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2 districts see improvements

Elaine and Altheimer Unified give themselves A's for efforts

BY KIMBERLY DISHONGH ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Educators in two school districts that were taken over by the state last spring are making strides, but they still have a ways to go, a consultant told the state Board of Education on Monday. Six-month follow-up selfevaluations in the Altheimer Unified and Elaine school districts showed that educators there have made improvements that should raise test scores, said David Fetterman, a Stanford University education professor and a consultant to the Arkansas Department of Education.

Fetterman said teachers, administrators and members of the community were asked to judge their progress toward achieving goals they set for themselves.

Both districts showed improvement in a self-evaluation in January compared with one done in August 2002, Fetterman said, including in such areas as teaching, discipline, communication and parent involvement/relationships.

In Altheimer, for example, a self-evaluation of teaching went from 6.73 in August to 7.42 in January on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest score. "I don't want to give the impression that things are wonderful ... at the same time, there's still a lot of work to do," Fetterman said. "All of these things that we're talking about are preconditions that need to be met if we're going to see scores change, and luckily all the preconditions are moving in the right direction."

The two eastern Arkansas districts were taken over by the state in March 2002 after being in academic distress, with chronically low test scores, since 1995.

Students in Altheimer and Elaine, which have enrollments of 502 and 348, respectively, are to take the state Benchmark Exam and the Stanford Achievement Test next month.

The exam results should be back in June or July, said Charity Smith, assistant director for accountability at the Education Department.

The board is expected to reevaluate the status of the districts at that time, she said.

Smith reminded the board that in the takeover, the Education Department appointed a chief academic officer to oversee day-to-day operations in each of the two districts. Also, curriculum and assessment monitors observe and evaluate instructional and assessment activities, while academic coaches help in math and literacy. In Altheimer, the elected School Board was made an observer of a three-member, state appointed interim panel that handles policy-making and budgeting duties usually reserved for elected officials.

Also, the Education Department had signed an agreement with Fetterman to train teachers and administrators in the troubled districts in evaluation and assessment tactics.

"We're building self-sustainability because we won't always be there," Fetterman said. "External evaluation is great, but internal evaluation is really what you need to keep going."

The chief academic officers from Altheimer and Elaine said Monday that everyone in their districts is ratcheting up classwork in preparation for the tests students will take next month.

Sheketa McKisick, chief academic officer in Elaine, said that district began offering extended-day learning in February for children in fourth through eighth grades every Tuesday through Thursday.

"At this point we're very tense," McKisick said.

She said teachers in the district like the self-evaluation because it gives them the opportunity to have direct input.

"Our teachers have been working really hard; our students are phenomenal," McKisick said. "I'm going to put it out there — I think [our students] are going to do great."

William Thomas, Elaine's chief academic officer, said first through sixth-graders have had access to school on Saturdays since November.

"I guess the way we look at it is that all kids need it," Thomas said, not just those in the grades being tested.

"We still have a lot of work that we have to do," Thomas said. "Our focus has to remain on the children."



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/STATON BREIDENTHAL David Fetterman, a Stanford University education professor and a consultant to the Arkansas Department of Education, discusses a review of the state's takeover of the Altheimer and Elaine school districts. The state began running the districts in March 2002 because of chronically low test scores.



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