schools. We have worked collaboratively with the district administration to develop and implement innovative curricula and programs at these schools. For example, our jointly developed and implemented science curriculum has made JCPS one of

only four large urban school districts that has kept pace with the national average in the area of science.

The JCTA has worked together with the administration to craft agreements allowing for innovative changes in staffing, better use of instructional time, professional development built directly into the school day, and the ability for teachers to meet and work on lessons together to make them better. Additionally, in our most recent contract settlement, JCTA agreed to set aside portions of our labor agreement dealing with teacher seniority and transfer rights, so that a principal at a "persistently low achieving" school can interview every teacher requesting to transfer into the building and only accept those teachers the principal feels are best suited to support the school's vision for improvement. We believe this will give these schools the

best opportunity for success possible.

While the union and the district administration are proud to be working together to help every school succeed, policymakers have created public policy that guarantees with absolute certainty that every year a certain number of our schools will be publicly labeled as failures despite our best efforts to the contrary. Here is essentially how that happens.

Under the federal No Child Left Behind law, the scores on the state accountability test are broken down into subgroups of students. These subgroups include special education students, English language learners, students of color, and so on. All of these subgroups, regardless of the challenges they face, are expected to achieve the same test scores on a single high-stakes annual test. If they do, the school is deemed to have

made "adequate yearly progress" or "AYP."

Each year, making AYP becomes harder and harder because the bar is raised. Eventually, by 2014, if even one student in any subgroup fails to score proficient on both the reading and math components of the high-stakes state accountability test, a school will fail AYP. The U.S. secretary of education estimates that up to 82 percent of schools nationwide may fail AYP in the 2011-2012 school year.

Schools that fail to achieve AYP two years in a row are labeled as "persistently low achieving" if they are in the bottom 5 percent of this "failing" group of schools in reading and math scores.

Because the AYP bar rises significantly every year, the pool of schools failing AYP is growing each year. Even if a school shows significant improvement, unless the school

actually catches up to the bar set by the state, it still fails AYP. Consequently, the number of schools in the bottom 5 percent is growing proportionally.

For example, in 2009-2010, 10 "persistently low achieving" schools were identified. Last year there were 12 more. It is estimated that 21 more schools will be identified this year. Next year there are likely to be more than 30 more schools identified as "persistently low achieving."

As this "persistently low achieving" pie gets larger and larger, it is essentially inevitable that Jefferson County's slice of the pie will increase in roughly the same proportion, which brings us back to our new superintendent, Dr. Hargens. Even if her leadership is absolutely spectacular, the number of failing schools is almost certain to increase every year of her tenure here, until policymakers change

the way "failing" schools are identified. This also means it will be almost impossible for any of our failing schools to improve enough in three years to prevent being labeled as "persistently low achieving" again.

As a community, we need to understand a very simple fact. Even with terrific leadership from our new superintendent, coupled with the union looking for every way possible to be a partner in improving our schools, the number of "failing" schools will likely grow every year until our policymakers change the way schools come to be labeled as "persistently low-achieving." For the sake of our public schools and the students they serve, let's hope that day comes sooner, rather than later.

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