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Contradictory school reports fail parents' test

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Colorado schools are being graded like never before, but frustrated parents are sifting through each new report and still wondering how well their children are being taught.

That's the stance of education groups and several parents, who say that report cards on school performance these days seems to contradict each other.

"It's extremely confusing, and it's misleading to many," said Mark Muller, a Boulder parent. "A lot of parents are screaming bloody murder.

"They ask, 'Why is my school excellent here and why did we fail here?'" he said.

Parents looking for insight into how a school is faring are flooded with mixed information from the state and federal governments, added parent Nancy Deans.

"Parents are wondering who to trust," Deans said. "Do you trust the state or the federal government? For parents not intimately in schools, that could be a problem."

Muller and Deans are on the Boulder Valley School District's school accountability committee. It reviews the performance of schools in the traditionally high-achieving district to make sure it can keep its state accreditation.

The district accreditation system was introduced in 1997. It was followed by the state's School Accountability Reports in 1999 and last year's federal No Child Left Behind Act.

All three are supposed to keep track of how well schools do in teaching reading, writing, math, science and other subjects. They also impose sanctions on schools that do not improve over time.

But they also produce results that confound families and school officials, critics say.

Boulder Valley parents were recently surprised to learn that while Fairview High School earned an "excellent" rating on the state's 2003 School Accountability Reports, the school failed to get a similar federal designation.

Other Boulder Valley schools rated "high" on the state reports - including Boulder High and Broomfield High - also were left off the federal Adequate Yearly Progress list.

The Cherry Creek School District also had five schools rated "high" on the state reports that did not make the federal list.

School officials are left sorting apples from oranges for parents.

Grandview High School principal Harry Bull, whose Cherry Creek school earned a "high" state rating but probably not a place on the federal list, said he has done a lot of explaining to his school's parent-teacher group. The federal Adequate Yearly Progress numbers will be available in mid-January.

"Grandview is a high-performing school, but we don't make the AYP list," Bull said. "Ask yourself, 'What's wrong with this picture?'"

Other districts and parents are trying to sift through the muddle and paperwork of three school-performance tests working at once in Colorado, said Bob Tschirki, executive director of the Colorado Association of School Executives.

"The misalignment and absurdities of operating under three very different accountability systems has created excessive paperwork for schools and sends mixed messages to principals, teachers and parents," Tschirki said.

His group and the nonprofit Donnell-Kay Foundation, a private group that promotes public education, reviewed the three systems and found that they are muddying school accountability rather than making things clearer for parents.

"While each ... is designed to inform the public about how well schools perform and how well students are learning, together they unfortunately are having the opposite effect by creating confusion," said Tony Lewis, executive director of the Donnell-Kay Foundation.

"Standards would be more valuable if they were more clear and straightforward," he said.

Each system uses scores from the annual Colorado Student Assessment Program exam to gauge student performance. But each system also uses the data differently to rate schools, said the joint report by Donnell-Kay and the school executives group.

That leads to one system ranking a school as "excellent" while another may rank that same school "in need of improvement."

Parents get mixed messages about a school and a student's performance and schools get different messages about the priorities they must address, the report said.

Preliminary results show that all elementary schools in the Cherry Creek district will make the Adequate Yearly Progress list, while some of the middle and high schools will not.

Cherry Creek's largest, most-diverse schools had problems getting on the list because they did not meet the academic requirements of various student subgroups, said Superintendent Monte Moses.

There is also the hurdle of making sure more than 95 percent of a school's student population takes the Colorado Student Assessment Program exam, he said. That can also keep a school from meeting the federal list's requirements.

"We expect the contradictions between the two systems of AYP and the School Accountability Reports to be resolved soon," Moses said. "The goal of both is to ensure that achievement is high for all students."

U.S. report doesn't recognize some of state's top schools

Preliminary results show that five Cherry Creek schools scored a "high" rating on the state's School Accountability Reports but did not make adequate yearly progress as required by the federal No Child Left Behind law. The schools are Laredo, Liberty and Thunder Ridge middle schools and Grandview and Smoky Hill high schools.

One Boulder Valley school - Fairview High School - was "excellent" on the state School Accountability Reports but did not make the federal list. Three Boulder Valley schools also earned a "high" state rating but did not make the federal list: Broomfield and Boulder high schools and Boulder Community School of Integrated Studies.