

Test

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true.

African American students have had many crowning achievements over the years. For example, in 1998 the percentage of blacks moving from grade seven to eight who were proficient on the tests grew nearly 15 percent, while the percentage of white students the same year, and in the same grade level, grew only about 7 percent.

But even with the substantial growth the rising eighth-graders experienced last year, only about 47 percent of them were proficient on the tests, compared to 81 percent of white students.

In a few instances, black students' growth on the tests were less than stellar.

In 1997, rising African American sixth- and seventh-graders had negative growth, with 6.3 percent less rising sixth-graders and 1.5 percent less rising seventh-graders performing at a proficient level from the year before.

Martin attributed the negative growth to the difficulty some students have making the transition from elementary school to middle school. White students also experienced negative growth during the same period in 1997, and the gains made among all students have been smallest at the fifth-to-sixth and sixth-to-seventh grade levels.

"That doesn't mean they went backwards...Less (students) were on grade level," Martin said.

The school system had another reason to toot its own horn last week. In a comparison with the same math and reading tests data for the whole state, African Americans in the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County school system are standing head and shoulders above the rest, narrowing the divide between their test scores and those of whites at a swifter rate.

"We are outstripping the state," Martin said.

Some years the percentage of African Americans who were proficient on the tests in Forsyth County were barely different from state averages. But in other years, local African American students experienced substantial growth compared to state figures.

For instance, in 1998 - the last year that complete state data is available - the percentage gap between white and African American students closed at a much higher rate among local students.

Older students seem to be making the most progress at eliminating the gap. Rising seventh- and eighth-graders here closed the gap by nearly 8 percent in 1998, almost double that of the state average for the same year and grade levels.

Martin said that a number of factors are responsible for the gains African Americans have made. He applauded the school board, his staff and the staffs of the system's schools for showing dedication and a commitment toward educating students.

Martin also gave credit to the state's three-year-old ABCs accountability plan, which measures the yearly progress of students at a particular school, awarding schools that show marked improvements with cash incentives and sending in special teams of educators to schools that do not.

Martin says the ABCs plan has caused a renaissance of sorts in teaching.

Long Life

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knees and pray. Sometimes, if you were walking by, I guess you would think church was going on."

Thomas came to Cincinnati from Georgia in 1923, when her two brothers sent her money so she could take the train and join them. She said it cost her about \$14 to get to Cincinnati. Soon after she arrived, she got an apartment that cost about \$10 a month and her brothers found her a job in a factory that pitted cherries.

"I didn't like that, because you had to stand in water all day," she said.

She soon found a job cleaning a dormitory for women in downtown Cincinnati.

For more than 20 years, she worked as an orderly at Good Samaritan Hospital and as a cook at the University of Cincinnati. She was 77 when she retired from a job as a cook at Xavier University.

Thomas has seen a lot of changes in her life, but she says she took them all in stride.

"I take things as they come," she said.

She says she has liked all the presidents except Herbert Hoover. "People were living in boxes when he was president, and if it hadn't been for Mr. Roosevelt, I don't know what would've happened," she said.

When Franklin D. Roosevelt died, she said she remembered everyone crying.

"It has really focused instruction in North Carolina schools," he said. "Teachers look closely at what they have taught."

Taking its cue from the ABCs plan, local teachers and administrators have tried to design instruction for every student. Martin said, giving a possible reason for Winston-Salem/Forsyth County's extraordinary growth. Martin added that smaller class sizes in many schools in the system have also spurred on the growth.

Martin also gave partial credit to the controversial redistricting plan for the strides that some African American students have made.

The plan, which created a school-choice plan and did away with forced busing, has concentrated a large number of students who receive free or reduced lunch in certain schools.

The school system has therefore focused much of its attention on these schools, taking special measures to ensure that those students get extra help, Martin said.

"We have put a lot of resources in these schools," Martin said.

Martin focused on one such school, Diggs Elementary School, during the news conference to illustrate how schools with high at-risk populations benefit from extra resources, both financial and human.

The school - which has a population that's nearly 100 percent African American - has benefited from a very low teacher/pupil ratio and from such special programs as Success For All, an intensive reading program developed by Johns Hopkins University, Martin said. When this year's ABCs results are released later this summer, school officials expect Diggs to be near the "exemplary" range. Last year, the school did not meet its expected or exemplary growth.

Martin's assertion that the redistricting plan may help, not hurt, the chances of African Americans being successful in the system, is a direct contradiction to what many black leaders have been saying since the plan was first adopted by the school board in 1995.

Many say the redistricting plan has impaired black students, especially in the area of PTA funds, which schools that are mostly minority receive less of.

"Any progress that any black children have made is in spite of the redistricting plan, not because of it," said the Rev. Carlton Eversley.

Martin promised Eversley one of the first copies of the testing data at a county commissioners meeting June 14 as the two men took opposing sides on whether or not the commissioners should give the school system extra money to fully implement the redistricting plan.

Eversley said he saw the figures Monday night during a meeting he had with Martin and school board chair Donny Lambeth. NAACP president Bill Tatum and an attorney working with the NAACP were also present at the meeting. Eversley said he was not at liberty to talk about what was discussed.

Eversley said the gains have barely made a dent in terms of where a large number of black kids remain on the end-of-grade tests: not proficient.

"The gap is still enormous," he said. "To think that we are at the end of the road rather than at the beginning is an awful mistake."

Martin conceded that much at the news conference.

"We need to keep chiseling away at (the gap)," Martin said.

Wednesday morning, after The Chronicle's press time, Eversley was scheduled to hold a news conference to announce that the General Assembly of the 2.5 million-member Presbyterian Church agreed to join the local NAACP in its fight against the school system's redistricting plan.

Eversley said the decision was made during the group's annual meeting in Fort Worth, Texas, last week. Eversley added that he expects the organization to financially support the NAACP lawsuit, which could be filed as early as this month.

School board member Victor Johnson said the gains that black students have made show that the school system is doing something right.

"We are running in the right

direction. We know where the problems are," he said last Thursday.

While Johnson said he'd rather focus on the education of children instead of the heated topic of redistricting, he does think that having black children back in schools in black neighborhoods has had a positive effect on their test scores.

Johnson said the plan has brought black parents back into the schools, which has led to better relationships between parents and teachers and principals, which, in turn, has led to a better academic environment for black students.

"Before the redistricting plan, black kids were suffering miserably," Johnson said. "In the integrated schools our black kids were not doing as well."

But Johnson is the first to admit that the school system has many miles to go before it can truly pat itself on the back. There are still not enough black students passing, not only the end-of-grade tests, but all tests, Johnson said.

"I know that we are much better than 40 percent proficient," Johnson said.

Board member Geneva Brown said the gains are not large enough yet to celebrate, but she said she would have gladly attended last Thursday's news conference, if only to show her support for students.

"I would have gone had I been invited," Brown said.

Board members Lambeth and Jane Goins were on hand at the news conference. Neither one addressed the media during the brief event; instead, they took seats beside administrators as Martin spoke.

Johnson said he was not invited to the news conference either, although he said he probably would not have attended. He says he is more concerned with the data released at the news conference and not so much the event itself.

Brown said an invitation was also not forthcoming when Martin, Goins and board member Lynn Throver went to the June 14 county commissioners meeting.

Although she is a staunch opponent of the redistricting plan, Brown says as a former educator who knows how crucial funding is to

schools, she supported the system's request for the extra money.

Ironically, years ago, when the school system was looking for a new superintendent, Brown was one of Martin's main cheerleaders. But due in large part to the different views they have of the redistricting plan, their relationship has become somewhat strained over the years.

"People keep asking me why did I fight so hard to get Dr. Martin here?" Brown said. "I grant you that he's a smart man, but there is something missing there."

Brown said Monday that she had not seen the figures on the gap closure, but that she planned to call for them the next morning. But Brown said what she's heard and read about them have not impressed her.

"It's not significant to me simply because the gaps are still so wide," she said. "It's not enough for me."

Brown said regardless of what the figures show, she can't get over the fact that barely 50 percent of black students are proficient on the end-of-grade tests.

Results from this past school year, which are still unofficial at this point, show that only rising fifth- and seventh-graders managed to climb, slightly, above the 50 percent proficient mark.

Brown says for change to truly come it will take strict and consistent monitoring of schools to ensure that students as well as teachers are being

taught all the tools they need.

Ultimately, extra money will not bring about better scores for black students, Brown said. A true closing of the gap will only happen when the system changes the way schools are run, making them a better environment for parents, students and teachers, Brown said.

Brown does concede that extra resources pumped into schools with a high number of students on free or reduced lunch have made some difference in end-of-grade testing, but she says the redistricting plan is not the panacea for equity in testing.

"It is not worth five cents in terms of educating all children," Brown said.

Brown said she is also asking the school system to furnish her with data that shows the gains minorities and whites have made at each individual school, figures that could prove more telling in determining what effect one-race schools are having. Johnson said that he is also interested in seeing the figures broken down by school.

In addition, Brown is also requesting other information relating to redistricting, including data showing how many requests have been made by parents, for the 1999-2000 school year, for their children to attend schools outside of their zones and which schools parents are choosing for the children for the 1999-2000 school year.

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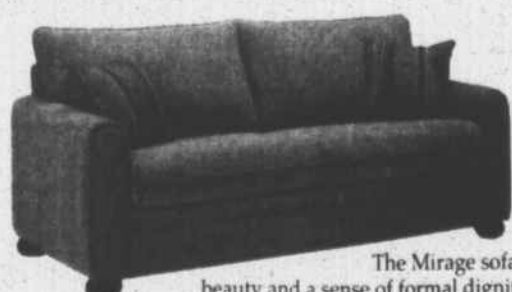


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