

Schools see fewer repeat students

BY JOHN L. GUERRA, Citizen Staff

About 144 fewer students were held back a grade in Monroe County schools this year than last year, according to figures the district released this week.

Students from the third grade to 10th grade are retained for several reasons: They score at Level 1 (the lowest score) on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test in reading or math; they score at or below the 25th percentile on the Standard Achievement Test (SAT) in reading or mathematics; their performance is below 3.0 on the Florida Writes! portion of the FCAT; or if they perform below grade level on a teacher-developed writing test.

To wit, students are held back if they fail to perform at proficiency levels assigned to their grade, according to Bruce King, the district's director of accountability and assessment.

"Retention means held back," he said. "At Grade 3, there's mandatory retention for kids who score level 1 [on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test], which is the lowest of the five levels of the FCAT test."

The number of students retained has fluctuated in the past three years. In 2005-2006, 439 students were held back; last year, the number increased to 456, an increase of 17 students. Then, this year, the number dropped to 312 students.

"Student FCAT scores improved over last year and grades are up from last year," King said. "The district got the highest grade-point average in the state, too."

The more populated schools had the highest number of retentions. In 2007-2008, this school year, Key West High School retained 168 of 744 students, or 23 percent of its student body. Coral Shores High School is next with 50 out of 410 retained, or 12 percent of the student body, followed by Marathon High School, which held back 32 of its 419 students, or 8 percent of its student body.

Marathon High School, however, showed the greatest reduction in hold-backs; last year it held back 90 students, and in 2007-2008 it retained 32, a decrease of 58 students.

Sigsbee and Stanley Switlik elementary schools and Big Pine Charter School held no students back, according to the report.

Students who are marked for retention don't always attend class with the younger students when class resumes in the fall.

"Students who score at Level 1 have had little success with Sunshine State standards," he said. "Those students are eligible for good cause exemption."

Students learning English for the first time and students with learning disabilities, for instance, can take alternative tests that take into account their special status. One is called the Normative Reference Test; if students can pass at 45th percentile, they can move to the next grade.

"Some stay in the third grade and receive remediation [help] or they can attend a reading camp in the summer or in the fall and they may take [the test] again and if they pass it, they can be moved up to fourth grade in the middle of the year."

Kids also can take alternative reading tests, two of them.

Some students can take a combination class, which might consist of other fifth-grade students who've been retained and sixth-grade students. Teachers also can create a portfolio that records a student's performance in class and other activities outside testing. If it shows the student is proficient or showing enough improvement outside testing, the student can be moved up with his or her peers. Also, students who are kept back two times can, in some cases, move up a grade.

Florida statute requires that a student be retained at the end of Grade 3 if the student scores below grade level in the area of reading.

Teachers consider several factors before recommending that a student be promoted or retained. Teachers must inform parents of their child's possible retention early in the second semester. The teacher then recommends to the school's principal which students should be held back.

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