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Schools try to halt slide on state scale

Targeted districts strive to avoid probation, retain accreditation

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Nine school districts are scrambling to boost test scores, increase parental involvement and raise the academic performance of disadvantaged students after being placed on "accreditation watch," the first of two steps before losing accreditation.

"I think it's an embarrassment myself," said Floyd Beard, superintendent of Cheyenne County School District 5 in Cheyenne Wells, one of the districts placed on watch by the Colorado Department of Education over the last year.

"I don't like telling our parents we're on accreditation watch," he said. "The insinuation is you weren't doing (proper) instruction."

Meanwhile, the state Education Department has sent letters notifying 22 other districts that if standards don't improve, they risk being placed on watch, said Gary Sibigroth, assistant commissioner for education in Colorado. He declined to name those districts.

In the 2002-03 school year, Hanover School District 28 in Colorado Springs became the first district placed on watch. This year, it was put on "probation" - just one step away from losing accreditation.

Under state law, a district that loses its accreditation could be ordered to reorganize, which could mean replacing its administration or staff, Sibigroth said.

"They may fall under the statute of reorganization," he said. "Your state finances could be withheld."

The state legislature created the current accreditation system in 1998 to improve accountability for public schools. Three years later, the State Board of Education approved the rules and entered into contracts with the state's 178 districts.

So far, none has lost accreditation, and Sibigroth said he doesn't expect that any will. Most have started or are in the process of creating correction plans, he said.

Still, reaction to "watch" status has ranged from frustration and acceptance to confusion and

embarrassment. Two districts - Harrison School District 2 in Colorado Springs and Dolores County RE No. 2 - have appealed. Both appeals are pending.

Don Davis, superintendent of the Dolores County district, said the label is insulting and overshadows the 8.7 percent overall improvement his students made on the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) tests.

The state placed the district on watch for failing several criteria, including parental involvement and poor CSAP scores.

Davis said the district is not drawing up a correction plan because he believes the state ignored strategies the district already had in place, such as the creation of a remedial lab for students who performed poorly.

"I had some board members suggest that we take some type of legal action," Davis said.

'You don't make excuses'

But others say being placed on watch is appropriate if children aren't showing growth from year to year.

"We have an issue. We have a problem, and everybody knew that coming into this deal," said Mike Poore, superintendent of Sheridan School District 2, the only Denver metro-area district on watch.

He said students in the district of 1,861 pupils either declined or were stable in CSAP scores, and Hispanic males are not performing well. Math, in particular, has been a challenge, Poore said.

Improvements are needed, he said. "You don't make excuses. You've got to get better."

The district will be training parents on how to tutor their children at home, Poore said. The district will also hire a math coach to work with grades kindergarten through six.

Shiela Gowan, whose 13-year-old son, Chris, attends school in the district, said she is not concerned about the label.

"My son is doing very well. He is an honor roll student," she said. If the status changed to probation, she said she would be more concerned, but teachers "do work really hard with a lot of the children."

In the Hanover School District, school board members are working with Sibigroth to get off probation.

"In the past, we were not taken off watch because of our inadequate response to the state," said school board president Rick Steel. "The current school board has every intention to make as many positive changes as we can make."

Colorado's public school districts must meet 11 criteria to maintain accreditation. Those include:

- Create an improvement plan that includes parent and community involvement.
- Show that students are improving on the CSAP exams.
- Show that students are performing at their grade level.
- Comply with state rules for literacy, school safety and spending.

Districts can be placed on watch for failing to meet any one of the 11 criteria. If there is no improvement after a year, the district can be placed on accreditation probation. After another year, a district loses its accreditation and faces reorganization.

Faulting the system

Some districts have complained that the accreditation system doesn't clearly explain how to get off watch status.

Troy Mayfield, superintendent of Branson Reorganized 82, said he erroneously told students in the district's online school that the CSAP was optional.

When only 6 percent of the district's students took the test, Branson was placed on accreditation watch. He said he later boosted the rate to 84 percent, but the district remains on watch.

"They said here are the things you have to do and your status will be restored to the year before. We've done those things, and it hasn't happened," Mayfield said. "I feel like I'm getting bureaucratic doublespeak and runaround."

Sibigroth said that if the watch or probation is based on CSAP scores, the district would have to wait until the next testing cycle to see a change in status.

The Harrison School District was placed on watch as a result of low CSAP scores, learning gaps between student groups and failing to track student progress.

Still, Superintendent Vic Meyers said he was surprised at being on the watch list because students, particularly blacks and Hispanics, had "outperformed" at least eight other neighboring districts with similar demographics.

"When you're serving a district that serves a high percentage of students that are in a low socioeconomic category, it has the effect of decreasing morale," he said.

Roscoe Davidson, deputy commissioner for the state education department, said there are more

factors involved. "It's not just districts to each other, but comparing a district to itself," he said.

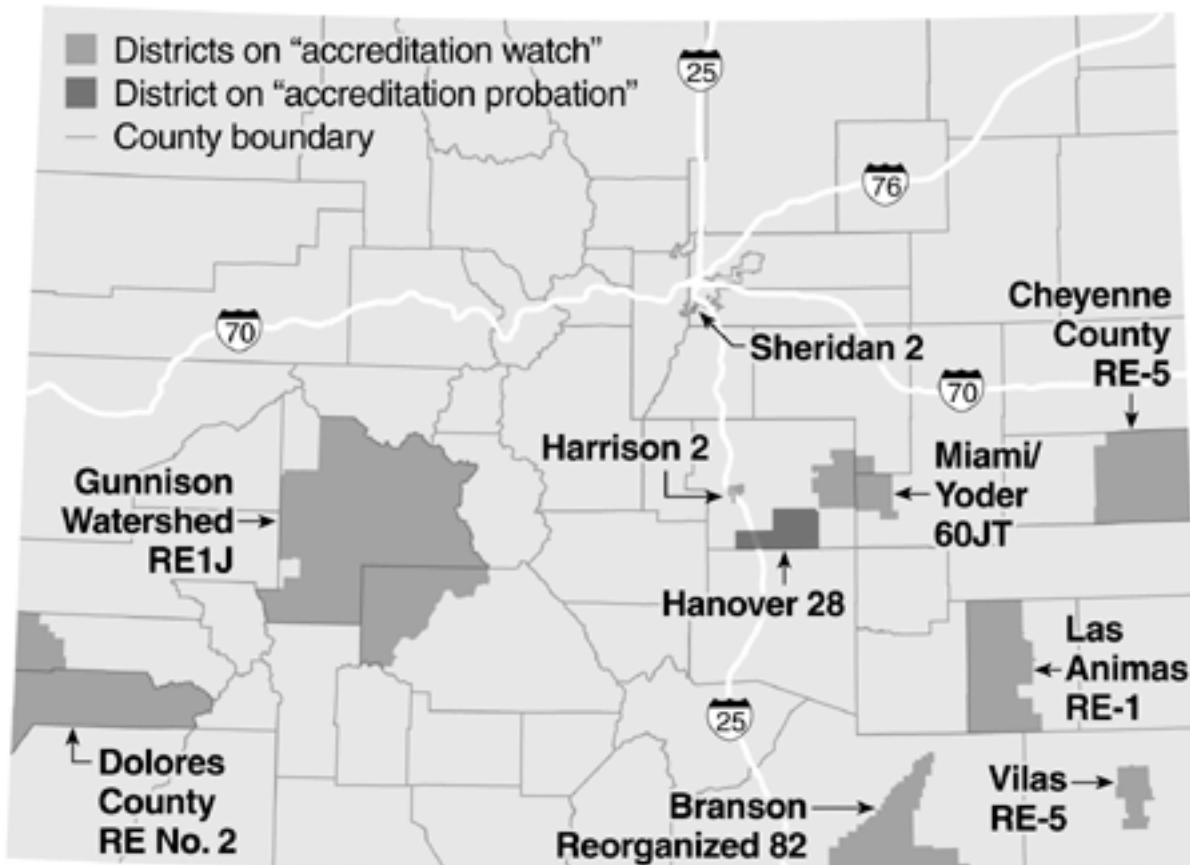
Miami/Yoder 60JT School District Superintendent Paul Dellacroce said he wasn't surprised that the district was placed on watch, because "we knew our test scores weren't there."

He said the district, which is about 35 miles east of Colorado Springs and has 415 students, is seeking technical assistance from the state on developing plans for student achievement.

"Bottom line is we're switching to a results-driven system," he said. "We knew it was coming. We're being proactive. We're in it together."

Districts on watch and probation

Low test scores, poor parental involvement or other factors have prompted the Colorado Department of Education to put nine districts on "accreditation watch." One additional district was put on watch last year and is currently on probation.



Source: Colorado Department of Education

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