

Beverly City meets criteria to lose focus school label

By **KELLY KULTYS**
STAFF WRITER

BEVERLY — It took about five years of changing teaching strategies, updating curriculum and helping students learn better, but the one-school district can finally say it is no longer under state supervision as a focus school.

In 2012, under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, Beverly was one of two Burlington County school districts designated as focus schools due to its performance on standardized tests and achievement gaps among its students.

“Every year, we had to approve our school improvement plan,” Superintendent Elizabeth Giacobbe said Wednesday.

The district was required to outline plans on how it was going to improve academic achievement and increase student test scores.

“We had to set goals in all of our areas. We were targeted (by the state) because of our economically disadvantaged, as well as our special education populations.”

For the 2016-17 school year, the one-school K-8 district had 296 students, of which 179 qualified for free or reduced lunches. About 40 students received special education last school year.

Because of the designation, the district was placed under the watch of one of the state’s nine Regional Achievement Centers, which were responsible for working with the schools to “implement proven turnaround principles and dramatically improve student achievement.”

The focus school label covered about 10 percent of schools in the state that had low performances from some of its subgroups, such as economically disadvantaged students, as well as schools that had the widest gaps in achievement between different groups of students.

The RACs also worked with priority schools, which were the lowest performing schools in the state.

As of June 30, according to a letter from the Commissioner of Education Kimberley Harrington, Beverly has met the required criteria to drop its label.

“I applaud your successful efforts to close the achievement gaps in your school, and encourage you to maintain a cycle of continuous improvement in order to remain on a positive trajectory,” Harrington wrote.

Giacobbe credited her teaching staff, as well as Kerri Lawler, the school’s director of curriculum and instruction, for closing these gaps.

Soon after she became the superintendent in 2011, when the school was labeled a priority school, Giacobbe said she instituted a data-based system that allowed the teachers to see their students’ test scores to help identify areas

they were struggling in.

“When I first started here, the prior administration wasn’t even letting them look at test scores,” she said.

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ELIZABETH GIACOBBE
BEVERLY SCHOOL DISTRICT
SUPERINTENDENT

Analyzing where students were struggling helped them address issues in the curriculum, which allowed the teachers to

change their strategies to better address educational needs.

“I’m so proud of them because none of this would have been possible without them,” the superintendent said. “It took a lot of training, analyzing data, which was new to them.”

Despite the removal of the label, Giacobbe said there’s one more goal she wants to see the school achieve — reward school status. Reward schools are defined by the state as schools that have “achieved high proficiency levels or high levels of growth, including progress toward closing the achievement gap.”

“While we are out of focus status, we’re not going to rest on our laurels,” she said. “We’re going to continue to work on closing our achievement gaps.”

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