Schools show progress

Pickens, Greenville improve, Anderson 1 keeps excellent rating

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Nineteen Greenville County schools raised their report card grades this year, helping the district edge up a notch in its improvement rating, while showing substantial improvement among "historically underachieving groups of students," according to new data from the state Department of Education.

Pickens County Schools also moved up in the "absolute rating" for the same reason, and Anderson 1 maintained its Excellent mark.

Greenville County's director of accountability and quality assurance said it wasn't a matter of working harder but working "smarter" that fueled the district's upward mobility.

"And that means aligning what we're teaching in the classroom to the standards that are being tested," he said.

That's not the same as "teaching to the test," he said, because teachers don't know which standards are going to be tested in each run of the tests.

Greenville County moved up from Average to Good on the growth rating, which measures progress from one year to the next, while retaining its Good

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grade on the absolute rating, based on standardized tests, graduation rates and other factors.

Including charter schools, 38 Greenville County schools scored Excellent on their absolute ratings, with 22 scoring Good, 20 Average, five Below Average, and two At Risk.

Pickens County had 12 Excellent, nine Good and four Average, with none Below Average or At Risk.

Anderson 1 had 10 Excellent, two Good and none Average or below.

The state also released new four-year graduation rates, with the statewide rate improving for the second year in a row to hit the 74.9 percent mark — still below the high water mark of the past 11 years of 78 percent.

"The path to prosperity for South Carolina's economy begins, but does not end, with greater numbers of high school graduates," state Superintendent of Education Mick Zais said.

Greenville Tech Charter High was one of four high schools in the state to post a 100 percent graduation rate. It was also in a four-way tie, along with Brashier Middle College Charter School, for the highest numerical score that the absolute ratings are derived from.

Sterling School, Greenville's school for gifted and talented students, ranked sixth and 17th for the performance of its middle and elementary school students, respectively, while Wren High was 13th.

Riverside High ranked 28th in the state.

Greenville County's four-year graduation rate improved slightly, from 72.2 percent to 72.4 percent. Pickens County's rose from 72.6 percent to 75.2 percent, while Anderson 1's was up from 82.4 percent to 85.2 percent.

The gap in the graduation rate between white and black students narrowed by 0.2 percent to its smallest margin since 2004, according to the Education Department. The gap between white and Hispanic students grew by 0.5 percent but has shrunk by 5.1 percent since 2004.

"Growth is good, but the fact remains one out of every four high school students won't graduate on time or eventually drop out of school," Zais said. "We can do far better as a state and past experience proves we can."

Statewide, 72 out of 84 school districts earned a rating of at least Average, an improvement by four districts over 2011. The number of At Risk schools fell to 61 schools, the lowest level since 2009.

The ratings are based on student performance on the Palmetto Assessment of State Standards, high school exit exams, end-of-course tests and the four-year and five-year graduation rates.

In Pickens County, every school maintained or improved its Absolute rating from 2011, with Crosswell Elementary, Liberty High and Pickens High improving. Nine schools — Crosswell Elementary, East End Elementary, McKissick Elementary, West End Elementary, Dacusville Middle, Liberty Middle, Gettys Middle, Liberty High and Pickens High — improved their growth ratings.

"We are very proud of the hard work of our students and teachers and feel that our success is a direct result of their commitment to our schools," Superintendent Kelly Pew said.

In Anderson 1, Palmetto and Spearman elementary schools regained Excellent grades after being at the Good level for the past few years.

"Administration and teachers have collaborated through professional