Bitter Lesson: A Good School Gets an 'F'

By MICHAEL WINERIP

IN the right kind of world, Public School 48 in the South Bronx would be getting all kinds of awards. Though the school serves some of the city's poorest minority children (75 per cent Hispanic, 25 per cent black and all eligible for free lunches), P.S. 48's test scores have soared in the last few years. In 2005, 86 per cent of fourth graders scored proficient in math, and 68.5 per cent in English, placing P.S. 48 near the top of the Bronx's 130 elementary schools.

The principal, John Hughes, has mixed feelings about all the testing that goes on these days, but professionally, he has put that aside. "The profit margin in this business is test scores," he said. "That's all they measure you by now."

Test prep? "Are you kidding?" he said. "We start in September and we don't stop until the tests are over," in March.

"I can't afford not to do test prep," he said. "Otherwise my kids don't have a chance. It's all by the test numbers. If they score 3's or 4's, they have marketability for getting into one of the city's good middle schools." With low scores of 2 or 1, out of a maximum of 4, they are stuck in a bad neighborhood school.

In 2004, Chancellor Joel I. Klein attended graduation, praising the test scores and wearing a T-shirt with the P.S. 48 slogan, "Best School in the Universe."

But the universe P.S. 48 gets evaluated in has little to do with the real world. P.S. 48 is measured in the federal No Child Left Behind world, and in that universe, it has been labeled failing.

When Mr. Hughes learned that, last fall, he was outraged, and contacted his supervisors to find out why. "No one could explain," he says. "They'd say, 'It must be this or it must be that.'"

In the No Child world, state and federal officials plug test results from schools that few of them have ever seen into a series of complex formulas. The calculations are so technical that it took city officials many hours over several weeks to finally pinpoint why P.S. 48 was labeled failing.

At one point, the city's top testing officials were not sure whether to use something called the Annual Measurable Objective or the Effective Annual Measurable Objective to calculate P.S. 48's score, and had to confer with state officials.

"If the number-crunchers don't understand," Mr. Hughes said, "how can a principal? And parents? It's crazy. "This federal law," Mr. Hughes added, "is wacky."

P.S. 48's problem? Under the federal law, it is not enough for a school to improve its overall test scores. Every subgroup - blacks, Hispanics, the poor - must also make sufficient progress in English and math. After numerous calls last fall, Mr. Hughes learned that his special-education and English language learner (immigrant) subgroups did not make sufficient progress on the English test.

Subgroup size varies by state; in New York, it is 30 students. Many small schools do not have enough students for subgroups, so they are spared this scrutiny entirely. Cynics have joked that the reason the small-school movement is so popular is that it is the only way to meet federal standards.

P.S. 48 is large, with 970 students. According to the state, it had 31 students in the English language learner subgroup.
Mr. Hughes was sure he had a lot less, but which English language learners the state counts in a subgroup is not straightforward.

Many immigrant students who have been in this country less than six years do not take the regular state English test; they take an alternative state language test that measures their English skills. Still others, who have been in the country or the school too short a time are not supposed to be counted in the subgroup.

Mr. Hughes wanted the names of the 31 students. But though the federal law is four years old, the state has no way to provide subgroup lists to schools. (This is supposed to change soon, when the state implements a new data service.) Instead, city officials spent long hours piecing together the list for Mr. Hughes.

Once the principal saw the names, he realized many did not belong on the list. Typically, they were Hispanics who were given bilingual services when they first arrived. However, once they had been at P.S. 48, teachers realized their problem was not English; it was that they were slow learners and needed special-education services. Most have not been in a language class for two to three years.

A state rule says students cannot be removed from the English learners' subgroup until they pass the English language test. But many cannot pass because of their special-education learning limitations.

In the end, the news was not all bad. Thanks to Mr. Hughes's angry quest, state officials now say they will set up a new process to remove such children from the subgroup list. With that victory, Mr. Hughes's English language learner list shrunk to 25, too small to be counted for the purposes of the No Child Left Behind Law.

Now, his only problem was the special-education subgroup's English score. Special education is the single biggest reason schools are judged failing under the federal law. As a result, the state gives bonus points if that is the only category a school misses. With 34 bonus points, Mr. Hughes assumed P.S. 48 had passed. "They're taking us off the failing list," he said on Friday.

BUT after conferring with the state, city officials e-mailed Mr. Hughes information on Monday that was too technical for him to comprehend but was clearly not good news. "The 34 points can only be applied to the A.M.O., not the E.A.M.O." (For those trying to keep track, that is Annual Measurable Objective rather than Effective Annual Measurable Objective.) Translated into English: if one more special-education child had scored 3, the school of 970 would have gone from failing to successful.

There is hope, however. School officials nationwide have complained that the federal special-education standards are unfair. They have pointed out that children often get special-education services because they are performing two years below their grade, so it is unrealistic to then expect them to pass a regular, grade-level state test.

For four years, the Bush administration dismissed these complaints as the soft bigotry of low expectations. However, recently, under the Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, federal officials reversed themselves and acknowledged that this standard is indeed unreasonable.

New rules will soon mean that 30 percent of special-education students are exempted from regular state tests. If that rule had been in place in 2005, P.S. 48 would have easily made its special-education numbers and been judged a success.

Under federal law, a failing school must send letters home offering students the chance to transfer to other schools. Last fall, Mr. Hughes sent home 970 letters. Not one parent removed a child. Unlike state and federal accountability experts, they've seen P.S. 48.

E-mail: edmike@nytimes.com