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ARE THESE THE DISTRICT'S 'LOWEST PERFORMING SCHOOLS?' THERE ARE MANY PROBLEMS WITH THE LABEL USED TO DESCRIBE 86 SCHOOLS NOW TARGETED FOR REFORM

Paul Socolar

In October 2001, when former Governor Mark Schweiker announced plans for taking over management of schools in Philadelphia, he promised that dramatic intervention would take place at the District's "60 lowest performing schools."

Ever since, references to the system's "lowest performing schools" have cropped up regularly in media coverage and conversation about the takeover. That phrase has been frequently attached to the 86 schools at the center of the District's reform program.

Schweiker's plan didn't name which 60 schools he considered to be the city's lowest performing, but he called for turning over management to private education providers like Edison Schools Inc. at these schools, while other schools would experience less drastic interventions.

Six months later, the newly appointed School Reform Commission announced its reform plan. The SRC picked 70 Philadelphia schools in which to intervene, and said they were chosen based on their low standardized test scores. Of these, 45 were ultimately turned over to outside managers, including Edison, 21 were to be "restructured" by the District and four were to be converted to charter schools. Sixteen additional schools with low test scores were allowed to continue under their current management because scores at those schools were steadily rising.

But the label "lowest performing schools" has stuck to all these schools. A memo prepared by the District this spring for Philadelphia City Council and distributed to the media refers to reforms affecting "the District's 86 lowest performing schools."

"I hope we can drop the label 'lowest performing schools,'" said Deputy Chief Academic Officer Ellen Savitz, who oversees the schools affected by the takeover. "It's demeaning to the kids and the parents."

Branding the 86 schools the District's "lowest performing" is also plainly inaccurate.

Even based on the test score standard used by the SRC to rank schools and then to select these 86, they are not the lowest ranked schools in the District.

Low-scoring schools left out

The SRC's standard was the schools' combined reading and math score on the 1998-99 PSSA test, the state's standardized test given every spring. But there are 23 low-ranked schools that were passed over because they were high schools, discipline schools, or other specialized schools, which the SRC was not prepared to include in the takeover.

The ranking of schools by the SRC never incorporated more than a dozen elementary schools where test scores are consistently low. The reason: they are K-4 schools, and the PSSA exam was not yet being administered in any of those grades, though they have scored poorly on other standardized tests.

Debate about whether the 86 schools were actually the system's lowest performing raged last April as the SRC was deciding the fate of these schools. A host of criticisms were raised about why the criteria used by the SRC for targeting these schools were not fair:

- Many of the targeted schools had received awards from the state for improving their test scores.
- The test data used by the SRC to rank schools were already three years old.
- The SRC used results on the PSSA test even though it was the SAT-9 test that was being emphasized at the time.
- By starting with a test score standard, rather than other indicators, the SRC ended up with a group of schools with high poverty populations and virtually all students of color.

Savitz told the *Notebook* that the District usually tries to rely on multiple measures to assess schools. But in identifying the 86 schools, the SRC relied solely on the results of the PSSA test.

"Whether that's a fair way to judge a school is a question," she stated.

Savitz said she preferred to describe the targeted schools as ones "where the kids need major support in reading and math."

"There are other schools that were not on the list of 86 that appear to really need major support," she added.

A *Notebook* analysis of last fall's results from the District's first use of the new TerraNova standardized test given to students in grades 3-10 shows that the vast majority of the 86 schools targeted by the SRC because of low scores on the state test are in fact among the schools that score the lowest in reading and math on the TerraNova exam.

But some schools' standings on the TerraNova are very different. Sixteen of the 86 schools labeled "low performing" appear in the top half of District schools overall, when schools are ranked based on their combined reading and math scores on the fall 2002 TerraNova.

The takeover schools whose combined reading and math scores on the TerraNova are above the midpoint for the District are Cook-Wissahickon, Dunbar, Cramp, Heston, Blankenburg, Martha Washington, Kinsey, Comegys, Central East, Pennypacker, Anderson, Leidy, Ferguson, Cassidy, Huey, and Emlen.

Most of the District's comprehensive high schools are clustered near the bottom on the TerraNova. The results provide CEO Paul Vallas with ammunition for his plans to redirect to the high schools some of the extra funding provided to the 86 schools affected by the takeover.

The fact that the PSSA and TerraNova are different tests—one measuring performance on state standards and one based on national standards—accounts for some of the variations in the rankings, according to Joe Jacovino, chief accountability officer for the School District.

Jacovino added that when comparing fall TerraNova scores with PSSA results from three years earlier, "It's not surprising that there have been some changes, both increases and decreases."

Whether the gains some schools have made will stick - and whether the label "lowest performing schools" will stick - remains to be seen.

Paul Socolar is Editor and Director of the Philadelphia Public School Notebook, an independent quarterly newspaper that serves as a voice for parents, students, teachers, and other members of the community who are working for quality and equity in Philadelphia's public schools.

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