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City's public schools reach AYP in math, reading

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MIDDLETOWN – For the first time since the 2001-2002 school year, Middletown Public Schools will be celebrating as they join the growing list of Connecticut schools to have achieved adequate yearly progress (AYP) as defined by the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act.

This marks four years of steady progress for the area's schools, particularly for economically disadvantaged and minority students. It also represents a huge jump in progress among students at Woodrow Wilson Middle School and Keigwin Middle School, who after eight years of failing to achieve this goal, made AYP.

"We are very proud of our students," Superintendent of Middletown Public Schools Michael Frechette said. "I think that they show what our folks have been doing is only showing some significant gains.

"It has certainly been no easy task," he added. "It's been hard work, especially for our students."

Middletown, which was considered to be one of the state's most troubled school districts only two years ago, has now joined the ranks of almost three quarters of Connecticut's public schools — 72 percent — to meet the NCLB standard.

Still, 281 schools and 37 school districts failed to meet the federal standard, which is based on the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMTs) scores of third through eighth graders and the Connecticut Academic Performance Test for tenth graders. Approximately eight out of 10 students are required to meet proficiency in reading and writing to meet the NCLB requirements.

According to Frechette, Middletown has made significant strides in closing the achievement gap between students, particularly those who are economically disadvantaged.

One of these initiatives includes the creation of data teams, which were created to review student performance, revise teaching strategies in the classroom and craft new tests to measure progress, Frechette said. All are part of the Connecticut Accountability for Learning Initiative (CALI), a program developed by the state to encourage schools to better use student performance data to

enhance learning.

"I think our improvement is largely due to the data teams," Frechette said. "It's due to our teachers looking over the data and meeting the students' needs through instruction."

Another initiative includes a program launched for the first time this past summer.

"For the first time we put together this summer program for 500 at-risk kids," Frechette said. "We focus on the areas of literacy (reading), numeracy (mathematics) and fine arts."

The program, designed to lower retention rates in students during the summertime, is collaboration between the schools and local organizations including the Green Street Arts Center, Oddfellows Playhouse, Wesleyan University and Liberty Bank.

"Too often the summer comes around and kids lose the information they got in school," Frechette said. "This will help prevent that."

There has also been a high attendance in the area's summer schools, according to Frechette.

Jon Romeo, principal of Macdonough Elementary School, said that teachers from the school will be participating in a "Back to School Neighborhood Walk" to foster communication and strengthen relationships between students, faculty and families.

"Teachers will hit the streets to visit each of our students' homes to deliver back to school information and greet families," Romeo said. "It's a great outreach activity for our staff and is sure to be well received by children and families."

Though progress at each school has been duly noted, officials said they are particularly excited about the progress of low-income and minority students who have traditionally been known to fall behind white and affluent students.

Among black Middletown students, 74 percent met the proficiency standard in mathematics on the CMTs, while 62 percent of black and low-income children and 63 percent of Hispanic students scored at proficient levels. Last year, only 64 percent of black students achieved proficiency in math. Black, Hispanic and low-income students had each scored approximately 53 percent in reading a year earlier.

The city's two middle schools and three elementary schools are currently considered to be "in need of improvement," according to the State Department of Education. This year, all five of these schools achieved AYP standards. If they do so again next year, the schools will be removed from the "needs improvement" list.

Assistant Superintendent Barbara Senges told the CT Mirror that being part of the "dirty dozen" has been a great, albeit ironic, blessing.

"In a way, getting to be one of the dirty dozen was one of the best things that ever happened to us," she said.

Frechette agreed saying that it forced the district to implement immediate change within the district.

AYP is a means of measuring, through standards and assessments, the achievement of the NCLB goal of 100 percent proficient by 2014. It is determined for the entire student population as well as

“subgroups” within that population.

Those subgroups are identified as racial/ethnic groups, students with disabilities, English language learners and economically disadvantaged students (as measured by participation in free and reduced-price meal programs).

Approximately 40 percent of Middletown students who took the CMT in the spring of 2010 are considered to be a part of this subgroup out of 2,400 students overall.

In total, about 72 percent of schools met NCLB standards on 2010 standardized tests, this number up about 60 percent from the past two years. Two hundred and eighty-one schools statewide did not meet the standards.

Schools make AYP if the students in each of the subgroups meet the targets for the percent of students meeting or exceeding the reading and writing standards on the state’s CMTs. They must also meet the participation and the attendance or graduation requirements set by the state.

According to Frechette, Middletown’s schools will continue with the district improvement plan implemented three years ago. This year’s focus is on culture and climate.

“We’re not changing anything we’re doing,” Frechette said. “If you improve the culture and you improve the climate, you will improve students educational experience overall.”

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