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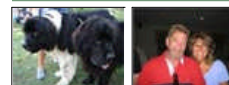
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Mixed results on MCAS

By Geoff Moore/Correspondent

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Just how well did Lincoln Public Schools students do on MCAS tests in 2006?

That was the key question Assistant Superintendent Paul Naso sought an answer for in his report and presentation to the School Committee Dec. 7.

Naso explained that the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) has been aligned to the federal government No Child Left Behind (NCLB) initiative by extending annual testing in mathematics and English Language Arts (ELA) across grades 3-8. NCLB also requires testing in science for one elementary, middle and high school grade. Lincoln and Hanscom Middle School complied by testing science and technology/engineering at fifth and eighth grades. NCLB subdivides performance into four categories and the state MCAS results have been aligned by adding an "advanced or proficient plus" ranking to its existing "proficient," "needs improvement" and "warning" categories. The increased amount of data, available for the first time for some grades and subjects, and the new performance divisions led Naso to modify the question "how did students do?" by adding, "compared to what criteria?"

To provide context, which he described as "one informal and arbitrary measure," Naso pointed out one high performance area in ELA with 25 percent of students scoring in the advanced category and 80 percent in the combined advanced and proficient category. He said that the fifth-grade and eighth-grade science results were encouraging, but greater analysis of fifth-grade results at Hanscom Middle School is required to understand areas of concern or low performance.

Overall mathematics results for all schools and grades were lower than for ELA, with scores for third-grade mathematics students both a surprise and disappointing. Naso added that the teaching staff understand what caused the blip, know what to do about it, and as a result do not expect improvement to be a big challenge.

Naso went on to describe what action the schools are taking to ensure that more students meet the proficiency expectation. Key, he said, was the individual follow up, adjustment of focus and support that every student in the "needs improvement" or "warning" categories is receiving following analysis of their individual results by teaching staff. He added that other forms of monitoring, not only MCAS, were equally important, as was collective tuning of curriculum and instructional methods by teachers and other specialists.

As an example of the benefits of investing time and energy in collective tuning, Naso showed a comparison of scores related to open response mathematics questions, which do not have multiple-choice answers provided. Students must first deduce the question being asked in this type of question and then determine the method by which the answer may be derived. In 2006, 70 percent of fourth-grade Lincoln campus students and 59 percent of fourth-grade Hanscom Middle School students scored 15 points or greater out of 20 points, compared with 50 percent and 27 percent of students respectively in 2005.

Naso stressed that MCAS data can only be used to take performance improvement so far, even with the rigorous and disciplined approach to data analysis that has been implemented at school and individual level. He went on to outline the MCAS assessment follow-up documentation, which detail and record steps towards individual student's improvement plan.

Performance to state and federal government targets is termed Acceptable Yearly Progress (AYP) and is measured by a Composite Performance Index (CPI) that extends in two-year cycles to 2014. For the 2005-06 cycle (Cycle IV), the Lincoln Public Schools has a rating in ELA of "Very High" with a CPI of 90 against a target of 80.9. The rating for mathematics is "High," with a CPI of 80.4 against a state target of 68.7.

Following Naso's report, School Committee members, teachers and the public audience spent some time addressing concerns or changes in results, such as the apparent dip in third-grade reading ability, raising the question of whether teacher support is adequate.

Also addressed was the question of why more students were not scoring at the "Advanced level" with a decline in the number of students at that level in the past three years at grades 4, 5 and 6. Naso said that it was difficult to isolate variables and draw conclusions with the change being small, but the situation did need monitoring. Earlier Naso had stressed that the goal of achieving more students scoring at "Advanced level" must first include adoption of a tight curriculum, the by-product of which would be advanced learning.

School Committee members praised the work of students, teachers and staff in achieving the results. Committee Chairman Julie Dobrow thanked Naso for distilling and presenting the data in such a useful a meaningful way.

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