

Test scores: Iredell-Statesville schools meet growth expectations

By Preston Spencer pspencer@statesville.com | Posted: Tuesday, September 8, 2015 5:21 pm

When it comes to growing students in Iredell-Statesville Schools, it appears as though teamwork among teachers, teacher assistants, administrators and parents is the key piece to the puzzle.

A little more than two-thirds—69 percent—of schools in the I-SS district either met or exceeded growth expectations in the 2014-15 school year, according to data released by the state last week. Overall, 12 schools exceeded growth expectations, 13 met expectations and 11 schools fell short.

Dr. Melanie Taylor, deputy superintendent of curriculum and instruction for I-SS, said the schools performing the best are the ones that started earlier with MTSS (multi-tiered system of support), a strategy pushed the last couple years. MTSS involves teachers meeting regularly in grade-level groups to discuss individual students and how best to collaborate to close skills gaps.

“It really is the teachers all working together in that problem-solving approach as a team, with the principal,” said Taylor.

Taylor said MTSS implementation has thus far had more of a focus on the elementary level, but would be stepped up at middle and high schools this year. She said it typically takes three to five years for results to really start showing up.

The hope is the process leads to higher state test scores. State end-of-grade and end-of-course test scores in I-SS schools dropped 1.6 percent in the most recent tally, released by the state last week. The schools landed at 57.8 percent of tests being passed at grade level or above, down from 59.4 percent the previous year.

But the 2014-15 school year scores are still up 8.7 percent from the 2012-13 year, which was the first year students took the new Common Core curriculum-based tests. Before students were tested on the Common Core, I-SS students had passed more than 80 percent of EOG and EOC tests for three straight years. Taylor said the curriculum used now is more rigorous, but that it seems that a comfort level of sorts is setting in, although the state plans to replace Common Core at the end of this school year.

“I certainly think that students and teachers are becoming more comfortable with the curriculum,” Taylor said. “I think any time you have a major change in that, we have always seen a pretty considerable drop that first year and over time you see that inch back up.”

One of the main indicators of where students are performing the best in test scores is the poverty rate

of each school, with more affluent schools, especially in the southern end of the county, showing higher passing percentages. But that's not always the case.

The school that showed the biggest improvement last year was the Collaborative College of Technology & Leadership, an early college program that is run on the property of Mitchell Community College in Statesville. The school, which has 227 students this year, takes in students who would be the first in their family to go to college or would not otherwise be able to attend college. Students in the five-year school earn an associate's degree along with a high school diploma.

CCTL Principal Teri Hutchens said the demographics at the school typically try to mirror the averages in I-SS, which has around 40 percent of students on free-and-reduced lunch.

In the 2014-15 year, 92.2 percent of end-of-year tests were passed by CCTL students, a 10 percent increase from the year before and good enough for second in the entire 36-school district, behind only Mount Mourne IB's 94.6 percent rate.

Hutchens believes part of the reason is because the school teaches much more than just the typical curriculum.

"A lot of what we do is teaching students college readiness skills, such as time management skills, self-advocacy," Hutchens said. "So those three skills, as we're teaching them along the way, lend them to be better students."

She also credited high-quality teachers and relationship-building with students, which was also cited as a factor at I-SS' next-best school when it came to improvement last school year – Harmony Elementary.

Harmony Elementary test scores jumped 9.7 percent last year, up to 61.8 percent passing overall. The school has well-above-average poverty rates, with more than 70 percent of students usually qualifying for free-and-reduced lunch. But Harmony Principal Andrew Mehall said there is great community support, which helps boost the teachers and the rest of the staff.

"The main thing we have is we have great teacher, parents, students, community support for the school," Mehall said.

Mehall added: The way his staff works together is "definitely a team approach."

"We believe in everyone working together," Mehall said. "We believe in each other. And it's definitely a great environment for that."

Harmony also implemented a new math curriculum 18 months ago, called Singapore Math, and new reading initiatives. Mehall credited teachers with how they have stayed focused, saying everyone was excited to see test scores rise and growth expectations exceeded when the data came out last week.

"When you have the hard work pay off, it really helps the morale," Mehall said. "It reassures you that

everything you're doing, you're on the right track."