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Off the Beat: City schools report mixed bag with MCAS results

By CATHERINE BAUM
Staff Writer

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NORTHAMPTON - Northampton elementary school students failed to meet the federal goal set for them in math and English language arts MCAS scores, but school officials have plans to improve next year's results.

Northampton School Superintendent Isabelina Rodriguez said the district hired reading and math interventionists for the middle and elementary schools, and plans to increase its professional development and provide after-school tutoring. Small group instruction during the school day is also aimed to help boost MCAS scores, she said.

"We'll be right on top of it," Rodriguez said.

Despite struggles at the elementary level, city schools continue to score higher than state averages on MCAS tests, a trend that reflects the hard work inside city classrooms, Rodriguez said.

Northampton students scored higher than the state in all grades in English language arts as well as Grade 3 in reading, grades 7 and 10 in mathematics, and grades 8 and 10 in science and technology. The school district has a high performance rating in English language arts and a moderate performance rating in mathematics.

Statewide, the majority - 54 percent - of schools failed to meet their federal goal, known as Adequate Yearly Progress, which is set by the No Child Left Behind Act and measured in part by MCAS results.

The aggregate of Northampton students met their federal goal in math and English language arts, while low-income and special education subgroups failed to meet their goal. Each year standards are set higher for schools, as the No Child Left Behind Act aims for all schools to score proficient by 2014.

For the third year in a row, middle school students met their goal in English, and, for the first time in three years, middle school students met their goal in math.

"That shows that the staff and administration at the middle school continue to work really hard at trying to figure out a way to meet the needs of students," Rodriguez said. Professional development, differentiated instruction and realigned curriculum helped to improve middle school MCAS scores, she added.

Meanwhile, Smith Vocational and Agricultural High School students failed to meet the federal goal in English language arts and math. The district is listed in improvement year one in math and improvement year one for subgroups in English language arts.

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Dinner and conversation

Conversation with adolescents at the dinner table can be a challenge, so to make things easier for busy families and to observe "Family Day - A Day to Eat Dinner with Your Children," Look Park and

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10 local restaurants will provide special family discounts, engaging activities and place mats with conversation-starting questions from 4 to 7 tonight.

Several hundred families are expected to gather tonight at Look Park, which waives entrance and picnic site fees in honor of Family Day. Friendly's Ice Cream Corp. will donate ice cream there. The park will also offer free train rides from 4 to 6 p.m.

Family dinners are important, Family Day founders say, because data shows when children feel connected to their families, they are less likely to engage in risky behaviors like drug use. The national holiday is celebrated locally thanks to coordination by the Strategic Planning Initiative for Families and Youth coalition, and the youth and family education department of the District Attorney's office.

"The big message is it's not what you eat or where you eat it, it's that you're doing it together as a family - hopefully not just today, but throughout the year," said Gail Gramarossa, specialist for Strategic Planning Initiative for Families and Youth.

Regular dinners are opportunities for parents to check in with their children about interests, academics friendships, peer pressures and what's going on in school, Gramarossa added.

Family Day event flyers are posted in Northampton schools and invitations went home to parents. Restaurants participating in special Family Day discounts tonight include Amherst Chinese, Bluebonnet Diner in Northampton, BridgeSide Grille in Sunderland, Chandler's Restaurant in South Deerfield, Village Pizza in Easthampton, Joe's Cafe Spaghetti & Pizza House in Northampton, Hawley's Family Restaurant in Belchertown, Holiday Pizza in South Deerfield, Route 9 Diner in Hadley and the Smithsonian Neighborhood Grill & Bar in Hatfield.

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Special education

When Hampshire Regional Schools Superintendent Craig Jurgensen stepped down as Northampton's special education leader to take the post in Westhampton this summer, the school district had a void to fill. Rather than hire an immediate successor, Superintendent Isabelina Rodriguez awarded an \$85,000 contract to Futures HealthCore, which specializes in special education management services.

Jack Kelley and Rose Carr, of Futures, came on board earlier this month, chairing team meetings and providing consultation and support staff in the district's special education department. Recently, they worked on a grant to hire literacy interventionists.

"They are out and about in the schools; They're working the system," Rodriguez said.

The Futures HealthCore contract is funded by the \$90,150 formerly allotted for Jurgensen's salary. Kelley and Carr's recommendations will be considered when the district looks to craft a job description for Jurgensen's successor, who is expected to be hired before the end of the school year, Rodriguez reports.

Catherine Baum can be reached at cbaum@gazettenet.com.

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