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In Providence, elementary pupils posting great gains

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PROVIDENCE — Anthony Carnevale Elementary has upended the stereotype that children of poverty can't succeed. The Springfield Avenue school has posted some of the greatest gains in reading and math scores of any primary school in the state.

On Wednesday, state Education Commissioner Deborah A. Gist joined state and local officials in praising Carnevale for beating the odds. The students here have made double-digit gains in the latest round of state tests: 17.1 points in reading and 15.6 points in math.

The school has flourished despite formidable challenges: 88 percent of the children live in poverty, and 25 percent receive special education services.

"Sometimes, when we talk about children who live in poverty, we talk about it like that means these children can't succeed," Gist said. "But what Carnevale proves and what the work of these teachers shows, is that this is not true."

What makes Carnevale effective? Committed faculty who, when the school opened in 2002, were interviewed and selected by the principal. Teachers who have reached out to parents and made them feel not only welcome, but a part of their children's success. And a willingness to give struggling students a chance to get extra help.

Carnevale offers after-school classes to prepare students to take the rigorous New England Common Assessment Program, the state exam. The school examines student test scores at the individual level so that students who have fallen behind can receive additional instruction in the areas where they are weak,

Carnevale, which has a thriving Parent Teacher Organization, schedules some of their meetings before school or on Saturdays so more parents are able to attend. As principal Mari-Ellen Boisclair said, "We are a family here."

In Providence, successful elementary schools like Webster and Fogarty had certain elements in common. Webster holds a two-week summer camp for incoming third graders to prevent the "summer slide" in math and English scores. When these students took the NECAP for the first time in October, many students were reading and doing math at grade level.

Webster also offers after-school reading clubs for children who are reading below grade level.

At Fogarty, teachers create a data card for each student. Students are then grouped based on their proficiency and specific help is designed for students at various skill levels.

While nearly two-thirds of the city's elementary schools showed gains in reading, math continued to be a significant problem. In fact, the school district posted a slight decline in math scores from 2008 to 2009.

At the high school level in particular, math scores were shockingly low. With the exception of Classical High School, student proficiency is in the single digits. And even at Classical, the system's academic jewel, only 54 percent of 11th graders are performing at grade level in math.

"We're not doing enough," School Supt. Tom Brady said. "But I take great solace in the fact that we put in a legitimate math curriculum in September, that we aligned the professional development, and that we put in the right instructional materials."

Experts say that improving student performance takes anywhere from three to five years. According to Brady, it took the elementary schools five years to make steady gains in reading and math.

Brady said, however, that the district needs to accelerate that process, especially for high school students, who are expected to be at least partially proficient in English and math by 2012. That element is part of the state's new graduation requirements.

Meanwhile, the district is looking at offering double periods of math for teenagers who are struggling in math as well as offering an extended school day. The school system is already working with the Providence After School Alliance on an after-school program for high school students. PASA currently offers enrichment activities for middle school students.

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