

Feds, state impact schools more and more

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
Thursday, 11 April 2013 14:43 -

Accountability driving testing, funding given

As federal and state funds for education dwindle, accountability from these sources rises.

That's the message shared by three District 20 school administrators during a Stakeholders meeting April 3.

About 16 people from the community attended the meeting in the Gothenburg Library community room to learn about federal and state impact on local schools. They were asked to share what they found out with at least three people.

Driving the accountability piece, the administrators said, is No Child Left Behind legislation that funds federal programs aimed at improving student performance by increasing state and school district accountability.

The legislation also offers flexibility, through vouchers, as to which schools children can attend.

Vouchers, supported by federal funds, are given to students to attend charter schools which are more common in more heavily populated areas, according to Dudley Elementary principal Jim Widdifield, who also coordinates the Title I program.

Schools that don't perform well academically can lose federal funds, Widdifield said, noting that districts must show adequate yearly progress by meeting proficiency in several subject areas in which students are tested.

Teachers teach to different standards that appear on various tests and "we start Day One," he said.

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So far, District 20 students have made adequate yearly progress and met proficiency standards.

Dr. Mike Teahon, school superintendent, said assessments or tests are supposed to improve instruction while accountability is for politicians and the public.

That's because test scores can't be compared school to school because of different demographics, he said.

For example, Gothenburg has a low poverty rate (for free- and reduced-price lunches) at 29% compared to neighboring Lexington with nearly 79% of its student body qualifying.

The state's average poverty rate is nearly 44%.

Ryan Groene, junior high principal and curriculum and assessment coordinator, said he thinks there's more accountability through state and national tests administered now than through assessments developed by local teachers throughout the state.

Until a few years ago, Gothenburg and other districts across Nebraska used the School-based Teacher-led Assessment Reporting System (STARS) until the state was forced to use another system known as Nebraska State Accountability.

NeSA is a system of criterion-referenced tests in reading, mathematics, science and writing.

Students also take MAPS (Measure of Academic Progress) that measures a student's academic progress.

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Classroom assessments by teachers are still administered.

Groene said the accountability piece of NCLB puts a lot of pressure on schools because it comes down to who is a good test taker.

“Some kids are good at math and some are good at language arts,” he explained. “Some are good at both.”

To do the best they can on test day, Widdifield said breakfast is brought in for elementary test takers.

“We restructure our day so we’re as prepared as possible,” he said, noting that a one-day snapshot of student accountability is not an accurate view of how students perform August through May of each year.

Test results are sent to state and federal officials who conduct research to see what districts are not doing well.

“The state asks for data on everything,” Groene said.

One good thing about NCLB legislation, Teahon said, is that teachers collaborate more on what and how they’re teaching and assessing students.

“It’s forced us to work together and there’s a more team-oriented atmosphere,” he said.

Through NCLB, Widdifield said states that apply for and receive federal grants, can get additional federal money to disburse to school districts, many of which have high poverty and special education rates.

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Teahon said grant-based systems don't work well in rural areas because fewer schools are successful in getting big grants .

He noted that many larger schools have full-time grant writers that apply for grants while smaller schools do not.

Formula-based funding, that occurs through state aid in Nebraska, takes demographics into account and spreads money more evenly in rural areas, he said.

But as state and federal funds become less, he said more reliance will be needed on local funds.

Because valuation increased last year in District 20, Teahon said an increase in state aid in is unlikely.

Interestingly, he said about 71% of the increase in state aid for 2013-14 will go to public schools in Lincoln and Omaha and surrounding metro areas.

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