

Failing schools

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By **GAIL SCHONTZLER** Chronicle Staff Write - Bozeman

The number of Montana schools making adequate progress under the federal No Child Left Behind rules will drop significantly this year, from 90 percent to around 71 percent, said Linda McCulloch, state superintendent of public instruction.

That's not because students did worse on last spring's statewide reading and math tests. In fact, test scores are rising.

But the target that schools must hit to get a passing grade under the federal law is rising faster, McCulloch said Monday in an interview in Bozeman.

"Preliminary indications are it will drop to 71 percent n even though our scores increased, and in all other tests our schools are doing better or holding their own," McCulloch said.

"Grading a school based on two subjects on one test given one time in the school year is not a (good) measure of success."

This year, Montana schools must have 83 percent of their students at grade level or higher to be labeled as making "adequate yearly progress" in reading. That's a nine-point jump from last year's target of 74 percent.

In math, the target score is jumping to 68 percent this year, up 17 points from last year's 51 percent.

The targets are moving up because the federal No Child Left Behind Act requires that all U.S. public schools bring 100 percent of their students to grade level or better by the year 2014. So every few years, states must raise the bar for their target scores, which define whether schools are making adequate yearly progress or AYP.

Montana's test scores are scheduled to be released Aug. 22, McCulloch said.

Kirk Miller, Bozeman schools superintendent, said Tuesday that local school leaders are still reviewing the preliminary test scores sent by the Office of Public Instruction, and it wouldn't be appropriate for him to comment until the numbers are officially released.

"We in no way, shape or form believe test scores define completely how our students are doing," Miller said. "However, we want them to do well on the (state) Criterion Reference Test for mathematics and reading as one of multiple

measures.”

Bozeman schools made public in July some preliminary 2008 scores in an annual report on reaching school goals. Those numbers, which could change, showed that 88 percent to 93 percent of Bozeman students were doing well in reading, which would beat the state’s new targets.

However in math, the preliminary numbers showed just 67 percent of 10th graders scored well. If that number remains unchanged, Bozeman High would end up on the list of schools failing to make adequate progress because the new state target is 68 percent.

McCulloch said another reason fewer Montana schools will be labeled as making adequate progress is that federal regulations are changing, so that fewer schools will fall under the definition of “small schools.”

McCulloch, in her last year as state superintendent of public instruction, said she regretted she wouldn’t be in office long enough to see Congress “bury” No Child Left Behind.

The goal of raising 100 percent of students to grade level in reading and math is great, but unrealistic, she said.

And a school can be labeled as failing if any subgroup - such as students living in poverty, kids who can’t speak English, or those with disabilities who need special education help - fails to do well on the test or fails to graduate enough students, she said.

“Next year there will be 50 ways for schools to fail,” under the law, McCulloch said. The law punishes struggling schools instead of helping them with adequate money to hire reading and math coaches or buying better textbooks, she added. As a result, many states are cutting back on teaching social studies, science and arts, eliminating spring break and recess, to focus on the tests.

Congress is expected to rewrite the law sometime after the presidential elections, and enough states have complained that major changes are likely, McCulloch said.

No easy answers to teaching vacancies in Montana – Great Falls Tribune

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It didn't happen overnight that some schools are having trouble filling vacancies with properly qualified teachers. The phenomenon has been around a long time, probably as long as small districts have struggled to lash together financing to maintain their schools. It always becomes more evident this time of year, when schools engage in an 11th-hour scramble to fill vacant positions.

But the combination of time and fiscal pressures, along with more and more specific standards for accreditation, is making it increasingly difficult, even for larger districts, to fill all of their positions with properly credentialed instructors.

The state Board of Public Education now says that almost 30 percent of the public schools in Montana are failing to meet accreditation standards for several reasons, including unfilled positions or having too many instructors teaching classes outside their endorsements. "That causes me great concern," said Kirk Miller, Bozeman's school superintendent and a member of the accreditation board. There are no easy solutions.

Pay is a key issue at a time when many young teachers are willing to shop around for the highest bidder — often out of state. The cost of recruiting is another stumbling block. Many districts offer extra incentives to lure teachers, but again many districts can't afford it.

Raising teachers' pay would seem to be an obvious answer, but in a state where incomes lag the national norms, it's nigh on impossible to ask taxpayers for more money to pay teachers at nationally competitive levels. The faculty gaps — even Great Falls has five openings for speech language pathologists — are just one more manifestation of the funding issues facing public education in Montana.

With tightening No Child Left Behind requirements, the situation isn't likely to improve soon. We don't pretend to have the answers.

Closer cooperation between schools and state colleges to help teachers get the certifications they need is always desirable, and there *are* programs to subsidize teachers' returning to college for additional endorsements.

But those programs apply only to teachers from the most economically troubled districts, and only for certain positions. Maybe the state could expand those programs.

Frankly, however, there *is* a limit to how realistic it is to expect some of Montana's small schools to have faculties fully endorsed in all subjects. "I'm taking teachers that I know to be good teachers and putting them at a position outside their area of endorsement," said Wade Johnson, superintendent in Cut Bank, which is a mid-size district. That's pretty much what smaller districts have always done. The good news for outcomes is that Montana's "education factories" are working with the very best raw materials — our children.

State's top ed official pans No Child Left Behind law
McCulloch says federal stats don't tell schools' full story

**By BECKY SHAY
Of The Gazette Staff**

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Linda McCulloch has never been a fan of the federal No Child Left Behind law.

"I hate the idea that you give one test, once a year and then you judge all the schools based on that test," she said Tuesday during a visit to Billings for a conference on full-day kindergarten.

Montana is facing a nearly 20 percent drop in the number of schools that have passed the federal standard for adequate yearly progress. There is a better way to assess schools, McCulloch said.

Some 90 percent of Montana schools met the grade in 2007. Preliminary results show that this year, 71 percent of schools will pass the AYP standard, McCulloch said. Final progress numbers won't be made public until Aug. 22.

On its face, a 20 percent decrease is scary; it's like a child's grade falling from an A to a C. But not meeting the AYP standard does not mean that schools are failing, McCulloch said.

"The best gauge is to walk out your door and look at your neighborhood school," she said. "How is it doing? Did it decline by 20 percent in the last year? I don't think so."

What happened is that schools didn't clear the rising bar of No Child Left Behind, McCulloch said. The federal law requires that states raise standards every three years so that students will be 100 percent proficient in No Child Left Behind standards by the 2013-14 school year.

For the 2007-08 school year, Montana's "annual measurable objective" increased in math from 51 percent to 68 percent and in reading from 74 percent to 83 percent. Early results suggest that was too much of an increase for students and schools to meet.

"Our schools are holding their own or getting better, for the most part," McCulloch said. "We're progressing, but it's not going to be enough."

Even though she doesn't agree with how No Child Left Behind works, McCulloch said she has always tried to have Montana achieve the standards. That's because it is federal law and millions of dollars are at stake for schools that don't make the benchmarks.

In recent years, schools failing to meet AYP were generally poorer and had more diverse populations, McCulloch said. This year, the failing schools are probably going to be spread across all demographics, she said.

McCulloch said she doesn't like the No Child Left Behind "high-stakes" reading and math tests that show just a snapshot in time. The tests are given each March to students in grades three through eight and to sophomores.

Part of the problem is that tests are given to different classes each year, McCulloch said. That means this year's fourth-graders are compared to last year's fourth-graders, rather than tracking the same kids to see if they made improvements. It doesn't measure individual growth, nor look at other academic areas or schools' efforts.

Montana has started using a more holistic view to gauge AYP in some schools. No Child Left Behind includes a "small-school process" that is an alternative way to calculate AYP. Now, 42 percent of Montana schools are evaluated this way, and McCulloch's staff has applied for all Montana schools to be included. Even Billings could be assessed as a "small school" because the state's largest district is small by national standards, she said.

The method is time- and labor-intensive. Volunteers have done the work the past few years, McCulloch said, because the state has no money to pay them.

The process uses No Child Left Behind test scores to determine AYP, but also analyzes information from several years and considers a variety of items such as schools' action plans and professional development. Some schools still don't meet the standards, McCulloch said, but the process gives a much better picture.

"It looks at trends, it looks at improvement," McCulloch said. "It doesn't just look at that one hurdle."

To reach AYP, schools must pass standards in up to 41 categories. McCulloch called it 41 ways to fail.

The categories apply to all students, six ethnic groups, students who have limited English proficiency, those who receive free or reduced-price meals and are in special education. There is also a qualification for the graduation rate of high schools and for attendance rate in elementary schools.

Ninety-five percent of the students listed in those categories must be tested. McCulloch said she has seen children who were out of school with maladies such as measles sit in the principal's office to test.

If a school misses the mark in even one of the categories, it fails the AYP standard.

The calculation becomes more convoluted as it is applied to districts.

It takes 30 students to make up one of the subgroups, such as special education or students of Asian descent. A single school might not have the numbers to create a subgroup, but when all students across a district are combined, the district may have enough to have to report a subgroup.

In that case, all schools can pass the AYP assessment, but the district fails.

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71 percent of state's schools meet standards

BY KRISTEN CATES • TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER • AUGUST 15, 2008

Linda McCulloch, state superintendent of public instruction, said she was pleasantly surprised to learn the number of schools in Montana meeting the No Child Left Behind Act's adequate yearly progress fell by only 19 percentage points in 2008.

She's surprised because the number of students required to meet proficiency standards in math and reading jumped by 17 percent and 9 percent, respectively, causing the percentage of schools making adequate yearly progress to drop from 90 percent in 2007 to 71 percent in 2008.

"We thought it was going to be more," McCulloch said. "We thought it was going to be down to 60 percent."

McCulloch has been traveling the state, meeting with news organizations ahead of the statewide release next week of individual school scores, to warn them of the reasons behind the dramatic drop in proficiency numbers.

The federal No Child Left Behind Act requires that all schools have 100 percent of their students proficient in reading and math by 2014. That means every few years, the bar has to be raised for the percentage of students testing at a proficient or advanced level.

If a school fails to make AYP more than two years in a row, it is put into improvement status and must offer parents the choice of sending their child to a different school. Schools must also direct federal funding to tutoring programs for reading and math assistance.

After three years or more of not meeting standards, state officials may come and reorganize the school, though it has never been done in Montana.

Sally Mathers, director of federal programs for Great Falls Public Schools, said she and other district officials were anticipating schools here wouldn't do as well this year, either.

Last year, Great Falls High School, C.M. Russell High School, East Middle School, North Middle School and Longfellow Elementary didn't make adequate progress.

Last year, the district had to send out 2,000 letters to parents of Great Falls High and East Middle School students, offering them the choice of transferring their student to another school within the district.

"We'll be doing some of that again," said Superintendent Cheryl Crawley.

This year, Mathers said there will be more schools missing that proficiency targets, but she can't elaborate until the report cards are released next week.

"To make adequate yearly progress, we know it's harder to get that many kids to make that jump," she said. "But I will say I'm very pleased with how well Great Falls did."

Nancy Coopersmith, assistant superintendent at the Office of Public Instruction, said each state is allowed to set its own increments for proficiency standards, but they must be federally approved. In past years, some states

built in small increments for proficiency standards and had one balloon proficiency standard close to 2014 — many hoping the law will go away by then.

But in Montana, each increase has been phased in over a series of three years.

This year, 68 percent of students tested must be proficient in math to make adequate yearly progress, as opposed to 51 percent last year. In reading, 83 percent of students must be proficient to make adequate yearly progress, as opposed to 74 percent in past years.

"There's no way to show how schools are improving," Coopersmith said.

McCulloch said it's a frustrating way of measuring student success, because it doesn't take into account students who earn average grades in those subject areas.

"It's no secret that I'm not a fan of No Child Left Behind," she said. "Proficient is like the A's and B's."

Other factors contributing to more of Montana's 830 schools not meeting AYP include a smaller number of students needed to make a subgroup for testing.

Subgroups consist of populations of students who are economically disadvantaged, minorities, have limited English language skills, and are special education students.

The U.S. Department of Education lowered the number of students needed to make a subgroup from 40 to 30.

Though she has seen NCLB create more benefits for federal reading programs, her office — along with other statewide education organizations — has drafted a letter to Montana's congressional delegation urging them not to reauthorize the NCLB portion of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

"I think it's very artificial and perhaps a damaging thing for our schools," McCulloch said. "I think it's going to be unnerving for the schools and the parents."