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Schools evaluation prompts city action

By LARRY HANOVER
Staff Writer

Some test scores rise dramatically

TRENTON _ Prompted by a report card evaluating city schools on test scores, teacher quality, violence and more, Mayor Douglas H. Palmer yesterday announced the formation of a coalition to turn the findings into action.

The announcement came on a day when city schools Superintendent James Lytle revealed encouraging preliminary findings not included in the report card _ substantial gains in test scores from last spring, including a 20 percentage- point gain in fourth-grade math.

The report card was produced by the Newark-based Education Law Center, which represents students in New Jersey's poorest districts. The nonprofit group evaluated Trenton, Camden, Newark and Union City to try to assess the effect of the billions of dollars in taxpayer money spent on those districts as a result of the Abbott v. Burke school-funding case.

The report did not break new ground. But it did provide a broad summary on the state of Trenton schools, bringing home the difficulty in turning around a district where 60 percent of students live in poverty and more than 2,100 students, or 17 percent, have their education disrupted by leaving or entering school in the middle of a year.

Among the findings were:

- Thirty-nine percent of core academic classes were taught by teachers meeting the federal definition of highly qualified in 2003-04, compared to 90 percent statewide.
- Trenton lags behind other Abbott districts with only one in five special- education students spending most of the day in regular classes.
- No Trenton schools met the federal definition of ``persistently dangerous, but Trenton Central High School came close, qualifying in three of four years.

But the report also spelled out that the district's shift from middle schools to a K-8 setup is bearing fruit, with eighth-graders generally faring better in schools that have changed over.

And, Lytle said, statewide standardized test results seem to be indicating the benefits of court-mandated preschool, launched in 1999-2000, are paying off in the long term.

Preliminary scores this year show increases in literacy and math in third and fourth grades, he said.

Fourth-grade math rocketed from 38 percent scoring proficient or better to 58 percent, he said.

``That's almost unheard of," Lytle said.

But after a year when school violence cast a large cloud on the district, and parents vented their spleen about poor educational performance during a March community meeting sponsored by the mayor, neither Palmer nor Lytle was painting an upbeat picture.

Palmer announced the launch of a citywide organization _ the Coalition for Hands-On Achievement of Necessary Goals in Education (CHANGE) _ with the mission of using the report to develop a plan of action.

“Instead of sitting on a shelf, the Education Law Center research will be our organizing framework,” Palmer said.

The coalition will have eight working groups, each with a school board member and facilitator. Palmer has asked for long-term recommendations by Dec. 1.

The groups will tackle issues such as school safety, magnet schools, special education and addressing Hispanic students' needs.

David Sciarra, executive director of the law center, praised Trenton for being unique among the four cities in trying to use the report's findings in such a concrete manner.

But, he said, “The work that teachers and staff face is daunting.” He pointed to the city's high poverty rate and percentages of students transferring during the school year.

While Palmer, Lytle and Sciarra were full of praise for one another, the report provides evidence of the tension that came from such a grueling review.

Lytle took issue with the report pointing out that the percentage of high schoolers graduating through the alternate exam rose from 29 percent in 1994-95 to 77 percent in 2002-03.

The percentages are decreasing partly because of the number of returning adults attending the Daylight-Twilight program, which has led to the number of graduates more than doubling, he said.

Also, a letter from Lytle reproduced at the back of the report said the district is “not willing to accept full responsibility” for educational struggles that came from being required to implement reforms, supported by the Department of Education and law center, that lacked adequate research.

He pointed to “whole school reform,” a prepackaged model that overhauled everything from curriculum to leadership and budgeting in individual schools.

NOTE: Contact Larry Hanover at lhanoover@njtimes.com or at (609) 989-5726.