

# Graduation rates in Oconee, Pickens above

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COLUMBIA — The graduation rates for the school districts of Oconee and Pickens counties exceeded the state average based on the report cards released Wednesday by the S.C. Department of Education.

Oconee County officials said the school district's current

report card shows the graduation rate at 81.5 percent, while Pickens County's on-time graduation rate hit an all-time high of 82 percent in 2015.

Both surpassed the state average of 80.3 percent, which in itself is an improvement over last year's graduation rate of 80.1 percent.

Superintendent Michael Thorsland said Oconee County's

ability to have a graduation rate of more than 80 percent is part of its overall goal of being one of the top 10 school districts in South Carolina.

"If we are to achieve our goal, our first priority must be to reduce the number of students leaving the school system before they are ready," Thorsland said.

Pickens County superintendent Danny Merck said he is

pleased the district has seen improvement in its graduation rate for seven consecutive years.

"The graduation rate is a tremendous story of ongoing success for our district," Merck said. "In 2010, the board of trustees set a goal of reaching an 80-percent graduation rate by 2015. We met that goal a year early and last year we just kept

## state average

building on that success."

Assistant superintendent of instructional services Sharon Huff said there were several initiatives that contributed to the increase in Pickens County — including graduation coaches and the Adult Learning Center's summer program.

"We placed graduation

coaches at each high school to identify students who are at risk of dropping out and to work with those students one-on-one to see them through their high school careers," Huff said. "The summer program at the Adult Learning Center has also had a huge impact by helping students who are right on the bubble to be able to earn enough credits to graduate before the graduation deadline each summer."

Pickens County officials said the State Report Card also revealed 64.3 percent of the school district's 2014 graduation class

was pursuing two- and four-year degrees, compared to 70.3 percent statewide.

It also showed 60.9 percent of the district seniors were eligible for the LIFE scholarship, higher than the 42.2 percent statewide.

"Those numbers taken together show us that our students are being well prepared to succeed in college but that some of them may have chosen not to apply," Huff said. "We are going to work to determine the reason."

Oconee County officials say the report cards, required by the No Child Left Behind federal law, would not include district ratings until 2017 due

to new format and new testing instruments.

Although most of the information presented on the report card has already been released to the public, officials say ACT Aspire continues to show the district percent ready level is above the state percent ready for English and math, but slightly under for reading and writing.

Ginger Hopkins, assistant superintendent for instructional services, said the John Collins Writing Program is among "many new instructional initiatives in the district."

"What we are learning

through this program is that we need to raise the bar for what we expect students to achieve because they live up to the expectations we set for them," Hopkins said. "This will affect how we teach across all subjects and we feel it will impact much more than just writing."

Thorsland said that while satisfied with much of the state Report Card, the district is not totally satisfied.

"We know our students are capable of so much more," Thorsland said. "We are determined to help them set and achieve high goals so they will be college and career ready

when they leave the School District of Oconee County."

The district and school report cards can be found on the DOE website at [ed.sc.gov](http://ed.sc.gov).

State superintendent of education Molly Spearman said the state will continue to boost academic achievement and that she encourages students throughout South Carolina to excel.

"I am proud of how far we've come, and I want to commend our students, parents and teachers for their success," Spearman said.

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