

The Washington Post

Testing success creates own challenge

By Bill Turque
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Terry Dade, the 33-year-old principal of Tyler Elementary in Southeast Washington, freely describes himself as a "data geek" who shares Chancellor Michelle A. Rhee's educational creed: Digging relentlessly into student test scores, diagnosing weaknesses and tailoring teaching to address them can ultimately lift a school's academic performance.

Hired by Rhee as a first-time principal last year, Dade dug out a success story at Tyler, with double-digit boosts in reading and math proficiency. It's also left Dade with a challenge that has thwarted many other principals: what to do for a second act.

Studies across the country show that many low-performing schools falter after big one-year gains in test scores. Of the seven D.C. public schools that increased proficiency rates by 20 percentage points or more in both reading and math in 2008 -- Aiton, Hearst, Raymond and Thomas elementary, Winston Educational Campus, Mamie D. Lee and Sharpe Health Center -- only Thomas showed growth in 2009. Most of the

schools that surged 20 points or more in a single category last year also had difficulty building on the increase this year.

No metric is more widely hailed by Rhee and Mayor Adrian M. Fenty (D) as a sign of genuine progress than test scores, which increased across the city in each of the past two years. And none appears more difficult to sustain.

"It's something we definitely look at and talk about a lot," said Rhee, who last fall presented teachers, administrators and support staff at the seven schools with cash awards averaging \$3,600 per person. But she allowed in an interview this past week that there might have been too much emphasis on the quantum jumps that have been celebrated.

"What I tell principals is that it's common when you see these gains to give some back," she said. "I would rather see really solid, steady growth than a wild swing."

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The next round of awards, she said, is likely to be tweaked to recognize that kind of progress.

Nevertheless, administrators at high-scoring schools are redoubling their efforts to sustain momentum. Dade, aware that rising scores are building Tyler's reputation as an up-and-coming elementary school in a Capitol Hill neighborhood filled with young families, is exhorting his teachers to collaborate on helping struggling students. At Sousa Middle School, Principal Dwan Jordon has filled a huge white board with the names of each of his 271 students and their standing on last month's DC-BAS, an interim assessment given to help prepare students for the spring DC-CAS: green marker for proficient, red for below proficient, orange if they are on the cusp of proficiency.

"We know our kids 100 percent. We know what kids need extra help," said Jordon, another new, data-focused Rhee hire.

Educators say several factors contribute to schools losing ground, some rooted in basic statistics. Those with small enrollments -- and therefore small testing samples -- are more vulnerable to wide score swings. Many of the public schools that produced big jumps in 2008 and declines this year, including Simon, Garrison and Hendley elementary, tested fewer than 150 children. Maury elementary tested fewer than 100.

New waves of children arrive each year, often with new sets of learning issues. Key teachers and administrators depart. Peggy Mussenden, principal of Aiton in Northeast, where math proficiency quadrupled in 2008 but fell back significantly in 2009, said losing a valued assistant principal hurt. Some sub-par second grade teaching in the 2007-08 school year left last year's third-grade teachers -- the grade when the first DC-CAS is administered -- with too much ground to cover.

"A lot of things happened," Mussenden said.

Tyler's recent history suggests that turnover at the top can produce big swings in scores. Under former principal Michelle Pierre-Farid, the school had big gains from 2004 to 2007, with proficiency spiking from 13.5 to 57.5 percent in reading and more than

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doubling to 44.3 percent in math.

But when Pierre-Farid left for a job with the Friendship charter schools, scores nose-dived in 2007-08. Her successor, Pedro Cartagena, was not retained by Rhee. Dade, a graduate of New Leaders for New Schools, a principal training program favored by Rhee, replaced him.

Policies imposed from the top can drive significant changes in scores. This year, the District's Office of the State Superintendent of Education enforced a 1 percent cap on the number of students in each grade who can be counted as proficient or advanced if they take an alternate test because of some learning issue or disability. Rhee said the cap affected four of the seven big gainers in 2008, including Mamie D. Lee and Sharpe, which serve students with mental and physical disabilities.

Huge one-year gains can also be a marker for cheating. In 2008, former state superintendent Deborah A. Gist commissioned an analysis of erasure patterns on DC-CAS exams at more than 20 public and public charter schools with large jumps. When the study of student answer sheets, conducted by the test's publisher, CTB McGraw-Hill, was deemed "inconclusive," Gist's successor, Kerri L. Briggs, decided not to press Rhee to investigate.

But Briggs, prompted by an erasure study of the 2009 exams, has asked 12 high scoring public and charter schools -- officials won't name them -- to conduct internal investigations. Rhee said the inquiry is one reason she has held off on a new round of cash awards. "We just want to make sure we're in the clear," she said.

Meantime, Dade and Jordon are driving their teachers to sift interim test data to address student weaknesses, from fractions and decimals to written responses. Both have engaged an outside firm, the Achievement Network, to administer periodic tests that determine more precisely than the DC-BAS whether students have mastered material recently covered in class.

Jordon has organized students into tiers, each with specially tailored interventions. Advanced students attend the "Saturday

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Academies" set up by the city to help students with test-taking skills. Those at the high end of basic can get tutoring from 7:30 to 8:45 in the morning. Those at basic and below have access to after-school tutoring and special Saturday morning sessions at Tyler.

Next month, Dade will start a "Boot Camp," in which every available adult in the building will work with small groups of kids.

"When my students get to the DC-CAS, my goal is for them to say, 'That was easy, Mr. Dade.' "

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