

SCHOOLS SCRAMBLE TO AVOID TAKEOVER

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Two Oktibbeha County schools could lose their public school status if state test scores aren't improved. One of the two could be taken over by the state as soon as September.

The Oktibbeha County School District board of trustees Monday received its first detailed report of strengths and deficiencies of the county's lowest-performing schools — East Oktibbeha Elementary and East Oktibbeha High School — from the Mississippi Department of Education.

A failure to improve test scores could mean firing of all personnel and takeover by the state or a designated management agency. Such action could convert a public school into a charter school in which local control of the school system is lost.

In September, the state assigned a five-person team of retired educators to work with both schools and help implement teaching strategies and examine factors that affect the academic performance of each school.

"Some of their findings are not surprising; some are debatable," County Superintendent James Covington said, "but we're not going to waste time debating. We're just going to roll up our sleeves and continue working."

"We found at both schools that the teachers were not instructing kids at a level that the kids are tested on the state level (math and English)," said Laura Jones, state department bureau manager. "Also, the climate and expectations at the elementary school were higher than the high school. We've started to see that change."

East Oktibbeha High School

According to the state department's report, East Oktibbeha High faces significant challenges in its curriculum and motivation of students. The report states high expectations are notably absent and that lessons are not meaningful, relevant or rigorous. The school's strengths are its discipline and safety procedures.

The state could take over East Oktibbeha High by as early as September if it doesn't push its quality distributive index score above 101. East High scored

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96 for the 2010-11 school year, which is at the bottom of the state's five-tier rating table and is considered failing.

A quality distributive index is a state points system that uses state testing scores, graduation rates and progress statistics.

Administrators at East High have set a QDI goal of 150.

East Oktibbeha Elementary

The same is true of East Oktibbeha Elementary, as its assessments "lacked variety and didn't reflect the designated level of difficulty." In addition, the state department found no evidence of a data-driven school improvement plan.

East Oktibbeha Elementary, which had a QDI of 101, has been considered an at-risk school for three years and is subject to charter conversion. The school must move into the academic watch category, which has a QDI threshold of 133.

East Elementary has set a QDI goal of 160.

Charter school status

The state worked with both schools in a similar capacity last year, but the high school improved its quality distributive index by one point while the elementary school's QDI dropped.

According to the state's New Start School law passed in 2010, the state department can fire entire staffs — from bus drivers to principals — at consistently failing schools. The department would appoint a new principal, who would then hire faculty and staff. The curricula and state testing procedures would remain the same.

The school's QDI is the deciding factor, and even if it improved from the failing zone (0-99) to the at-risk zone (100-132), it would still face charter conversion because it's been an at-risk school for three years. East Oktibbeha High and East Oktibbeha Elementary would have to improve to academic watch, the third tier. The top two tiers are successful and high performing, with a sub-tier of star district in high performing.

According to state statistics, fewer than 6 percent of state schools are considered failing.

Tied to the 2010 bill that estab-

lished the New Start School law is the charter conversion law, which gives community members and parents the option of petitioning the state to convert the school into a charter school. A charter school would be run by an independent company, such as KIP Academy and Learning Center in Georgia, and would be subject to curricula changes.

Jones said charter schools are similar to magnet schools in that any student in the district would be able to attend as long as there was room. Optional curricula, such as college prep or medical technology classes, could also be offered. Charter schools would be run entirely by an independent entity, not an appointed school board.

The likelihood of either school becoming a charter conversion school is extremely low, as there are no charter schools in the state.

"This has never happened before," Jones said. "So this is what I envision: First, you have to get 50 percent of the parents to sign the petition to turn it into a charter. Then, either they've got to show how they're going to successfully run the school or how a charter organization with a track record of success is going to run it. They would have to present that plan to the state board for approval."

Expected legislative changes

During the next state legislative session, the charter school laws are likely to be revamped, Jones said. The Republican majority aims to have charter schools take the same state tests, which means they'd follow the same curricula. Republicans also want to give communities the option to establish charter schools without converting an existing public school.

"We should know something in the next month and a half," Jones said. "Either way, there are going to be some changes."

There could also be reform to the New State School law, which leaves teachers and administrators in limbo because state test results aren't released until September, a month into the school year.

"It creates a tough spot for teachers because there's uncertainty, and they're going to look somewhere they know they'll have a job," Jones said.

Taking steps to retain local control

To address the lack of data-driven instruction, both schools have implemented the EZ Test Tracker system, which allows teachers and administrators to chart growth daily and weekly.

County schools will take the second of three practice versions of the state test this week.

Covington said the results of the test, which will be available by the February board meeting, will be weighed against data from September. The two schools will have a better gauge of improvement.

"The question isn't whether teachers are teaching, but what we're all trying to do is get them teaching better," Covington said. "We want them working smarter. Where we can stand some improvement is in making kids do the work, and what I mean by that is we're not making kids think deep enough. We've got to get beyond surface thinking, get them beyond analyzing and ask the probing questions that will extend the lesson."

Covington said teachers have reacted positively to the state's approach of "how can we improve the things you do well" instead of focusing on deficiencies.

The district has taken steps to boost community involvement and motivate students by having community meetings at each school, where state tests and curricula have been discussed.

Covington said both schools have seen better attendance and discipline records, too. The district has implemented additional after-school and in-school tutoring, as well as Saturday tutoring sessions.

The state department is working in a similar capacity with 28 schools in 17 districts. Roughly 30 more were labeled at risk of failing — the benchmark for the state to assess and assist a school — but those schools showed improvement from last year and were allowed to move forward. The 2011-12 school year marks the fourth straight year the state department has assisted one or more Oktibbeha County schools.