

Reading, math push science off the radar

State ratings will add science in '09. CMS's high-poverty urban schools struggle.

By Ann Doss Helms
ahelms@charlotteobserver.com
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Superintendent Peter Gorman

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Struggling schools spend so much time teaching reading and math that there's little left for science, widening the gap in science scores between high- and low-poverty schools, Superintendent Peter Gorman said Wednesday.

All schools have long emphasized reading and math, which for years have been the only tests used to rate schools and distribute teacher bonuses. The limited time left for science means kids who do well may be drawing on experiences outside school – museum trips, science camps and clubs, books and TV shows about science – that impoverished children are less likely to have, Gorman said.

“We will continue to struggle with that until we have the time in the school day to teach (science),” Gorman said.

This week the state released results of the 2008 science exam, given to fifth- and eighth-graders. Several low-poverty suburban schools and magnets had pass-rate results well above the state and district averages of 47 percent and 44 percent, respectively.

But 41 CMS schools, almost all of them high-poverty neighborhood schools, had pass rates below 25 percent. At Bruns Avenue Elementary, where 97 percent of students come from low-income homes, 90 fifth-graders took the science test. Only one earned a grade-level score, for a pass rate of 1 percent.

“It doesn't surprise me. It saddens me,” said Gorman, who this year replaced Bruns' principal and gave the new

leader bonus money to recruit experienced teachers with a track record of success.

Gorman has boosted the time that young, struggling readers spend working on that skill, with an “intensive reading” program for K-3 students. During a news conference, he acknowledged the program as one example of efforts that pull time from other studies such as science and social studies. But he noted later that the students who took last year's exam were too old to be in the intensive reading program.

Last year, CMS added an hour to the school day at Billingsville Elementary, one of the district's highest-poverty and lowest-performing schools. Just under 13 percent of last year's fifth-graders passed the science exam – low, but better than 11 other high-poverty elementaries.

KIPP Charlotte, a new charter school that features 8.5-hour days (compared with six hours and 15 minutes for most CMS elementaries), had a 73 percent pass rate for its first batch of fifth-graders, better than all but five CMS elementaries. The school is part of a national chain that focuses on preparing low-income and minority students for college.

Beginning in 2009, science scores will count toward state ratings of schools.

Gorman, a former science teacher, has vowed to improve science instruction, but offered few specifics Wednesday. However, he noted that he recently named Wayne Fisher, an award-winning science teacher from Myers Park High, to boost performance in elementary-school science.