

School district receives 'B' grade; Benchmark scores bump Peake off school improvement list

By JOE PHELPS
Siftings Herald

The Arkadelphia Public School District was one of 33 in the state that was ranked by the Arkansas Policy Foundation as a "B" school for the 2008-2009 school year. It was also ranked the 33rd best district using SAT scores from first-grade math and reading and ninth-grade math and reading.

According to Superintendent Donnie Whitten, the district improved from a "B-minus" from the previous year.

Surrounding districts were given "C" grades: Ouachita School District (ranked 99th), Gurdon School District (ranked 110th), Malvern School District (ranked 113th), Centerpoint School District (ranked 134th), and Prescott School District (ranked 196th). This ranking puts Arkadelphia schools in the top 15 percent of schools in the state in math and reading scores.

The district also received data from 2009 Benchmark scores, and Whitten said he is impressed with the progress.

For the first time in district history, Peake Elementary School has been removed from the school improvement list since it has received Adequate Yearly Progress two years in a row. "It proves that it can be done," Whitten said Monday.

Meanwhile, Arkadelphia High School is in year six of school improvement, Goza Middle School is in year four and the primary schools are in year one.

Whitten said literacy scores have kept AHS and Goza from getting off the list, and the primary schools were put into school improvement because of about two students.

"There are programs in place" to get each school off the school improvement list, he said. "We are targeting two subpopulations in literacy. We are seeing literacy scores across the state that are not what they are supposed to be."

Scores have been increasing "across the board" in the district. Third-grade scores saw an 8 percent increase in math scores and 9 percent increase in literacy; fourth-grade scores increased as well, with 1 percent and 4 percent increases in math and literacy, respectively; fifth-grade scores increased by 12 percent in both categories, with a 17 percent increase in science scores; sixth-grade math scores increased by 11 percent, but literacy scores dropped by 2 percent; seventh-grade math and literacy scores increased by 2 and 6 percent, respectively, while science scores decreased by 2 percent; eighth-grade math and literacy scores increased by 8 and 2 percent.

Algebra I scores dropped at Goza by 1 percent, while it dropped at AHS by 2 percent. Geometry scores increased by 11 percent, while literacy dropped 4 percent. Biology increased 2 percent.

Whitten said the double-digit increases in percentages are "very rare" and said he is confident that scores will continue to increase.

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The school board recently entered into a contract to partner with America's Choice, an educational company that provides targeted professional development for staff and provides the district with technical assistance in school buildings on a regular basis. Whitten said there are several school districts across the state that have partnered with America's Choice, which works directly with the state's Department of Edu-

cation.

The district paid \$56 this year for the \$180 contract, paid for out of federal No Child Left Behind money. Whitten said there will be no cost to the district next year, when the state will pay.

Whitten said America's Choice representatives have been on campus days so far to work with teachers and administrators and staff have all given positive feedback.

DSH Sept. 1, 2009