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Palm Beach County high schools show improvement in latest grades

Boost seen for local business, communities as schools garner A grades

By Marc Freeman, Sun Sentinel

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This was the uplifting news that the communities of Lake Worth, Boynton Beach and Belle Glade had waited to hear for so long.

On Tuesday, with new record-breaking academic ratings awarded to the local high schools, these areas gained some of the bragging rights associated with the A-rated campuses in Boca Raton, Wellington and Jupiter.

Shedding poor grades after years of struggles, the improved grades at Boynton Beach, Lake Worth and Glades Central High were cause for celebration on campus. But it's also regarded as the ticket toward luring businesses and industries, raising property values, selling homes and lifting community spirits.

"It's a very positive shot in the arm for the community, not just the city," Boynton Beach City Manager Kurt Bressner said after learning that the high school achieved a B rating from the state for the first time. It had a D grade from 2003 to 2008, before improving to a C last year, according to the Department of Education.

Chamber of Commerce Chairman James Williams also called it significant because "some companies that are looking at Boynton Beach right now for relocation and bringing jobs into the community and the quality of education is something very important there."

High schools across Florida on Tuesday received report cards for the 2009-10 school year, based on a revamped grading system that for the first time judged schools on more than just Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test scores.

It started off with a bang for the Palm Beach County School District's 23 high schools, and three of the county's five charter high schools. An all-time high of 86 percent of the high schools received an A or a B grade.

That included the first A for Lake Worth High, which had the county's most remarkable turnaround.

Just a year ago the campus was branded with a D and placed on the state's list of the lowest-performing campuses. It would have been considered for closure, conversion to a charter school or other drastic measures, without significant improvement.
"We were dead and buried," said former Lake Worth Principal Ian Saltzman, now serving in the district administration. "This is a tribute to everybody working so hard. I'm so proud for those students, teachers and the city."

Beth Johnston, executive director of the Greater Lake Worth Chamber of Commerce, called it a "huge boost" for economic development.

"The business community congratulates the students, teachers and administrators on their tenacity to improve," Johnston said.

Along with FCAT scores, high school grades now are based on student graduation rates, student participation and success in higher-level courses such as Advanced Placement, and student success on college-ready tests such as ACT and SAT, among other factors.

The expanded calculation, part of a push to ratchet up high school performance, is designed to give a fuller picture of high school achievement and to push schools to get more students ready for college.

Schools are not eligible for A ratings unless they show success with the graduation rate of at-risk students.

Grades for elementary and middle schools, which are still based entirely on FCAT performance, came out in August.

School grades are probably more important for parents in the younger grades, since many high schools offer magnet and choice programs which don't require students to attend their neighborhood school, said William Stronge, professor emeritus of economics at Florida Atlantic University.

He said the quality of schools can have a strong impact on the economy.

"Good schools will produce a good labor force, and a good labor force will attract business with higher paying jobs," he said.

In Palm Beach County, eight high schools improved one letter grade and five schools improved two grades.

Just one school, Leadership Academy West charter school in West Palm Beach, received an F, and one charter school received a D, Riviera Beach Maritime Academy. But these ratings were based only on FCAT results.

Statewide, a record 140 high schools received As, 192 got Bs, 69 Cs, 58 Ds and 11 Fs.

Education Commissioner Eric Smith said the improved grades came because Florida students were taking and passing more advanced classes and sticking around to earn diplomas in greater numbers than ever before.
But not all accountability reports are showing good news for Florida high schools.

Florida was one of 11 states participating in a 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress report released recently. It scored third from the bottom of the 11 states, beating only West Virginia and Arkansas.

Just 32 percent of 12th graders were proficient in reading, compared to 36 percent nationwide, and 19 percent were proficient in math, compared to a national average of 25 percent.

"We're keenly aware that we have too high of remediation rate" for students leaving high school and entering community colleges, particularly in math, Smith said in a conference call.

Schools that received As, or improve at least one letter grade from the previous year, receive state reward money of $75 per student. That means $150,000 for a 2,000-student high school. The money is usually divvied out as bonuses for school employees.

Suzy Garfinkle, a Boynton Beach High parent, says those awards are well-deserved because of the great effort made toward improving the school every day.

"I am so proud and excited today for all of the people at Boynton Beach High School, especially the teachers and administrators," said Garfinkle, whose daughter Natalie Chevrier, 16, is a sophomore.

Boynton Beach High Principal Keith Oswald said an A grade is now in reach.

"The community can believe we can accomplish our dreams and goals," he said.

A similar celebration was held at Glades Central, which improved from a D to a C and nearly achieved a B, Principal Anthony Anderson said. It's the first time the school rose about a D grade.

Assistant Principal Angela Moore says the school no longer has "the stigma of being associated with failure. We're excited right now, but we know there's work that still needs to be done."

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