

Making the grade

The school district in Hazel Crest, which hit rock bottom four years ago, has shown remarkable improvement thanks to many factors, including separating the boys from the girls in some grades

November 26, 2006

By Kati Phillips Staff writer

Third period was just about to begin on a recent Wednesday at Robert Frost Middle School and boys were lined up outside a math room, tucking in their shirts and balancing textbooks on their hips while they waited to be let into class.

In the classroom next door, girls in navy and white uniforms hunched over spiral notebooks and dutifully answered a question written on the board.

Science teacher Lakisha Carter paused for a moment to let the superintendent in on a little secret as she passed through the room. "This is my class with the highest GPA," she said.

These images were unimaginable just four years ago.

In 2002, Hazel Crest School District 152 1/2 was run into the ground. It had no savings, no credit and \$1 million in outstanding bills. Teachers feared they would not get paid. Robert Frost Middle School hallways were nothing short of unruly. All of the district's schools were on academic probation.

The district would have been dissolved and the students dispersed to other suburbs, but a state-appointed finance authority could not find a neighboring district able to absorb the mess.

An emergency state loan, a property tax increase, the closure of Lincoln and Warren Palm schools and drastic cuts in personnel brought the district into the black by the end of 2004.

The good financial news was repeated in 2005. The problem was that test scores plummeted to a four-year low. Just 35 percent of the kids met grade-level requirements in reading and math.

One question dogged leaders, parents, taxpayers and students: Would balancing the budget make the district academically bankrupt?

Mary Grant, a lifelong Hazel Crest resident and member of the school finance authority, said she knows the answer.

"I am absolutely positive that the children are definitely getting a better education," she said.

Hazel Crest students have met standards for the first time since the No Child Left Behind Act went into effect, according to preliminary 2006 school report cards.

More than 47.5 percent of students at Robert Frost, Ralph Bunche and Woodland schools are reading and solving math problems at grade level, the preliminary Illinois Standards Achievement Test results show.

"For a district to go from the scores we had the last few years to all our schools making (adequate yearly progress), it's phenomenal," said Barb Toney, a member of the school finance authority. "It's not that we were close. We made it. You don't see that very often, particularly given the challenges of this community."

Same-sex middle school classes

Among the reforms credited for improving test scores is the advent of single-gender classrooms.

Last school year, the district reopened Warren Palm School as a sixth-grade center. Boys and girls were separated for all subjects. Those sixth-graders brought the single-gender classrooms with them when they came to Robert Frost Middle School this fall for seventh grade.

Teachers got more than 30 hours of training in gender-specific teaching techniques, said Robert Frost Principal Maceo Rainey. The goal was to neutralize the self-consciousness of preadolescence, a time when students stop raising their hands for fear of making a mistake in front of a crush, a time when being smart is simply uncool.

"I love it because girls are dealing with separate issues," said Robert Frost Middle School parent-teacher association president Juanita Moore, who has a daughter in a segregated seventh-grade cohort. "I think it is easier to cope and maintain without a boy in the room."

Teachers also got an unintended result. No girls and boys fought each other last school year. Girl-on-girl fights never got physical. Boys threw punches less than a half-dozen times, said Supt. Sheila Harrison-Williams.

"It was unheard of," she said.

Carter was among the teachers who were skeptical of the single-gender approach. But in three months time -- thanks in part to her master's degree research in single-gender education -- she's become a fan.

"In my class, they are achieving a whole lot more," she said. "That's partly due to the way I teach the girls and boys differently. I change it up."

When reviewing for a test recently, Carter took the boys to the gym for a game of kickball. Each time a boy answered a question correctly, he got to kick the ball and run around the bases. A wrong answer was an automatic out. The girls played human tic-tac-toe instead.

Just six years ago, fewer than a dozen public schools nationwide offered any kind of single-gender education, said Leonard Sax, executive director of the National Association for Single-Sex Public Education. Now more than 240 public schools are partially or entirely gender segregated.

The change has been fueled by research that has demonstrated there are hard-wired differences in the ways boys and girls learn, he said. Girls at age 12, for instance, hear at least seven times better than boys their same age. Most girls learn best in classrooms free of distractions. Boys relish the boisterous.

But it isn't a coincidence that Hazel Crest, trying to rebuild its academics with a limited budget, went this route.

"The motivation for (the change) is the fact that their schools failed to reach AYP (adequate yearly progress), and the administrators are scared," Sax said. "They are looking around for things to improve achievement that don't cost anything."

Better books, lessons & tests

The use of single-gender middle school classrooms was not a magic bullet.

The district also revamped its reading curriculum and emphasized teacher training across every grade.

Administrators dumped a rigid, script-based reading program called Direct Instruction, purchased new textbooks and inked a \$317,000 contract with Evans Newton Inc., an Arizona-based educational consulting group.

The consultants compared the textbooks to the state standards and filled gaps with supplemental reading materials. They also created quarterly tests in the same format as the ISAT so teachers could monitor their students' progress and reteach any weak areas. A reading coach continues to visit schools several times a month to model and advise on lessons.

Union president and Woodland School physical education teacher David Bohmann said teachers and principals have bought into the program and share one goal.

"Everyone is teaching to the ISAT," he said.

Community members are watching the scores. The test results were the first thing out of the mouth of LaJolyn Robinson, a resident of the district for 43 years, when asked if she's noticed any changes at the district. Her children and grandchildren are graduates of the district.

"They improved their ISAT so they're on the right road," she said.

Super superintendent

No conversations about Hazel Crest's turnaround go without the mention of the new superintendent.

Known for her background in achievement and motivating people, Harrison-Williams was hired away from a small and troubled Lockport district three years ago to rebuild the Hazel Crest's academics under the purview of the state-appointed school finance authority.

Her tenure has brought stability to a district hurt by superintendent turnover, school board president Dean Barnett said. She has rebuilt a relationship with the union and made the district a better place to work, Bohmann said. And she has worked in harmony with the school and finance boards, members said.

"She hit the ground running and hasn't stopped since she was hired," Toney said. "She came in and made this her district. She is extremely dedicated to the schools, this community and her job."

Moving forward

Of course, this is not the final chapter in the Hazel Crest story. The district still has six years left to pay off the emergency loan and dissolve its school finance authority. Academically, the schools need to make adequate yearly progress for a second consecutive year before they are taken off the academic watch list.

School board member Gertrude Rucker calls this a "rebuilding period."

District leaders are shifting focus now to reviving after-school sports and band, the extracurricular activities that were the cut when money ran short, and to the district's overall configuration.

Educators expect to reopen Lincoln School in the fall as an early childhood and kindergarten grade center, expansion that will be paid for by the retirement of leased module classrooms, said the district's chief financial officer, Rob Grossi.

A new school even could be in the future once the district builds up some money in the bank.

But for now, Harrison-Williams wants people to realize that Hazel Crest is no longer the little district that couldn't.

"We are alive and kicking. We are doing well. We are moving forward on all fronts," she said.

*Kati Phillips may be reached at
kphillips@dailysouthtown.com
or (708) 633-5976.*