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ISTEP scores shake up assumptions on rankings

Some IPS elementaries, high school charters are outperforming township peers

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State test results show a new pecking order, as some IPS elementary schools post scores among the highest in Marion County, outstripping many suburban township schools and a wave of new charter schools.

At the high school level, charters have emerged among the county's leaders.

The results of a Star analysis of the median scores on statewide exams fly against common public perceptions of charter schools, Indianapolis Public Schools and the surrounding township districts.

Those who suggest IPS performs poorly across the board or tout charter schools as a cure-all face a much more complicated reality:

Indianapolis Public Schools has some of the highest scores in the county at lower grade levels. Two of the five highest-performing schools at third-grade math are in IPS, as are seven of the top 10 in sixth-grade math. But its high schools all fall at the bottom of the rankings.

Charter schools compare poorly to traditional public schools at the elementary levels but have some of the highest ninth- and 10th-grade test scores in the county. All but one upper-grades charter school beat every single IPS high school.

Township districts with top-notch reputations have scores below the state average and in some elementary schools below those in IPS.

The patterns follow a series of changes in the county's public schools, from the launch of the first charter schools six years ago to an expansion of testing to include more grades and the shift of IPS sixth-graders out of middle schools and into elementaries.

Students take the Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational-Plus exam each fall in grades 3 through 10. Results are typically reported as the percentage of students who pass. But using a school's median score in each grade offers a better look at how well a school is performing on the exam. Two schools could both have 100-percent passing rates, but every student at one school could have passed with the equivalent of an A and every student at the other with a D.

For instance, fourth-graders at Speedway's Newby Elementary and Lawrence Township's Indian Creek magnet elementary led the county with a 95 percent pass rate on the English test. But Newby's median score on the test was 25 points lower than Indian Creek's -- and lower than 18 other schools in the county.

High-performing charter

Janet McNeal suspects that few in the city know that her 10th-graders had the highest English scores in Marion County on the ISTEP-Plus this year.

McNeal, the principal at Herron High School, a charter school, said the public doesn't realize charter schools can do such work. Some see them as a blight, raiding traditional public schools for talented students.

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But nearly all Herron students struggled at other schools, she said.

"I keep hearing that we steal the cream of the crop from the public schools," she said, "but that's just not the case."

Being tops means Herron's 10th-graders beat those at seven other charter schools, nine IPS schools and 12 high schools in the townships with a median 590 score on the state English test.

That's short of Carmel High School's 613, a score that made it the highest-performing school in Central Indiana and fourth-highest in the state. IPS' highest scorer, the magnet Key Learning Community, scored 569.

Seven of the city's eight charter high schools outperformed every traditional IPS high school. The eighth, Indianapolis Metropolitan High School, mainly serves dropouts but still had a higher score than IPS' Northwest High School.

Students at Herron hadn't been told by school officials of their top rank, but several said they weren't surprised.

William Pate-DeMyers, a junior, attended public schools in Marion and Hendricks counties and a private Catholic school. The work at Herron, he said, has been the most challenging.

"They set the bar so high here," he said. "The teachers care so much, they won't let you slack."

Early struggles

Charter schools fare much more poorly at the elementary levels, where some IPS schools lead the way.

Of the county's 140 or so schools serving elementary grades, the best-performing charter school, Irvington Community School, scored below at least 30 traditional schools in third and fourth grade.

In fifth-grade math, for example, five of nine elementary-grade charter schools were in the bottom quarter of the county.

Kevin Teasley, who operates two charter schools, said charter schools suffer because children coming to charter schools tend to be behind and then leave once they're back on track.

"A lot of the general public are looking at charter schools as a place to get remediation and get fixed," he said, "and then they go on to other schools that have other amenities."

IPS elementary schools hold their own against charter schools, including eight IPS schools scoring in the top quarter of the county's schools on fourth-grade math and another nine in the top half of schools.

On the Southeastside, School 114's sixth-graders had the fifth-highest median math score in the county and its fourth-graders had the ninth-best in English.

More than 90 percent of the students there live in poverty, typically a factor in keeping test scores down. But the percentage of students passing both parts of the ISTEP-Plus has risen from 19 percent to 62 percent in 10 years.

Teachers gather to review copies of the prior year's ISTEP-Plus to analyze where students erred -- and to refine their teaching methods. Each teacher specializes in a subject and rotates to teach that topic to other classes.

"From when I started here to today," teacher LeAnn Kavanaugh said, "it's a tremendous difference."

Despite successes at elementary schools, Superintendent Eugene White laments IPS' ninth- and 10th-grade test scores. Every township school outperformed every IPS high school, as did all but one charter school.

"Our high schools are abysmal," White said. "I wish I could have a better word, but at this time I don't."

The district sliced its high schools into smaller schools in 2005 to improve performance. White has made reforms -- twice-a-quarter tests, study skills programs, dropout prevention centers -- with the same goal.

So far, it hasn't worked.

Most of the district's high schools have lower percentages of students passing the state tests than when White joined the district in 2005.

Of the county's 32 high schools, Arlington High School ranks 29th -- ahead of only Northwest High School, a Warren Township special education program and an IPS school for tough discipline cases.

White said his best advice for parents of high school students was to enroll them in a magnet program with higher scores. He said he expects traditional high schools will see major improvement within a few years.

Indiana University education professor Joshua Smith said a pattern of higher-performing elementary schools and low-performing high schools can be expected in urban districts as students struggle to face the challenges of poverty.

Township schools may not see the pattern in as many schools, he said, because they do not have quite as high percentages of students living in poverty. Elementary schools have the flexibility to provide support networks -- special tutors or intensive blocks of time for reading -- that can help children who struggle to learn.

By high school, he said, those support networks evaporate in most districts and students become aware that many have low expectations for them.

"I think that's probably some of the funnel that's happening," he said. "It's the cumulative effect of poverty, and it's challenging."

Even those elementary scores might be deceiving, he said, if schools boosted test scores by sacrificing social studies or music for more time on arithmetic.

Township schools

Once seen as havens for middle-class families fleeing the city core, the 10 Marion County school districts outside IPS built strong academic reputations. In some cases, that high esteem may need a reality check.

High schools with once-stellar reputations also have slipped. Lawrence Township Schools' two high schools, for example, score barely in the top half of schools in the county on the 10th-grade ISTEP tests.

Even on the ninth-grade math test, where the district performed better, both Lawrence North and Lawrence Central came in behind Charles A. Tindley charter school and Beech Grove, Speedway, Franklin Central, North Central, Perry Meridian, Ben Davis, Southport and Warren Central high schools.

In Wayne Township Schools, for example, six of the district's 11 elementary schools ranked in the lower half of the county's schools on third-grade reading -- territory historically occupied by IPS schools.

Call Star reporter Andy Gammill at (317) 444-6494.

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