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In Pinellas, Minorities Lag Despite FCAT Gains

By Kelly Ryan

LARGO — As they sought an end to court-ordered busing for desegregation, Pinellas school leaders made a bold pledge in June 1998: Struggling students would improve, and the achievement gap between black and white students would narrow.

Statistics released Thursday indicate that Pinellas has a lot of work to do.

African-American students did post some significant gains, but as a group still lag alarmingly behind their white peers, at all grade levels tested and in all subject areas. The scores released Thursday were from February's Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test in reading, writing and math.



For example, 20 percent of black fifth-graders met the state standard that is considered passing on the math portion, up from 13.7 percent in 1999. But 60 percent of white fifth-graders did that, up from 49.7 percent in 1999. Nearly 34 percent of black fourth-graders met state reading standards; 73 percent of white students did.

The same trend — despite gains, African-American students still trail their white peers — is evident at the state level. Pinellas' African-American students topped African-American students statewide in nine of 18 categories.

The persistent achievement gap won't go away overnight, Pinellas school Superintendent Howard Hinesley said. But he said the district is committed to having the highest standards for all students and is continuously trying to improve teaching methods.

"You have to have the highest expectations for every student," Hinesley said. "There are variables that impact one's learning, but they should not be used as excuses."

Pinellas did not release its report until late Thursday, and the district's top administrators had not had much time to study it.

But it is sure to inspire discussion.

The School Board and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund late last year negotiated a settlement to the 1964 desegregation case that accused the district of operating inferior schools for black children. The lawsuit led to a court order that has required cross-county busing for integration and race ratios in schools.

That settlement, approved in August by a federal judge, outlines an end to traditional neighborhood zoning and a move to letting parents choose their children's schools. That is the part of the settlement that has generated the most debate so far.

The Legal Defense Fund, superintendent and School Board members agree it is not the most important part.

The settlement also outlines the district's pledge to narrow the achievement gap — a gap that plagues schools all over the nation and, until recently, has not been openly discussed.

The settlement requires the district to follow a plan adopted in June 18, 1998, that makes clear that the district has the same high student achievement goals for each student. Under this plan, schools are required to develop and monitor improvement goals for every student.

Every year, area superintendents review performance in every school, in every classroom. They look for teachers who seem consistently to have more success with struggling students. They offer help to teachers who don't.

The district also is experimenting with a variety of programs to help students falling behind grade level. Read 180, which combines computer and small group instruction, aims to help struggling readers turn around 180 degrees. Math camp is offered for incoming freshmen who might not be able to keep up in high school algebra.

Only 19 percent of Pinellas' black eighth-graders met state reading standards, down from 26 percent in 1999. White students also fell some, but from 64 percent to 56 percent. In math, 27 percent of black students met state standards; about 67 percent of white students did.

"There are no quick fixes in this," Hinesley said. "The emphasis is going to be there, the expectation is going to be there. Our strategy is to do everything we can."

A community group created by the settlement, the District Monitoring and Advisory Committee, will monitor the district's success boosting achievement for black children.

It also will analyze whether African-Americans have enough access to challenging courses and are not inappropriately placed in special education classes.

Members of the monitoring committee will receive a full FCAT achievement report next month. The committee will study the data and make recommendations to the School Board.

That constant attention gives Enrique Escarraz hope that the district's commitment to black student achievement won't fade.

"The first fear is that actually working on trying to improve black students' education is something that can become just a fad for this day and is forgotten," said Escarraz, lead local attorney for the Legal Defense Fund. "A network is set up so it's not just a fad. It will always be something they have to deal with."