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Good Schools or Bad? Ratings Baffle Parents

Sam Dillon

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DARIEN, Ill.- Students are returning to classes across the nation amid a cacophony of contradictory messages about the quality of their education, as thousands of schools with vaunted reputations have been rated in recent weeks as low-performing under a federal law.

School ratings issued under the terms of the president's No Child Left Behind law have clashed with school report card systems administered by some states, leaving parents unsure which level of government to believe or whether to transfer their children, an option offered by the law.

In North Carolina, which pioneered one of the nation's most sophisticated accountability systems, more than 32 schools ranked as excellent by the state failed to meet Washington's criteria for academic progress. In California, 317 schools showed tremendous academic growth on the state's performance index, yet the federal law labeled them low-performing.

Here in Darien, the Hinsdale South High School is one of a dozen prestigious high schools in prosperous Chicago suburbs that failed to meet a federal target and were obligated to send letters to parents explaining their shortcomings and offering to transfer children to other schools.

The conflict between state and federal evaluations has confused hundreds of communities since early August, when class bells began ringing for the fall term in several Southern states. In Florida, Gov. Jeb Bush announced that the state had rated more than two-thirds of Florida's 3,100 schools as high-performing. But three-quarters were rated as low-performing under the federal law.

"We have a school down here that is absolutely extraordinary - all the kids take Advanced Placement courses," said Jane Gallucci, chairwoman of the Pinellas County School Board and a past president of the Florida School Boards Association, "and the feds called it a failing school. Now that's ludicrous."

The mixed messages are creating headaches for hundreds of thousands of American parents considering whether to transfer their children, an option available when a school is declared low-performing for two years in a row because it missed the targets of the federal law, which President Bush signed in January 2002.

Many affluent communities where gaining entrance to elite colleges is nearly an obsession have been rattled by the law's verdict on their schools, which can fall short if not enough students show up for a test or because mentally retarded students do not perform at grade level.

In Darien, Hinsdale South missed one federal target based on low test scores by a handful of disabled students, and the school district, as required by law, sent letters to parents.

Betsy Levy, whose daughter Samantha is a junior, said she found the letter so confusing, she had to reread it several times. "Our school has been very good for us, and seeing it labeled a failure is hard to take," Mrs. Levy said.

When she met with four other Hinsdale South mothers to discuss the problem, she wondered aloud whether colleges would now look down on Hinsdale South applicants. And a friend, Donna Siefer, voiced another worry: How would real estate agents finesse the bad news to potential home buyers? That rang bells for Diane Bolos, president of a Hinsdale South fund-raising group.

"Yeah, did Congress consider what labeling a school would do to property values?" Mrs. Bolos asked.

The law aims to allow children to transfer to better schools, thereby encouraging all schools to improve. But parents at Hinsdale South expressed little interest in moving their children, complaining instead that the law's yardstick was faulty. That was a view shared by Representative Judy Biggert, a Republican who represents the district.

"I never expected to see all these suburban schools on the watch list," said Ms. Biggert, who started her political career as president of the Hinsdale school board in the 1980's and helped write the federal law. She said she was astonished at the list of schools with excellent reputations in wealthy Chicago suburbs slapped with the low-performing label.

"I've been in all these schools and know how good they are and have concerns that so many schools of this caliber are getting labeled," she said.

It is a sign of the law's sweeping influence that the mood in schoolhouses across the nation seems closely tied to its annual verdict on academic progress. In schools like

Cumberland Trace Elementary in Bowling Green, Ky., where students met their test targets, "Life is good," said Patrice McCrary, who teaches kindergarten. "Our classes have jelled nicely this fall."

In contrast, at the Arnall Middle School in Newnan, Ga., where students with limited English skills failed to meet the law's targets, morale is low, said Lorraine Johnson, who was a national Teacher of the Year finalist in 2003. "Teachers are feeling pressure and frustration because Arnall has been labeled."

Eugene Hickok, deputy United States secretary of education, acknowledged that the law had put many schools with great reputations on probation because one or more groups of students had insufficient progress on standardized tests.

"But the point of the law is not to label schools," Mr. Hickok said. "The point is to find out which students are not performing well, and to do something about it." Furthermore, achievement at many schools placed on academic probation last fall has risen since because educators have become more focused, he said.

Among the criteria that have caused thousands of schools to fall short are requirements that disabled students pass the same tests as other students and that 95 percent of students in a school and in every ethnic group be tested. Many states measure schools by other yardsticks, for instance commending schools that help low-scoring students progress rapidly to higher academic levels. But judging how well schools are performing by federal standards is becoming trickier, as rules have changed in recent months. Starting last December, after an outcry from local educators and lawmakers, especially in Republican-governed states, Education Secretary Rod Paige relaxed some regulations considered arbitrary and unfair.

For example, the rule requiring 95 percent participation on standardized tests has been relaxed for some states to allow them to meet the rule by averaging participation over several years. In recent months, federal officials have allowed more than 40 states to amend their school accountability systems in ways that have often made it easier to meet the federal standards, said Patricia Sullivan, deputy executive director at the Council of Chief State School Officers, which represents state superintendents of education.

It is too soon to tell exactly what impact this will have on the number of schools labeled low-performing. Despite a federal rule requiring states to identify schools missing federal targets before the resumption of classes each year, many states have missed the deadline. A year ago, the law labeled 26,000 of the nation's 93,000 public schools as low-performing. So far this year, 26 states have reported their numbers. Last year in those states, 13,423 schools missed the targets. This year, the number is 10,918, said Scott Young, a policy specialist for the education program at the National Conference of State Legislatures.

In Georgia, Delaware and Kentucky, for instance, a higher percentage of schools met goals than last year. But in other states, including Iowa, Oregon and Minnesota, the number of schools on academic probation has greatly increased.

[In New York City, the number deemed failing for the second year running dropped to 328 from 366, according to a list released Friday by officials in Albany. Many of the schools have built dazzling reputations for educating immigrant and minority students who have floundered in other schools, said Ann Cook, an expert and a co-director of Urban Academy, an innovative school with a national reputation and not on the low-performing list.

Manhattan Comprehensive Night and Day School, Ms. Cook said, has been doing so well reaching out to young adults, it was recently profiled on the television program "Now With Bill Moyers." Yet it is on the list.

"Calling these schools failures is like sending cancer patients who are deathly ill to Sloan-Kettering, and when they die, you say, 'Let's hold Sloan-Kettering responsible,'" said Ms. Cook, a frequent critic of the federal law.]

Among the states that have not yet publicly identified schools falling short this year are Connecticut and New Jersey, both of which had highly regarded schools put on academic probation last year.

In Westport, Conn., the Bedford Middle School, where test scores are often among Connecticut's highest, was called low-performing because the school failed to meet the 95 percent standard for testing for the disabled by one student.

"It really bugs me that we got a black eye for a mechanical reason rather than for anything legitimate," said Dr. Elliott Landon, Westport's superintendent.

Montgomery High School in Skillman, N.J., was honored by the federal Department of Education as a Blue Ribbon School of Excellence in 1993, and last year its mean SAT score of 1220 was 194 points above the national average. But Montgomery, too, failed to meet federal targets last year because one student's absence brought the school afoul of the rule requiring that 95 percent of students take standardized tests.

But even some of the law's supporters are concerned about great schools being labeled as low performers this year. Former Gov. James B. Hunt Jr. of North Carolina, who now heads an institute bearing his name that studies education policy, called No Child Left Behind "a good idea that is helping us ensure that all children learn."

But Mr. Hunt took umbrage when he saw that it labeled Leesville Road High School, in Raleigh, N.C., as a low performer. North Carolina's grading system rated it an excellent and high-academic-growth school.

"I've visited Leesville, and this is one great school," Mr. Hunt said. "This business of No Child Left Behind contradicting our state systems is very confusing for parents. We need to work this out so that states aren't telling them one thing and the feds something else."