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School report cards released

Parents soon will receive accountability updates

By **Berny Morson, Rocky Mountain News**

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The state Department of Education today will release report cards for every public school in Colorado, with ratings on everything from academics to safety.

Each of the state's 1,780 schools has been rated for academic achievement on a five- tiered scale, from "unsatisfactory" to "excellent," based on results of state tests administered last spring.

For the first time, the report cards will show whether students in each school are generally improving or declining based on test scores.

The report cards - officially called School Accountability Reports - are meant to provide parents with a portrait of the schools their children attend, said Colorado Education Commissioner William Moloney.

"The broad, overarching theme is accountability," Moloney said. "If a parent goes over this and says, 'This doesn't look too good, the safety is a little shaky here, and finances seem to be on the ropes, or achievement (is down),' then they're in a position to say, 'Something has to be done about this,' or 'I want another option.' "

The report card gives parents sample questions to ask of school officials, such as what a school is doing to improve learning and how teachers are using test results to improve instruction.

A million report cards have been printed and sent to schools. Most parents will receive a copy within two weeks.

The report cards for each school show, among other things:

- Whether the school is fully accredited by the school district and whether the school is making progress toward meeting its goals under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.
- Safety data that show the number of fights and assaults, as well as drug, alcohol and tobacco incidents.
- The number of teachers and their average number of years of experience.

The academic rating for each school represents test scores for each subject at each grade level as combined through a complicated formula, said Dianne Lefly, a supervisor in the state education department's student assessment unit.

The measurement of academic growth is based on tracking the scores of individual students as they advanced in grade from the 2003-04 school year to the 2004-05 school year, Lefly said.

For example, scores for fourth-graders in 2004-05 are compared with scores for third-graders in 2003-04.

That information is available for the first time this year, she said.

The private Donnell-Kay Foundation on Monday released its own report card on Colorado schools.

It rated the state's overall academic achievement as average, but called the gap between Anglos and minorities "unsatisfactory."

The private family foundation based in Denver specializes in education policy issues.

The group's report is based on comparisons among the states using national data as well as previously published results from the state achievement tests.

The report notes that, on average, 72 percent of Anglos performed at the proficient or advanced level on the state tests, compared with 42 percent of blacks and 39 percent of Hispanics.

Minorities also have lower graduation rates and college participation rates than Anglos, the report says.

The report was timed to coincide with school report cards, said Donnell-Kay director Tony Lewis.

"It's all well and good for the state to hold schools accountable," Lewis said. "Citizens need to hold the state accountable."

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