



Some Bristol Virginia parents are upset by letter from schools about black and disabled students' test scores preventing No Child Left Behind annual progress

Bristol Herald Courier (VA) - Friday, October 5, 2007

Author/Byline: *Khristopher J. Brooks, Bristol Herald Courier, Va.*

Section: *State and regional*

Oct. 5--Bristol Virginia Public Schools

www.bvps.org

BRISTOL, Va. -- Some Virginia Middle School parents are upset about a letter sent home explaining why the school didn't meet its federal testing benchmarks.

On Wednesday, school officials sent home a one-page letter saying that black students didn't perform well enough on reading and students with disabilities didn't do well enough on math. Because of the shortcomings, Virginia Middle and the entire city school system did not receive an adequately yearly progress, or AYP, status under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, the letter stated.

But after reading the note, which was attached to students' report cards, parents say they think it was worded insensitively and singled out black students and the disabled.

"In the letter, it's basically badmouthing black students to a standard of them not being smart, in my opinion," said angry parent Robert Worley, who has a stepdaughter at Virginia Middle School. "The more and more I read it, the more I got angry."

School Superintendent Douglas Arnold defended the letter, saying it simply relayed the facts.

Tracey King, another angry parent, said her child was negatively affected by the letter.

"My daughter didn't even want to go to school today because of the letter," King said. "It was stereotyping and singling out."

King said she read the letter Thursday afternoon and couldn't believe school leaders would give it to students.

"When the kids saw 'black students' in there, they thought, 'Wow, what did I do? They are talking about me'," King said.

According to a copy of the letter obtained by the Bristol Herald Courier, the note was written Sept. 11 and signed by Assistant Superintendent Michael Amstein. The note's letterhead also listed the five-member School Board and Arnold.

"Based on the preliminary data released by the Virginia Department of Education, Bristol Virginia Public Schools did not make AYP for 2007-2008 in reading performance by black students," the letter reads. "Virginia Middle School did not make AYP in reading performance by black students and math performance by students with disabilities. All other schools within the division made AYP."

The preliminary results stated that 66.1 percent of black students at the middle school met the passing objective instead of a federal benchmark of 73 percent. Only 52.8 percent of students with disabilities passed their mathematics portion, the data found.

However, according to state data, Virginia Middle School has made adequate yearly progress the past two years. But because it failed to do so this year, the entire Bristol Virginia Public Schools system has not made AYP.

Arnold said the school system had nothing to do with the letter's wording and that school officials were just relaying the message.

"The wording used was the exact wording used on the reports disaggregated that the federal government sent to us," he said. "We didn't change anything or add our own notations; we just sent the same thing."

The school system office received about six phone calls about the letter on Thursday, Arnold said, adding that he answered four.

He said school officials will not send out an apology or resend another letter because they are not at fault.

"We're not going to apologize. It's a statement of fact, and we were exactly reporting. But I want to just move on," Arnold said.

Virginia Middle School Principal Gary Ritchie was unavailable for comment Thursday night.

School Board Chairman Butch Tolley said he didn't know much about the letter or even what it said.

"I'm not that familiar with it at all," he said Thursday night, adding that he didn't read it. "I very briefly had a 30-second conversation about it [with Arnold]. I've been tied up all day."

Still, parents like Michelle Reisler, who has two children at Virginia Middle, say attaching the letter to report cards made black students feel inadequate and discouraged.

"I feel like that was a really big put-down -- just the wording of it," Reisler said Thursday. "[Arnold] should come before all the black kids and explain to them what he meant by that."

Parents also think the letter was worded insensitively, and it should have said "a small segment of the student body" failed to meet the requirements, King said.

According to 2006-07 state figures, Virginia Middle School had 62 black students in its student body of 547.

King and Reisler aren't the only parents mad about the letter.

Monica Frank, with one son at the middle school, said even if another agency worded the letter, local school officials were insensitive for sending it out.

"What really got me upset was when my nephew came and said, 'Does this mean I'm ignorant?'"

Frank, who said black and white parents are angry about the letter, said she wants a retraction from school officials.

King and Reisler said they want school administrators to find a way to correct black students' troubles with reading and disabled students' problems with math.

Until then, the two parents say they plan to rally other angry parents and attend the next School Board meeting on Nov. 5 to voice their opinions.

"We will let them know that we do care about our children, and we want to see them succeed," Reisler said.

kbrooks@bristolnews.com -- (276) 645-2549

Memo: To see more of the Bristol Herald Courier or to subscribe to the newspaper, go to <http://www.tricities.com>.

Copyright

(c) 2007, Bristol Herald Courier, Va.

Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

For reprints, email tmsreprints@permissionsgroup.com, call 800-374-7985 or 847-635-6550, send a fax to 847-635-6968, or write to The Permissions Group Inc., 1247 Milwaukee Ave., Suite 303, Glenview, IL 60025, USA.

Index Terms: *Education; News; Feature*

Record Number: *20071005-BC-Some-Bristol-Virginia-parents-are-upset-by-letter-from-schools-abou*
Copyright, 2007, Bristol Herald Courier (VA), All Rights Reserved.