

35 labeled 'achieving' of 239 school districts

CYNTHIA HOWELL
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Thirty-five of Arkansas' 239 school districts and six of 16 open-enrollment charter schools are classified as "achieving" school systems under the state's new accountability system, leaving more than 200 districts and charter systems — some considered very high performing — branded as "needing improvement."

East Arkansas school districts such as Marvell and

Osceola, which are relatively low performing, are recognized in the new system as "achieving." That reflects the recent academic progress made by students there.

In contrast, the Conway and Vilonia school districts in central Arkansas, and the Bentonville and Rogers school districts in Northwest Arkansas — typically high performers — are tagged as needing to improve.

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Achieve

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The good news for the districts carrying the needing-improvement label is that with the exception of having to explain the label to their communities, there are no other immediate consequences.

"We don't have specific sanctions or incentives for those districts that are achieving or need to improve," said Phyllis Stewart, the chief of staff and spokesman at the Arkansas Department of Education.

"But they are ultimately responsible for the progress of [individual] schools in their districts, especially if they have 'priority' or 'focus' schools," Stewart added. "If the districts don't meet the requirements for those schools, they may end up being in academic distress."

There are 48 "priority schools." Those are the 5 percent lowest-achieving schools on the state Benchmark and End-of-Course exams. The 109 "focus schools" are those with the greatest disparities between their at-risk students — who are special-education, low-income or limited-English-speaking students — and those students who are not in the at-risk categories.

Focus and priority schools must carry out improvement plans, or their performance can put their districts in jeopardy of being labeled as academically distressed. School districts in academic distress, as the result of rules recently adopted by the Arkansas Board of Education, have up to two years to im-

prove or else face state sanctions that can include a state takeover. There are no districts currently classified as academically distressed.

Frank Mitchell, superintendent of the 3,150-student Vilonia School District in Faulkner County, was dismayed by the needs-improvement label for his district, where 77 percent or more of both students overall and students in populations at risk of school failure scored at proficient or better levels on state exams last spring.

"A lot of this doesn't make sense," Mitchell said. "It puts you in categories where you don't belong."

Arkansas' new accountability system, approved last June by the U.S. Department of Education, customizes student-achievement requirements for each school.

No longer are Arkansas schools facing a 2013-14 deadline to get 100 percent of students to proficient or grade level in math and literacy. That was required by the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2002.

Now, because of a waiver to the federal law, every school is supposed to get halfway to 100 percent proficient within six years, using the percentage of students scoring at proficient or better in 2011 as the starting point.

If, for example, 76 percent of students scored at the proficient level in 2011, then the school must increase that percentage by 12 points at a rate of at least 2 points a year over six years. If only 40 percent of the students are proficient, then the school must improve that by 5 percentage points a year, or 30 points, by

Achieving schools

The following 35 Arkansas school districts and six charter school systems are categorized as "achieving" under the state's new accountability system approved in June by the U.S. Department of Education.

School Districts

Batesville
Beebe
Berryville
Bismarck
Cabot
Cossatot River School District
Cutter-Morning Star
Dardanelle
DesArc
Dermott
Dierks
Elkins
Farmington
Fayetteville
Greenbrier
Hartford
Highland
Huntsville
Lakeside (Garland County)
Magnet Cove
Marvell
Manilla
McGehee

Mountain Home
Mulberry
Omaha
Osceola
Ouachita
Pangburn
Salem
Siloam Springs
Scranton
Springdale
Valley View
Waldron School District

Charter Schools

Covenant Keepers Charter School (Little Rock)
Estem Elementary Public Charter School (Little Rock)
E-Stem High Public Charter School (Little Rock)
Haas Hall Academy (Fayetteville)
KIPP Delta Public Schools (Helena-West Helena)
Lisa Academy North Charter School (Sherwood)

2016-17.

In Vilonia, better than 87 percent of students overall and 77 percent of students in at-risk groups scored at proficient or better in literacy in 2012. Similarly, 88.75 percent of Vilonia students overall and 81.41 percent of at-risk group students scored at proficient or better in math.

But the district fell short of the math achievement targets of 89.11 percent proficient for all students and 82.41 percent for the at-risk group.

"Our test scores were good under the old format, and in our opinion they are good under the new format," Vilonia Assistant Superintendent Gary Lambert said. "Our

test scores have not changed. Under the new system, the goals and the targets set by the state are pretty high because our test results were high in the past."

Despite the "needs improvement" classification, Lambert said he expects the state Education Department will put its efforts into other school districts with greater academic deficiencies than Vilonia.

"It is a little bothersome and hard to explain to a group of teachers when their students scored 85 percent in literacy when the target was 87. Eighty-five percent is a good result. All in all, we are good here. We are not afraid of accountability. We want to

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do our best to serve kids."

Osceola School District Superintendent Mike Cox welcomed the state's new accountability system and the "achieving" label for his district of 1,270 students, 88 percent of whom are from low-income families.

Cox said the academic gains that produced the achieving label were the result of hard work by teachers and students, coupled with support from an education-improvement company. The district also benefits, Cox said, from the vitality infused by Teach For America teachers, a group of recent college graduates who commit to teach for two years in high-poverty communities.

"Any kind of success makes it easier to encourage," said Cox, a veteran Arkansas superintendent who is in his third year as the chief executive at Osceola. "It tells the teachers that what we are doing is working, so let's continue to do what we are doing and add some to it."

"I'm just excited to come to work every day," he added.

About 70 percent of Osceola students overall and students in groups at-risk of school failure scored at proficient or better on state literacy tests last spring, exceeding achievement targets that are in the 62-64 percent range.

In math, about 56 percent of students scored at proficient or better, besting the 51 to 53 percent range of targets.

The Osceola district is a district that has two "priority schools" — Osceola High and Osceola Middle schools. Those schools were identified as some of the lowest-achieving schools in the state three years ago. As such, the two schools received three-year, multimillion-dollar federal School Improvement Grants. Schools that received those grants were automatically labeled as priority schools this year. Osceola is in the final year of the grants this school year.

Under the state's previous system, Osceola had two schools on the needs-improvement list, one for so many years it was "state-directed," or operating under state Education Department guidance.

Two other east Arkansas school districts classified as "achieving" under the new accountability system are of particular note. The relatively affluent Valley View district in Jonesboro attained "achieving" status while spending the least amount per pupil in the state — \$6,903 — according to the Arkansas Annual Statistical Report for the 2011-12 school year.

The Marvell School District in Phillips County, where 98 percent of the 400 students are from low-income families, also earned "achieving" status. Marvell spends \$20,547 per student, the highest dollar amount in the state, according to the same statistical report.