

One of the things I have always liked about Mitchell is that not infrequently people will catch me at a ballgame or out to dinner and personally let me know about something positive that has happened with their child at school. It may be a teacher that took some extra time with their child, a good decision that an administrator made, or just the upbeat personality of a bus driver or hot lunch employee. And, while it is less enjoyable, it is also as important to me when someone will stop me to let me know of something about which they are not happy. What sometimes baffles me is when two people contact me about the same situation or employee, one to laud and the other complain.

Except that this is just how things are in education because how you evaluate a school depends, at least in part, upon where you sit. If you spend your day in an elementary student's desk, a good school is one in which you have friends and a nice teacher. If you hold the parental chair, a school is doing its job if it prepares your child for their next stage in life or if it has the extracurriculars you value or if your child is simply happy there. A school board member may see a good school as one with an experienced faculty, attractive and solid buildings, or a balanced budget.

But tied to all of this is one factor that frankly must outrank any other: student achievement. How well students are performing academically is at the very heart of a school. It is the school's very reason for being. And thus, we try in several different ways each year to communicate to students, parents and the community just how well our students are doing at their studies. Here goes:

1. **No Child Left Behind:** Under the NCLB legislation, each of our 7 schools is evaluated annually on the percentage of the students who meet the proficiency goals set at the state level. Last year, we had a clean sweep with every single building meeting the adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals in every subject matter and in every student subgroup. This year also brought delightful news as every school again met AYP, except for the Mitchell Middle School, though even that was good news. Last year, the Mitchell Middle School was still on school improvement level 2 even though it met AYP because a school does not leave school improvement status until it makes AYP for 2 straight years. This year, the Middle School met AYP in all areas except for one subgroup, special education mathematics. But this was a different subject than in the past, so the Middle School moved off of school improvement, all the way up to just alert status, a dramatic improvement. In other words, the NCLB news was excellent, an achievement for which the teachers, students, and other district employees deserve enormous credit.

2. **Distinguished Schools:** As in the past, several Mitchell Schools were also designated as distinguished schools this year. The distinguished school status is assigned when the school does markedly better than the state AYP goal or shows large improvement in an underperforming subgroup. Both Gertie Belle Rogers and L.B. Williams Elementary Schools were marked 'distinguished' this year. But so was the Mitchell Senior High School, a feat attained this year by *no other large high school in the state*.

3. **Hitting the Ceiling:** More and more of Mitchell's schools this year saw over 90% of their students reach proficiency or above in math and reading. This is wonderful news. But it is a bit like reaching the base of the summit of Mt. Everest. Many climbers reach that point but the number of successful climbers plummets, pun intended, thereafter. The higher you go, the tougher it is to make those next few feet. That is the point Mitchell schools are now reaching. We can still improve but it's getting tougher and it becomes a real question whether or not it is even possible to reach 100%. Then again, the Rosedale Elementary School has had 100% of its students reach proficiency (or advanced) every year for the last 5. And if Olympic athletes can keep setting world records, never seeming to reach that point we all suspect must exist where it just isn't possible to run any faster, should we be so quick to give up?

4. **ACT Scores:** One other student achievement statistic reached us recently, the ACT scores. This test of college readiness is taken by the majority of South Dakota students. At Mitchell, over 70% of our student take the test as they approach or move into their senior year. This high percentage is important because the more of your students that take the test, the harder it is to have a high average score. In 2008, Mitchell Senior High School's average score was a 22.2, two-tenths higher than the state average (which also moved up this year) and six-tenths of a point higher than our high school's multi-year average. This is especially good news because even though more of our students are taking the test, our students' average score is still on the rise.

Thus, if you are evaluating Mitchell students and Mitchell schools on student achievement, the results are good and getting better, thanks to hard-working students, dedicated teachers, and the continued focus of building principals, and all of the school district employees who remember the reason for a school in the first place.