

The Fairfield School District got wonderful news this week, when we learned we have earned an “excellent” rating from the Ohio Dept. of Education.

We reached this level once before, in the 2005-2006 school year. But in 2006-2007 we just missed it (by nine students) and slipped a notch back to “effective.”

For the 2007-2008 rating, the ODE began sending us preliminary information in June, about how many of the 30 state standards, most of them related to the Ohio Achievement Tests, we had achieved. We attained 27 of those 30 standards, which, by itself, would have had us maintaining the effective rating for another year.

But the ODE sent us more data in July, specifically, the measurements related to Adequate Yearly Progress, or AYP. This is a standard that came out of the No Child Left Behind Act, and tracks the progress that specific subgroups of students are making. These subgroups (a student can be in more than one) are, in no particular order: 1) limited English proficient (LEP) students, 2) special education students on individualized educational plans (IEPs), 3) economically disadvantaged students, 4) African-American students, 5) Hispanic students, 6) white students, 7) multi-racial students, 8) Asian or Pacific Islander students, and 9) American Indian or Alaskan Native students. We are scored in eight of the nine subgroups...the only subgroup where we don't have enough individuals to qualify is the last one.

The information the ODE sent in July told us that we didn't meet the AYP standards, in any of three different ways that meeting AYP can be achieved. Even though the data was still preliminary – there was one more part still to come in August – it looked very much like our “effective” ranking would drop to “continuous improvement,” because we had not reached AYP for three straight years. You may recall that I shared in a column in this newspaper our expectation that based on the preliminary information we had, it looked like our rating was going to drop.

Then, in August, we received the last piece of the assessment data. It's called the “value-added” component. Unlike the other three measures of AYP, which compare one group of students to another, value-added tracks the progress of individual students, measuring how much academic progress they make from one year to the next. And our results were very strong.

The value-added results showed that, as a district, our students made more than a year's growth in the 2007-2008 school year. And that meant that we did, in fact, meet the AYP criteria, because the value-added component is a fourth way to reach AYP.

And there was more good news. The way the system works, if a district exceeds expected growth targets for two straight years, its rating can go up. As I mentioned, our students showed more than a year's growth in 2007-2008. They had also achieved more than a year's growth the year before, in 2006-2007. So our rating has gone up – from “effective” to “excellent.”

We are proud of that. We are also proud that every subgroup that the state tracks made more than one year's expected growth. The credit goes to our students and their families, to our teachers, and to all of our employees who support those teachers.

It is an important measurement, but it is not the only measurement that matters. We want to reach the Adequate Yearly Progress targets in each way, not just one way. We want to achieve all 30 state standards. We still have a lot of work to do, and it starts today, with the first day of school.

*Published in the Fairfield Echo, August 28, 2008.*