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Town's MCAS improves ***Murdock officials see positives in state report card***

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WINCHENDON Students at Murdock High School met or exceeded expectations on the MCAS exam administered earlier this year.

That's the conclusion of a report issued by the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

In only one area other than MCAS results, which are used to assess Murdock's progress toward moving from a Level 3 to a Level 2 school did it fail to hit the target goal.

That area was in the annual dropout rate.

The state says 5.5 percent of Murdock students dropped out of school in 2015, compared to the state average of 1.9 percent.

In the subject areas of the MCAS exam itself – English language arts, mathematics, and science – the targets were all met for both high need students and for all students taking the exam.

On the science portion of the test, the results for high needs students exceeded the target.

The results put Murdock in the 24th percentile statewide for science, 20th percentile for mathematics, and 16th percentile for English language arts.

However, the state's rating for progress toward narrowing proficiency gaps is based on a cumulative progress and performance index of 1 to 100, Murdock was given an overall score of 64, short of the target of 75.

That placed the school in the 12th percentile when compared to schools statewide, down from the 13th percentile last year.

According to Jacqueline Reis of DESE, the overall score "is based on a four year weighted average, while the subject area targets are for a single year.

Essentially, past years' performance is weighing down (Murdock's) performance, even though 2016 accounts for 40 percent of the calculation."

Despite the mixed results, school officials do see positives in the state's report card. When it comes to test results in the three subject areas, Superintendent Steve Haddad says, "We're heading in the right direction."

"We're concentrating on academics," he said.

"Making sure teachers prepare for the job they have.

We're improving but we just have to improve more.

We can improve instruction by improving teachers through continuing education and professional development.

We'll get more improvement with even more effort. That isn't to say teachers aren't trying. They have a very tough job."

"We are making progress toward the goals that were set four years ago," said Murdock High School Principal Josh Romano.

"It's a great sign when you're making progress.

When you look closely at the report card, we are doing what the state expected us to do." Romano said a number of steps are being taken to improve student performance on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System tests.

"We have a writing course that all freshmen have to take," he said.

"We plan for it to be a temporary measure as efforts to improve literacy in the lower grades move ahead.

Those efforts will help future high school students but this course was established to address the needs of students now."

"We've also incorporated a mnemonic course for persuasive writing.

It was developed by (10th and 12th grade teacher) Julia Callahan.

It's an incredible course.

It teaches kids how to write an analytical essay.

All the kids are learning this."

Romano said the school also offers math tutoring three days a week, and an MCAS "boot camp" has been developed for math and science, which takes place just before the exams are administered.

"I'm optimistic about science scores," says Romano.

"There's a new science curriculum in the middle school that includes life sciences, such as biology.

When they get to high school, their science classes will reinforce much of what they've already learned.

That will help when they take the test."

With an overall score placing Murdock in the 12th percentile, it is now considered a Level 3 school.

In order to move up to Level 2, it must reach the 20th percentile.

When asked how long it might take for Murdock to reach Level 2, Romano said, "At best, maybe three years.

But you can't rest on your laurels just because you reach the 20th percentile. With scores based on a four-year average, it's possible to fall below that benchmark and revert to Level 3 again.

The trick is being able to sustain your performance over time."

Romano said improving the attitude of students will also help scores improve.

"We really need to stress how important their education is.

Right now, too many of them have no perseverance. When things get hard, a lot of them just want to quit.

We can't let them.

We're not doing this to make them miserable, we're doing this to help them.

We need to change attitudes, but we're still figuring out how to do that."

"We as a whole care about their future," Romano said.

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