

Test data helps student learning

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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School stakeholders learn how results affect curriculum.

Last year's Dudley Elementary fourth graders didn't fare as well on math standards as their peers across the state.

Gothenburg youngsters showed they were nearly 80% proficient on the math standards they were assessed compared to almost 92% for all Nebraska fourth graders.

Knowing where and how to close gaps like those for fourth-grade math students is part of what District 20's data collection and analysis is all about, according to junior high principal and assessment coordinator Ryan Groene.

Groene and superintendent Mike Teahon explained the process to about 20 Stakeholders March 3 during a noon meeting at Gothenburg Public Library.

Stakeholders are school patrons who are invited to meetings on different educational topics and asked to share that information with other community members.

"We want to make education for our kids as good as it can be," Groene said. "We want to provide the best possible instruction."

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Assessment of students and management of that data is part of the district's school improvement goal.

As a result, he said data must be examined to look at student strengths and weaknesses to decide if curriculum changes are needed.

Using math as an example, Groene said closing the learning gap may mean investigating another math curriculum or pulling in additional resources to help students better understand the material.

Groene also talked about what tests students take. They include:

The Iowa Test of Basic Skills, a comprehensive test over several subjects.

STARS (School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System) that includes a statewide trait-based writing assessment and assessments in reading, mathematics, science, and social studies/history.

Students are allowed to retest on challenging assessments several times a year until they understand the concept.

NeSA is a once-a-year new Nebraska Statewide Assessment which students will take in reading this year followed by science, math, language arts in future years.

The ACT college entrance exam.

Regular classroom tests over curriculum.

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DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) which is used in early elementary grades and includes such things as matching sounds to letters.

Although NeSA will replace the STARS test, Groene said the district will continue giving the STARS assessment to students for data collection.

The goal of data collection, Groene explained, is to take certain strands—like vocabulary—from a test like the ITBS, and compare it to another test like STARS to pinpoint where students are doing well and where they need to improve.

Teahon said it's a timing issue sometimes when students are tested on material they've not yet covered during a semester.

"That's what we're looking at—gaps in curriculum," he said.

In addition, Teahon said test data allows educators to see if they might need to restructure curriculum like what kind of math classes should be offered to students who don't intend to go to college.

He said the staff is also considering offering a higher-level algebra class for college-bound students who don't want to take calculus.

Teahon said continuity of math would be in place during high school so students would be prepared for college algebra.

Such a class would combine such things as trigonometry and basic algebra.

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During a question-answer period, one parent asked if the new NeSA test would level the playing field since students in larger schools often have more curriculum choices.

Groene said all students would be exposed to the same curriculum on the NeSA test.

Larger schools have larger staff which enables them to offer additional classes, Teahon pointed out.

Another stakeholder asked if teachers complain about having time to teach other things besides assessment standards.

Groene said they do although it's better than when the state first required statewide testing on standards.

Teahon said fourth-grade teachers sometimes feel overwhelmed because they have to assess students on four standards—reading, writing, math and science—while junior and high school teachers test on one subject.

“We lose some local control because of the requirements we have to meet,” he said.

Groene acknowledged NeSA may not be the best way to assess students because it's a one-time, high-stakes test.

“But we feel it's a necessary step to prepare students,” he said.

Students will take the NeSA test between March 29 and April 29.

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