

Akron Beacon Journal

EDUCATION

I Promise School 1 of 3 APS buildings to improve enough to exit state oversight

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When Stephanie Davis became principal of the I Promise School almost two years ago, one of her goals was to bring stability to a school made up of Akron's most vulnerable children, who had seen numerous leaders come and go through the previous years.

Davis said she feels like that stability is finally starting to pay off, and she and Akron Public Schools now have a significant milestone to show for it.

The school is no longer under state oversight, per an updated list released by the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce this month.

"We're happy about this growth, and I'm proud of the students," Davis said. "And we're just going to continue this hard work to continue to grow our students."

I Promise is one of three Akron schools that got the same good news this month.

David Hill Community Learning Center and Akron Online also have been released from state oversight.

Those schools found themselves on one of three lists the state has to hold schools accountable for their academic performance. The lists reflect schools where low academic performance has earned the building a "designation" by the state, either for the full building's struggles, or the struggle of a subgroup of students within that school.

The designations are part of a federal requirement for states to identify low-performing schools and to hold districts accountable for improving them. Some designations are issued every three years, while others can be given every year. A school can come off any of the lists as soon as they make the necessary improvements over a minimum of two years.

How did Akron Public Schools fare?

The news this go-around was a mixed bag for Akron overall. Three schools came out of state oversight, a few more that were already in it have not yet shown enough progress to come out, and another three were newly identified and will now be under state oversight for at least two years.

Keith Liechty-Clifford, the district's director of school improvement, said the designations are not ones schools want to earn, but they can help the district support staff and provide additional resources where necessary.

All schools in the districts have individual improvement plans, he said, but those with a state designation receive priority across the district when it comes to limited resources like staffing or programming.

"For us it does bring a new level of concern, of awareness," Liechty-Clifford said. "So we take it seriously. For us at a very basic level, if you get a designation, then you have slightly more rigorous expectations around your school improvement initiatives."

Schools with state designations also receive more money from the state, and when they improve enough to come off the lists, they lose that extra funding. For APS Online, which is coming off a state list this year, that will mean losing funding that is currently paying for a social worker to help students' families.

For the schools that have improved enough to come off the list, Liechty-Clifford said much credit is due to the district's adoption three years ago of a reading curriculum that fully embraced the "science of reading," a heavily phonics-based, explicit teaching of kids how to read that aligns with brain science. The district also required all early literacy teachers to take a 60-hour course, called LETRS, over the course of a year, to better understand that science and how to apply it in their classrooms.

The teachers union pushed back on the number of hours required for the training, because it was on top of other professional development that teachers were required to do, and far exceeded a state minimum requirement. But Liechty-Clifford said the increased lift has been worth it.

"We took a little bit of heat for that but I think it's paying off when you see a lot of our early literacy numbers," he said. "We continue to build systems around the science of reading."

I Promise School showing progress

At I Promise, Davis said she is seeing the science of reading make a difference in her school.

Coming out of state oversight, she said, is "a nice byproduct of all the hard work that my students and staff are doing."

The I Promise School is a partnership between the Akron school district and the LeBron James Family Foundation, and is a public school. It was created in 2018 to be an intervention for the district's lowest-performing students, providing them a new educational environment and intensive supports for students and their families.

I Promise has struggled with turnover in teachers and leaders, and achievement scores on the state report card have raised concerns. However, the school continues to earn positive scores in progress, which reflects how much students are growing in one year.

Davis said she knows because students are coming into the school behind, it will always be a fight to stay out of state oversight. The school also has a long way to go to achieving its original goal of catching kids up before they leave after eighth grade.

"I just want to stay positive and keep going with our momentum," Davis said. "This is an important benchmark but it's by no means the finish line."

Schools with poor performance can earn one of three designations from the state. Those are:

Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI): These schools rank in the bottom 5% in academics among all Title I schools in the state, based on their Report Card. High schools can also be put on the CSI list for having a graduation rate below 67%. No new schools were added to this list this year statewide.

Additional Targeted Support and Intervention (ATSI): Schools with a subgroup of students, like students with disabilities, performing in the bottom 5% among their peers across the state.

Targeted Support and Intervention (TSI): Schools with a subgroup of students performing in the bottom 2% among their peers across the state.

Schools in Akron Public Schools that are no longer under state oversight as of this year:

David Hill CLC: Was put on the CSI list in 2022 for being in the bottom 5% in the state. Exited the list this year.

APS Online: Was put on the CSI list in 2022 for having a graduating rate below 67%. Exited the list this year.

I Promise School: Was put on TSI list for academic performance of two subgroups, Black students and students with disabilities. Exited both groups this year.

Schools that were previously under state oversight and remain there:

Akron Alternative Academy: Was put on CSI list in 2018 for being in the bottom 5%, then in 2022 for low graduation rate. Remains on the list.

Garfield CLC: The school, then-Kenmore Garfield, was put on the CSI list for being in the bottom 5% in 2022 and remains on the list.

Leggett CLC: Was put on ATSI list for performance of students with disabilities.

Schools newly identified for state oversight:

Case CLC: Designated TSI for performance of students with disabilities.

East CLC: Designated TSI for Hispanic students

McEbright CLC: Designated TSI for white, non-Hispanic students

Other schools in Summit County currently under state oversight:

Schnee Learning Center: dropout-recovery charter school on the CSI list for graduation rate

Steel Academy: charter school on the CSI list for graduation rate

Towpath Trail: dropout-recovery charter school on the CSI list for graduation rate

Akron Career Tech High School: charter school on CSI list for chronic absenteeism

Alternative Education Academy: charter school on CSI list for being in the bottom 5% and graduation rate

Cascade Career Prep High School: dropout-recovery charter school on CSI list for being in the bottom 5% and graduation rate

Other Summit County schools that improved and exited lists this year:

Imagine Leadership Academy: charter school was on CSI list for being in the bottom 5%, exited this year

Bolich Middle: Cuyahoga Falls City School District middle school was an ATSI school for multi-racial student performance, exited this year

Barberton Elementary West: Barberton City Schools elementary was ATSI for students with disabilities, exited this year

AkroTech High School: charter school was on TSI list for performance of Black students, exited this year

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