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Schools gear up for annual tests

By NATALIA MIELCZAREK
Staff Writer

They've compared and contrasted countless test scores from years past.

How to teach the kids about George Washington so they remember months down the road? How to convince some of them that adding integers will come in handy?

It's almost testing time in Metro. When students return from spring break March 22, they will have only a few days to settle in. Then it's all about filling in the answer bubbles with a No. 2.

Here's a look at four schools in Southeast Davidson County that are gearing up for achievement tests spread out over a couple of weeks. Whether the schools' current scores are high or low, all the principals are expecting to see their students improve.

Test time

The combined requirements of the No Child Left Behind federal law and Tennessee's accountability system almost doubled the test-taking time of the annual achievement tests that



Billy Kingsley / Staff
Brandon Kelly, a student at Crieve Hall Elementary, prepares for achievement tests, which begin for students 3-8 soon after they return from spring break March 22.

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students take in grades three through eight.

Grade 3: from 4 hours, 25 minutes to 9 hours, 15 minutes

Grade 4: from 4 hours, 35 minutes to 8 hours, 50 minutes

Grades 5 and 8: from 4 hours, 35 minutes to 9 hours, 30 minutes

Grade 6 and 7: from 4 hours, 35 minutes to 8 hours, 50 minutes

TCAP = Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program, which includes achievement tests for grades three through eight, Gateway exams for high school students and others.

Fall-Hamilton Elementary

510 Wedgewood Ave.

Principal: Carole McDaniel

School statistics:

Economically disadvantaged students: 91.2%

White: 28.5%

Black: 59.7%

Hispanic: 5.9%

Grades the school received based on its achievement scores:

2002: math: F / reading: F

2003: math: F / reading: F

Q&A with Principal Carole McDaniel

Question: As a new principal at the school, how are you preparing for achievement tests this year?

Answer: We've been using last year's test data. The grade level teams have analyzed those data to determine areas of success and weakness. Our teachers collaborate during planning time on instructional strategies that



work to improve those areas.

The reading specialist has been working with individual student assessment and with small groups of students. After school the reading specialist also does staff development with classroom teachers.

At the beginning of the year I bought each classroom teacher the Classroom Connection notebooks, which give them sample test items, which will also help children with their test-taking skills.

We started this at the very beginning of the school year. You can't prepare the day before.

We have excellent computer teachers; they have been administering STAR reading and STAR math and ThinkLink, assessments that you periodically give to gauge what kind of progress the students have been making in each subject area.

Q: What would make you happy in terms of a score this year?

A: It would make me happy if we made at least a year's gain in reading, math and language and if their scores met the No Child Left Behind (federal law) benchmarks. That would be an added bonus. But I look at the progress more than anything.

Q: How will you handle the longer hours of testing this year?

A: The teachers will not test any longer than two hours per day. This is an effort not to tire them out. We're going to use the morning for testing because research shows that they do better when they're fresh in the morning. Prior to the TCAP we're going to have a pep rally, and hopefully this will alleviate some of the anxiety.

Crieve Hall Elementary

498 Hogan Road

Principal: Stephanie Chatham

School statistics:

Economically disadvantaged student population: 35.9%

White: 62.3%

Black: 23.1%

Hispanic: 12.3%

Grades the school received based on its achievement scores:

2002: math: A / reading: A

2003: math: A / reading: A

Q&A with Principal Stephanie Chatham

Q: What are you doing this year to keep up your scores? Is it tough?

A: It's hard. There's an expectation built into the school that's performed well. You're expected to maintain them and improve. It was my first year here last year, so I observed what teachers were already doing right and then looked at areas of professional growth. If I know what they're doing right, it's my job to perpetuate that. This year I'm more familiar with Crieve Hall.

At the beginning of the year we bought test-ready practice booklets for second, third and fourth grade, so we practiced enough to put them in a comfortable situation. This is the second year that we've used the ThinkLink test, which is a diagnostic tool that's directly aligned with TCAP format and skills. It shows us how our boys and girls are doing in all the skills. I think all schools do similar things all year long. Teachers teach their hearts out.

One area of weakness that our children from third to fourth grade have is they don't show the academic growth they should. To address that, in fourth grade we took the idea of the (remedial reading program) Language! and expanded it to all the kids. I'm also doing TCAP talks with all my fourth-graders.

Throughout the year I just keep talking about the importance of writing and incorporating it into all subject areas. You can't prepare for TCAP in three weeks.

Q: What would make you happy in terms of a score this year?

A: We don't ever rest on our laurels. This school had a wonderful tradition that I want to maintain. We're aiming for the 75th percentile (from a scale of 100) for all the children, especially an increase in fourth grade, which will help with gain scores. We want to make sure that every child achieves to the highest level. I don't want to make any sort of excuses for them, and I want to bring everybody out of the bottom (group).

Q: How will you handle longer testing hours this year?

A: We just gave them more days. Last year we tested in three to four days,

and this year we will have six days. We create a schoolwide environment that from 8:30 to 11:30 in the morning is the test time. That's when the whole building is quiet. I'm not going to test them in the afternoon unless it's a makeup exam.

Apollo Middle

631 Richards Road

Principal: James Briggs

School statistics:

Economically disadvantaged student population: 64.5%

White: 36.4%

Black: 40.4%

Hispanic: 16.4%

Grades the school received based on its achievement scores:

2002: math: D / reading: F

2003: math: F / reading: F

Q&A with Principal James Briggs

Q: How are you preparing for the upcoming achievement tests this year?

A: We're taking more than an approach of a two-week cram session.

We've looked at the previous TCAP scores, writing assessments and any other data to see where we're at. The first of the (school) year, we identified areas our students struggle with in our school improvement plan, and we looked at them at every grade level.

I had all the teachers concentrate on those areas like math or language arts with individual students. Then we were able to see what exactly our kids were missing and what they struggle with. I know that for some of them vocabulary was a weak point, so we focused on that. We've done that throughout the year. You look at each classroom and the grade level.

I call it peeling an onion. Teachers can see what's going on in their classrooms. We also give them ThinkLink tests throughout the year to see what skills they're missing. We've also filled out profile sheets on each child

that tell us what each child knows from day one. We also challenged Antioch Middle with the TCAP scores so we have a little competition.

We've used (federal) Title I money to catch them up through tutoring four times a week and on Saturday. We will continue that after achievement tests. It's not all about the scores. It's about the kids, too.

Q: Do you have a goal this year you want to meet on the achievement tests?

A: Our goal for this year is for everyone to improve by 10%.

Q: How will you handle the longer hours of testing this year?

A: We're going to set up a schedule. The test in eighth grade is 200 pages, so we're not going to test more than two hours a day. We're spreading it over more days. After a week (of taking tests) they get to a point where they want to do A, B, A, B. We want to avoid that.

McMurray Middle

520 McMurray Drive

Principal: Karen Lefkovitz

School statistics:

Economically disadvantaged student population: 57.8%

White: 46.8%

Black: 35.7%

Hispanic: 10.6%

Grades the school received based on its achievement scores:

2002: math: C / reading: C

2003: math: C / reading: C

Q&A with Principal Karen Lefkovitz

Q: What are you doing to prepare for the upcoming achievement tests?

A: Our student population has changed dramatically in the last two years. Our poverty level has risen, and we're an English as a Second Language center. We gave all the teachers all the TCAP data on all the students. We

broke it down by quartile. We took a look at those students who are on the edge of a quartile to pull them up.

But of course we also want other students to do better. We're also administering the ThinkLink tests. That way the teachers know exactly what skills to target. Teachers review test-taking strategies. We also looked at the (academic) standards and aligned them with the TCAP standards.

Q: Do you have a goal this year that you want to meet on the achievement tests?

A: To compare last year's test scores to this year's scores wouldn't be fair because our student population has changed so much. It wouldn't be comparing apples to apples. We did make some gains in some areas, and we slipped in others.

My target goal in the school improvement plan is to move between 4% to 5% of the students in each of the (testing) areas. But any increase in reading, math and language arts is acceptable. Any improvement our children make we will celebrate.

Q: How will you handle the longer hours of testing this year?

A: We're going to use every available testing date and only test 90 minutes per day. We're going to give makeup tests in the afternoon to those children who didn't make it. The test is very long, and I don't want to set the children up for failure.

Source: state Department of Education

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