

MME results show demographic achievement gap – Chris Jackett – Eagle

Black [parents](#) speak out about scores

By Chris Jackett
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BLOOMFIELD TOWNSHIP — An analysis of Michigan Merit Exam results shows black students in the Bloomfield Hills Schools district are trailing their [white](#) and Asian classmates academically. Parents are looking for answers to the achievement gap, but the district said it's a multi-faceted issue.

The district's MME results from last spring show that 35 percent or more of the white and Asian student populations at Andover and Lahser combined to pass the test than did black students.

In spring 2011, black juniors in the district, not including the International Academy, did not do well as a whole, and several parents are upset.

“The boys are not doing well. The girls need to do a lot better, but the African-American boys are the ones having the issues,” said Rhodonna Anderson, who is black and whose son will take the MME at Lahser in spring 2012. “I can't explain it other than lack of interest and motivation to do better. All kids are impressionable and want someone to tell them they can do it. We're trusting teachers with our [children](#), and they have them most of the day, so I expect a lot. Everyone doesn't learn the same way, so you need to change it so it helps all the students.”

Fewer than 60 black juniors, who are now seniors, took the test last spring, and 70 percent passed social studies. But as a demographic, the group failed reading, writing, math and science, with just 37 percent passing the writing portion of the MME.

BHS, regularly recognized as one of the top districts in the state, saw 80 percent or more of its white juniors pass each category, and 87 percent or more of its Asian juniors pass each category. Roughly 320 white students and 31 Asian students were tested between Andover and Lahser last spring.

As a district, 86 percent or more of the roughly 420 students passed each category with a Level One “advance” or Level Two “efficient” rating.

“The issue with achievement with minority students in Bloomfield Hills unfortunately mirrors that throughout the United States. Bloomfield Hills is far from ordinary,” said Ed Bretzlaff, the district's assistant superintendent for instruction, who is white. “There has been tons and tons and tons of research. A lot of it starts at home. It doesn't matter what group you're talking about, but students who aren't exposed to tons of reading material come to school knowing fewer words. That's not necessarily the issue in Bloomfield Hills, but that's what national research shows.”

Although the demographic differences in 2011 were noticeable and the black students tested poorly as a whole, it was a general improvement over past years. The Class of 2011 was an exception, doing better as a whole in

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Percentage of students who passed MME, split by the three largest demographics						
	Students	Reading	Writing	Math	Science	Social Studies
2011	District-IA	83%	76%	76%	78%	87%
	White	87%	82%	80%	82%	89%
	Black	53%	37%	40%	45%	70%
	Asian	94%	87%	100%	97%	100%
<i>(Black students average 35% lower than white students, 47% lower than Asian students)</i>						
2010	District-IA	86%	74%	78%	81%	94%
	White	89%	80%	82%	85%	97%
	Black	69%	43%	49%	54%	83%
	Asian	91%	84%	91%	84%	91%
<i>(Black students average 27% lower than white students, 29% lower than Asian students)</i>						
2009	District-IA	83%	77%	73%	79%	91%
	White	87%	83%	78%	83%	93%
	Black	54%	25%	29%	44%	78%
	Asian	81%	79%	90%	93%	93%
<i>(Black students average 40% lower than white students, 41% lower than Asian students)</i>						

Source: www.michigan.gov/mme

most categories — in all categories for black students — when they were juniors in spring 2010, but the spring 2009 MME exam saw just 25 percent of black students pass writing and 29 percent pass math.

“We have seen the scores for our African-American students increase, but we have seen them (struggle) throughout the state,” said Tracy Hall, who is black and in her fourth year as Lahser’s associate principal. “Most of our white students have been here since elementary school. Most African-American students come in at middle school in eighth-grade. When it’s time to take the MME, they’re playing catch-up from before the ninth-grade. Most of the students from both races feel they’re getting a good education here. I think, comprehensively throughout the curriculum, these skills are embedded.”

Hall determined that only three of Lahser’s 28 black students who took the MME last spring had been in the district since third-grade or before. Thirteen others joined between fourth- and sixth-grade, while seven came in between seventh and ninth, and the remaining five joined as high school sophomores or juniors.

“The rigor of the district will prepare the kids for the MME. You can see the ones that matriculate through the program have done better on the MME,” said Sherry Wiggins-Baker, who is black and the mother of Lahser graduates, and the director of the African-American-focused Student Academic Acceleration program. “There is a direct correlation between the number of hours I see them at tutoring and their grades.”

Anderson said she feels the matriculation argument is no longer valid, as black students continue to struggle as a whole despite how long they’ve been a BHS student.

“I think they’re coming out there more for safety, but their kids are being neglected,” Anderson said of black families moving into the BHS district. “They’re not getting that extra push from the teachers that say ‘you can be what you want to be.’ The school district is changing, but the administrative side isn’t. They’re not even reaching a lot of the kids that had issues. I think the new blood needs to be more open-minded, and I’m not seeing that.”

EXTRA HELP

The district has taken multiple steps to tend to the issue during the past decade, officials said. In addition to Wiggins-Baker’s free Student Academic Acceleration program, the district has developed the low-cost Bloomfield Hills Saturday Enrichment Program, free tutoring tables with athletic coaches, and the African-American Parent Network as part of an Oakland Schools’ initiative, and is involved in the Learning Achievement Coalition – Oakland, better known as LAC-O. There is also free after-school tutoring with teachers and the National Honor Society.

“The goal initially was to address these achievements gaps,” Saturday Enrichment Program Executive Director Stephanie Crider, who is black, said of starting the program in 2000. “When we began, everything was free. Then, when there was a (\$10 per subject per day) fee attached to it, enrollment declined.

“Parents felt good to know other African-American families in the community because there are so few and they are so dispersed throughout. I think we’ve made some progress. I think there’s not as much tension as there was in the beginning when both sides were pointing fingers at each other. My hope is we could have an ongoing committee that addresses these concerns. I think our community is not as progressive as it needs to be. These are difficult conversations to have.”

Wiggins-Baker said doing homework, parent and teacher engagement, and using best practices are all part of the formula for student success.

“Show me a teacher that’s engaged and a parent that’s engaged and I’ll show you a student that’s successful,” Wiggins-Baker said. “Money really doesn’t determine it. It’s that formula. Even if the child has money, if they

don't spend the time at task, they (won't be successful). There's a component of race, but it's not the only component.

"I have seen a lot of change here at Lahser from the time my kids were here (in 2006). To me, there's a lot of resources for the kids, it just matters (if they take advantage of them)."

Anderson said she thinks the district's grades are higher because the more affluent families can afford to pay \$60-\$90 per hour for private tutors. She also said enrichment programs, held at Fox Hills, do not have an ideal location for tutoring, although district officials say they chose the location because more black students lived near Fox Hills than any other district building.

"It's not fair to the kids who can't afford it," Anderson said of the extra tutoring. "All the African-American kids in the school don't live at Fox Hills. When you have kids who can't drive, why don't you have it during the school day?"

The district has taken an in-school block scheduling measure to address students struggling in a specific subject. For example, if a student struggles in an English subject, he or she will be scheduled for two language arts classes back-to-back instead of an elective course for one time block.

"Personally, my kids do pretty well. But, overall, there is a huge gap," said African-American parent Myra Gracey, a former 25-year Detroit police officer whose son is a sophomore at Lahser. "As a parent, if you're not very, very involved, they will fall through the cracks.

"There's a lot of new issues coming to Bloomfield Hills. It's not the crème de la crème anymore. I applaud teachers. I think their job is much harder than mine."

When Lahser Principal Charlie Hollerith took the reins at the high school seven years ago, he was surprised to discover the achievement gap.

"When I first saw the scores, I saw that as an area we needed to address," said Hollerith, who is white. "We were very deliberate and targeted to bring these services to the kids who most needed it. I think we do a lot better screenings to identify supports that will help the students out early on."

He said looking at how students perform over time is an important factor standardized tests like the MME struggle to display.

"When you look at MME, you are comparing one cohort of students to another cohort of students. Let's look at growth," said Hollerith, who noted Lahser made the Adequate Yearly Progress list this summer after failing to do so in 2010. "Our concern administratively is how far have they come over time. It takes a tremendous amount of human capital along the way."

That human capital includes parents, teachers and administrators. However, only a small portion of teachers within the BHS district are a minority.

DIVERSITY AT THE HELM

According to a November 2010 Equal Employment Opportunity Commission report provided by the district, 35 of 766 full-time district employees (4.5 percent) are black, 721 are white (94.1 percent), six are Hispanic, four are Asian or Pacific Islander and none are American Indian. As a district, BHS Student Services manager JoAnne Messina said the 5,313 BHS students are about 75 percent white, 13 percent black, 10 percent Asian and 2 percent Hispanic, not including International Academy.

“I think it’s a big piece that needs to be addressed,” Anderson said.

Many of the full-time black educators are not classified as teachers. Just six of 113 elementary and three of the 189 secondary teachers are black. Interestingly, 107 of the 113 total elementary teachers (94.7 percent) are women, compared with 128 of the 189 total secondary teachers (67.7 percent).

“I think, if we could get more African-American teachers hired, that would help,” Crider said. “To have teachers who can relate in delivery style, I think that would help the students and help keep them engaged.”

Four of 89 part-time district employees are black. Christine Barnett, BHS assistant superintendent for human resources and labor relations, said athletic coaches are not employees of the district unless they are also teachers.

“They are employed by EduStaff, the third party that we contract with for such services,” said Barnett, who is white. “However, our unofficial count indicates that there are 138 coaches at the high school level, 12 of which are African-American.”

Combining all coaches and district employees, 52 of 993 (5.2 percent) are black, and even fewer are from other minority groups.

“It’s been a long, long effort on the part of the district to increase the hiring of minority teachers. There’s a lot of competition for qualified minority candidates,” said Bretzlaff, who said that fewer minorities are going into teaching as a profession. “We would love to have more minority teachers. I think we’re pretty representative, as much as Bloomfield Hills is representative of anyone. We’re becoming more and more diverse.

“We appreciate the concern. We know the concern is there. It’s not one size fits all. Every student has needs.”

Many feel the important thing is to move forward together. Past MME scores cannot be changed, but those to be recorded in future years can still be helped.

“I think the responsibility probably lies on both sides,” Crider said of parents and the district. “I just hope that really both sides are willing to be honest and open and willing to candidly talk about the real issues. I think we’re capable of doing that.”

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