

Some Oregon schools face sanctions for poor test results

Only 64 percent of Oregon schools make the grade in 'No Child Left Behind' plan

JULIA SILVERMAN
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

PORTLAND — More than 370 Oregon schools have been pegged as needing improvement under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, according to data released Thursday by the Oregon Department of Education.

That law, the centerpiece of the Bush administration's education agenda, requires schools to bring increasing percentages of their students up to grade level in math and reading every year, or face sanctions, ranging from paying for tutors to being taken over by the state or a private company.

This year, about 40 percent of students had to be at grade level for schools to escape the "failing" tag; just 64 percent of the state's schools managed to hit that target, slightly worse than last year's total.

State education officials didn't hide their disappointment with the results, which were particularly bleak for the state's high schools: only 23 percent of high schools met the performance targets, compared with a relatively healthy 75 percent of elementary and middle schools.

"We are concerned," said Susan Castillo, the state's schools superintendent. "This is about identifying areas that need improvement in our

schools, and helping them improve." For the great majority of the 371 schools, the only effect of the poor ratings will be negative headlines. Only schools that receive Title I funding, which is earmarked for socio-economically disadvantaged schools, face the sanctions this year.

And even Title I schools must lag behind performance targets for two years in a row in the same subject area — either math or English — before the sanctions are triggered.

That leaves just 44 schools facing the sanctions, most of them clustered in the Portland metro area, the Salem-Woodburn corridor, and in Klamath Falls, one of the higher-poverty regions of the state.

"We anticipated this, but it is discouraging," said Jim Ferguson, the principal of Ponderosa Junior High School in Klamath Falls, one of the schools that will face sanctions. "I just wish the government would realize that improvement is what counts, not two-year averages."

The federal targets are difficult to meet because schools are measured not just on overall performance but by how well different groups of students do, including blacks, Hispanics, economically-disadvantaged students and those in special-education classes.

If even one of those groups fails to hit the targets on tests or attendance levels, an entire school can be classified as "needing improvement."

Most often, entire Oregon schools don't make the required progress because of the performance of special-education students, those who are still

learning English, and socio-economically disadvantaged students.

Thursday's results did yield some interesting statewide trends. For example, schools that received Title I funding posted far better results than their non-Title I counterparts, even though the former must contend with a less-privileged student body.

Education officials speculated that the results were proof that the money going into Title I programs was paying off, and that the federal sanctions hanging over the heads of Title I schools might be motivating them.

"This really shows that when schools are given the resources they need to focus on classroom instruction, we see student success," said Gene Evans, spokesman for the Department of Education.

There were also some bright spots. In addition to the solid performance by the state's elementary school, 81 schools that were tagged as needing improvement last year met the standards this year, freeing them from any sanctions.

But in the future, non-Title I schools that fail to make significant progress two years in a row won't get off with just bad publicity, Castillo said.

In the future, such schools might receive more professional development for their teachers, or technical help from the state, Castillo said. If such help fails to make a dent in student results, Castillo said, there might be state "intervention" in the schools.

Julia Silverman is a writer for the Associated Press.

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"The question in this case is whether elected public officials have to uphold and enforce the law as written or whether they can apply the law according to their own personal whims," said Benjamin Bull, the Alliance Defense Fund's chief counsel. "If it's the latter, our uniform system of laws would be

reduced to a patchwork of disparate rights and obligations based upon the beliefs of local officials."

Kendell, of the Center for Lesbian Rights, agreed leaving the licenses in legal limbo for about year — until the Supreme Court gets cases now percolating through lower courts — "will result in some uncertainty."

Lisa Liff is a writer for the Associated Press.

GTFF

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The GTFF won a decisive victory on the issue of the University's practice of hiring graduate students for hourly wages, Cecil said.

The new contract language states the University cannot hire graduate students unless they are working under contract, resolving what was one of the negotiations' most contentious issues. The GTFF said the old language was unclear. The new policy clearly states the University must give hired graduate students a salary, a full tuition waiver and health care benefits.

"It's a simple declarative sentence," Cecil said.

King said the new language "clarifies the work to be performed by GTFFs."

Cecil said mediation was successful, where nine months of negotiations were not, because mediator Wendy Greenwald made it possible for negotiators to interact without the flares of ego that nine months of negotiations can cause.

"There are times when having a third party to relay offers without the personality conflicts can help," Cecil said.

Lindgren said he thinks mediation went well because of GTFF demonstrations, including Empty Campus Day, held Aug. 4, which showed the University that the GTFF had member support.

King said events like Empty Campus Day had no real effect on negotiations. The University was ready and willing to settle the contract long before the event took place, she said.

No decision was made about undergraduate labor during mediation, Lindgren said. The GTFF's chief

complaint in the matter was that certain departments are using undergraduates to do work the union sees as usually reserved for GTFs.

"We think the contract already bars undergraduates from taking our jobs," Cecil said.

The GTFF has filed grievances against what it sees as the three biggest offenders: the math, English and biology departments. Lindgren said the University had already ruled on all three cases, ruling that the actions of the math and English departments are legal and actions of the biology department illegal. The GTFF plans to go to arbitration over the English and math department rulings later in the year, Lindgren said, adding that the biology department was found to be violating the GTFF contract, representing 15,000 hours of graduate labor lost annually.

The University did not accept the GTFF's proposed remedy for the situation, which asked that the biology department stop hiring undergraduates and that the GTFF be paid back the dues they would have received had that work been done by union members, roughly \$5,000.

"The University said that biology was wrong but that there would be no compensation," Cecil said.

With negotiations over, the GTFF can now back down from its threat of a strike, but with unanimous support from the GTFF Executive Council, the threat was very real, Cecil said.

"We were confident in our ability to get our 60 percent strike vote," said Cecil.

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