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STATE EDUCATION REPORT

Six Omaha-area schools are labeled as 'low achieving' The OPS superintendent accuses state officials of "gaming the system to access \$77 million of federal money."

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Five high schools and one elementary school in the Omaha area are among 52 schools the Nebraska Department of Education designated Wednesday as "persistently lowest achieving" schools under federal rules for accepting stimulus money. The list includes 28 high schools, eight middle schools and 18 elementary schools. Two of the schools house both middle and high school students.

Included on the list are five Omaha area high schools: Omaha Central, Omaha North, Omaha South, Omaha Benson and Bellevue East. Indian Hill Elementary School in **OPS** also made the list.

The designation could mean federal grant funding for the schools if their districts agree to reforms prescribed by the Obama administration such as staffing changes at each school building.

John Mackiel, superintendent of the Omaha Public Schools, expressed frustration Wednesday at the fact that **OPS** schools made the list.

The four **OPS** high schools made the list because they have **graduation rates** below 75 percent.

Mackiel sharply criticized state officials for labeling the schools in order to receive federal funding.

"I don't believe there's anything more reprehensible than gaming the system to access \$77 million of federal money by accepting it and then labeling schools that two months ago you just celebrated in terms of the educational opportunities going on in those schools," he said.

Schools on the list are eligible for a total of \$17 million in grants, but there probably will be only enough money to serve schools with the greatest need of improvement. As a result, many of the districts with schools listed won't have to make difficult decisions on whether to remove principals or take other drastic measures.

Schools that accept federal School Improvement Grants would have to implement one of four models. The models range in severity from removing the principal to closing the school.

Nebraska sought and received a waiver in the federal rules allowing use of a **graduation rate** of 75 percent instead of the 60 percent called for by the federal government.

Nebraska Education Commissioner Roger Breed said no Nebraska high schools except for Native American schools would have qualified for funding at 60 percent.

The **rate** was used to objectively identify schools as in need of assistance and support.

"We made that request without knowing what schools would be on the list," Breed said.

Bellevue Public Schools officials couldn't immediately be reached for comment Wednesday.

Mackiel called it "a curious Alice-in-Wonderland contradiction" that in February, the Nebraska Education Department performed an annual assessment of the district and issued a "glowing" report commending the leadership at South, North, Central and Benson High Schools.

In the next 10 days, Mackiel said, graduating seniors at the four high schools will be awarded more than \$25 million in scholarships, "but to see the list today you wouldn't know that."

In order to receive its final third of federal stimulus funds, Nebraska officials had to prepare the list and make other assurances to federal officials.

Mackiel said the **OPS** board has yet to be briefed on the list. He said **OPS** officials have not yet determined whether they would implement federally prescribed interventions, including removing principals, in order to qualify the schools for federal grants to improve academic achievement.

OMAHA-AREA SCHOOLS ON THE LIST

» Benson High School

- » Central High School
- » North High School
- » South High School
- » Bellevue East High School
- » Omaha Indian Hill Elementary School

NEBRASKA SCHOOLS ON THE LIST

- » Ainsworth Community Schools: Ainsworth Middle School
- » Alliance Public Schools: Alliance Middle School, Alliance High School
- » Banner County Public Schools: Banner County High School
- » Brady Public Schools: Brady High School
- » Chase County Schools: Chase County Elementary School
- » Columbus Public Schools: Centennial Elementary School, Emerson Elementary School
- » Conestoga Public Schools: Conestoga Elementary School
- » Crawford Public Schools: Crawford Elementary
- » Cross County Public Schools: Cross County High School
- » David City Public Schools: David City Secondary School
- » Dundy County Public Schools: Benkelman Elementary School
- » East Butler Public Schools: High School at Brainard
- » Gordon-Rushville Public Schools: Gordon-Rushville Middle School
- » Hay Springs Public Schools: Hay Springs Middle School, Hay Springs High School
- » Leyton Public Schools: Leyton High School
- » Lincoln Public Schools: Elliott Elementary, Lincoln High School, Lincoln Northeast High School, Lincoln North Star High School, Belmont Elementary, Culler Middle School, Everett Elementary School, Prescott Elementary School, Saratoga Elementary School,

West Lincoln Elementary School

- » Loup City Public Schools: Loup City High School
- » Madison Public Schools: Madison Elementary
- » Minatare Public Schools: Minatare Elementary
- » Morrill Public Schools: Morrill High School
- » North Platte Public Schools: Madison Middle School
- » Omaha Nation Public Schools: Omaha Nation High School
- » Pierce Public Schools: Pierce Junior-Senior High School, Pierce Elementary School
- » Ravenna Public Schools: Ravenna Senior High School
- » St. Edward Public Schools: St. Edward High School
- » Santee Public Schools: Santee Elementary, Santee High School
- » Shelby Public Schools: Shelby High School
- » Sidney Public Schools: Sidney High School
- » Wahoo Public Schools: Wahoo High School
- » Walthill Public Schools: Walthill High School, Walthill Elementary School
- » Winnebago Public Schools: Winnebago High School

SOURCE: Nebraska Department of Education

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