

Bethlehem Area PSSA test scores improve

School district meets standard, but officials fear state budget cuts threaten progress

By Tim Darragh | OF THE MORNING CALL

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The Bethlehem Area School District has worked its way off the state's academically troubled list, defying the trend of struggling urban districts in [Pennsylvania](#).

"It's huge," Superintendent Joseph A. Lewis said of preliminary Pennsylvania System of School Assessment math and reading scores released by the state Department of Education this week. The district as a whole met the state's adequate yearly progress status, a year after attaining the "making progress" level, which followed two consecutive years in substandard "corrective action" status.

But district officials tempered their satisfaction over the districtwide improvement with concerns that the very programs that helped elevate scores will be gutted in a forthcoming state budget.

"What scares me is we made progress because we're tutoring kids by the hundreds" as well as undertaking programs such as creating teaching teams and small-group and professional learning communities, Lewis said. "And all that money's going to dry up tomorrow."

Lewis referred to the ongoing battle over the state budget, pitting a Senate Republican proposal against one put forward by Gov. Ed Rendell. Rendell proposes increasing the basic education subsidy using federal stimulus spending. He would use other federal tax money to make school spending more equitable among districts. The [GOP](#) alternative plan would reduce state spending on public schools to 2006 levels, and then use federal stimulus money to fill the gap, essentially maintaining 2008-09 funding levels.

Less money for tutoring, for instance, would limit purchases of additional copies of software for a program such as Read 180, which has had an "incredible" impact on students' reading proficiency, he said.

About a third of the district's elementary school students receive some form of tutoring, said Eric Smith, principal at Spring Garden Elementary School.

Despite the grim budget news, the district's administration, teachers and students should take pride in their overall improvement, Lewis said. "Our programs have taken hold," he said. "I think it's validation that what we're doing is working."

Among other regional districts that fell in ranking last year -- including [Bangor](#) Area, Stroudsburg Area, Pocono Mountain and Allentown -- Bangor also reported districtwide improvement. Bangor, which had been in "warning" status, returned to meeting standards, said Superintendent John F. Reinhart. "That was very important for us," he said.

Like Lewis, Reinhart said Bangor's progress is jeopardized by any cuts in funding through Harrisburg.

"I would be very disappointed to know that the state would deem it necessary to withdraw the funding and the support that they've given us now that we've moved forward," he said.

Pocono Mountain, Allentown and Stroudsburg did not report their preliminary results.

Lewis reiterated complaints that the state's testing system punishes districts like Bethlehem's, which have large populations of students with disabilities and are learning English as a second language. "It's very rare" for such a district to climb out of corrective status, he said.

Still, the district has work to do. Liberty and Freedom high schools still have not met the state's adequate yearly progress standards, although Liberty made "tremendous gains," Lewis said. With the exception of Broughal Middle School -- which he said has the district's highest concentration of special-needs students -- Bethlehem's middle schools also made the grade, Lewis said.

The state this week released the preliminary assessments directly to the districts. They have a period of a few weeks to appeal school scores. The department will release final grades for all the districts to the public following the appeal period.

To determine adequate yearly progress, the state rates every school district and each school based on math and reading scores of third- through eighth-graders and 11th-graders. Test participation, attendance and graduation rates are also factors.

tim.darragh@mcall.com

610 778-2259