

“Research tells us each child needs a strong foundation. To close the achievement gap and assure all children develop to their full potential, we need high quality education that begins at an early age.”

Abby Lowe, Kindergarten Teacher, Harrison Elementary,
2010-11 Teacher of the Year, Springfield Public Schools

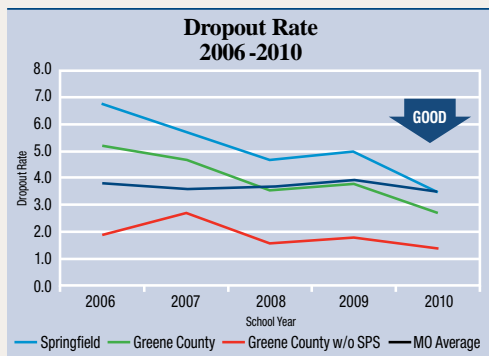
Difficult economic times, mounting accountability, and decreased funding from traditional sources created growing pressures for the eight K-12 public school districts in Greene County. In spite of the increased expectations and decreased financial resources, area districts continue to offer children and youth quality public education. Approximately 40,000 students attend the 82 schools within the eight public school districts of Greene County. Six of Greene County’s eight school districts, including Springfield, received the Distinction in Performance designation from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for 2010. The region’s largest district, Springfield R-12, continues to lead the state in addressing the demand for academic choice within a public school setting and offers a variety of innovative programs that provide additional learning options for students. Some of the school choice options within the community include: International Baccalaureate programs from PreK – 12; Wonders of the Ozarks Learning Facility (WOLF), an environmental science focus for 5th graders; and Project Lead the Way, a high school pre-engineering curriculum with a strong math and science emphasis. The commitment of the region’s citizens to provide quality education for all students should help ensure that students are prepared for the educational, civic, and employment demands of the 21st century.

Blue Ribbons

Decreased Dropout Rate in Springfield Public Schools

Identified in previous *Community Focus* reports as a red flag, steady progress has been made on reducing the number of high school dropouts in Greene County. Therefore, this progress is now noted as a blue ribbon. The graduation rate in Springfield Public Schools trended upward over the past five years and is now at 83.8 percent, with the district’s dropout rate standing at 3.5 percent. The district’s collective efforts to help more young people obtain their high school diplomas became the Persistence to Graduation initiative, or P2G, which focuses on attendance, counseling, health services, classroom instruction and engagement, the use of consistent indicators to identify students at all grade levels at risk for dropping out, literacy needs of students with disabilities, and expanded alternative education programs and school sites.

While the decrease in the dropout rate merits a blue ribbon, there is still work to be done to bring Springfield’s graduation rate above the state average of 85.7 percent, as a high school diploma is only one step toward assuring students have education and training adequate for competitive employment in the 21st century.



Source: Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education

Community Collaboration

Noted as a blue ribbon in previous *Community Focus* reports, collaboration in addressing educational concerns remains a

community strength; the recent P-20 Council of the Ozarks is a good example of this collaboration.

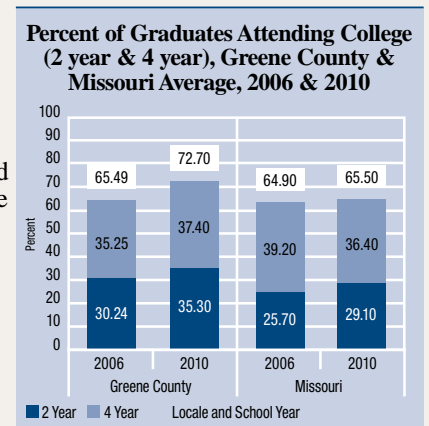
Growing out of a State initiative, the P-20 Council of the Ozarks was formed in 2010. The council focuses on key issues that reach across educational sectors and into the workforce, including student preparation, student success, curriculum alignment, and collaboration with business and industry. Working committees include Civic Organizations and Business, Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary, Post-Secondary, Teacher Education, and Workforce Development, all of which are in place and are developing strategic plans. Each committee consists of representatives from all facets of the community-at-large, regional education institutions (pre-kindergarten to graduate schools), and business and civic organizations throughout the region. Partners include Ozarks Technical Community College, Springfield Public Schools, area 4-year colleges and universities, the Workforce Investment Board, area Chambers of Commerce, regional business and industry leaders, as well as other regional K-12 districts. The P-20 Council of the Ozarks has three goals: develop strategies for optimal outcomes in the transition through education and into the workforce; foster collaboration among pre-kindergarten, elementary, secondary, post-secondary and graduate education institutions and the business and workforce sectors; and improve academic achievement and college success while promoting lifelong learning.

Multi-agency and institutional collaboration, as well as the community-wide focus in acknowledging the ties between education and workforce preparedness, reflect a community strength that should have a lasting impact and improve the quality of public education for current and future generations of the region’s young people.

College Attendance After High School Graduation

In the 2009 *Community Focus* report, college attendance after high school graduation was listed as an emerging issue. Now, Greene County students are enrolling in college at a higher rate than the state average. In fact, the state average has remained steady since 2006, while Greene County’s numbers have increased 7 percent. This progress can be explained in part by the expansion of Missouri’s A+ Scholarship and School Improvement Program.

Created in 1993 by state law, the A+ Program is designed to ensure all students who graduate from Missouri public high schools are well prepared to pursue advanced education and/or employment. The attached financial incentive allows high school graduates to attend public community college or career/technical schools in Missouri tuition free if certain criteria are met. By 2009, all but two Greene County high schools (Strafford and Ash Grove) had earned the A+ designation. However, potential changes at the



Source: Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education

state level may diminish the school improvement piece of the A+ Program and must be monitored.

RED FLAGS

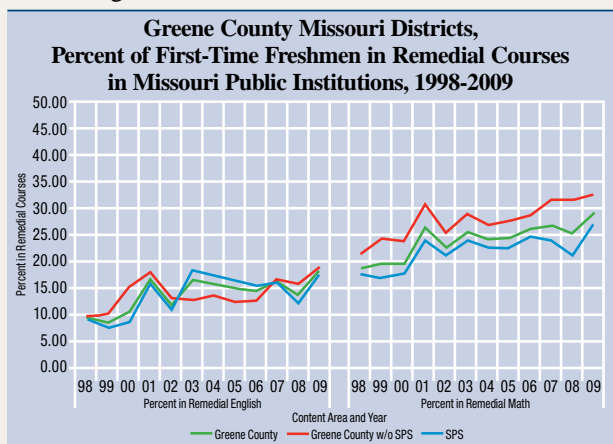
Remediation of First-Time Freshmen

Greene County schools strive to prepare all students for advanced education and employment after graduation, yet higher education institutions are reporting an increase in new students needing remedial courses in math, English, and other subjects. Of the Ozarks Technical Community College freshmen who tested into remediation in fall 2007, just 15 percent went on to graduate within three years.

In fall 2010, nearly three-fourths of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking OTC students tested into remediation, including a large group of adult learners, typical of OTC's overall student population. Reasons for this increase in remediation may include:

- More schools participating in the A+ Program mean more students of varying abilities now have a financial incentive to attend community colleges and technical schools.
- The stressed national economy drives high school seniors who might have joined the workforce upon graduation to select college instead.

Both K-12 and higher education officials recognize the need to coordinate performance expectations and college preparation standards. As stated earlier, the P-20 Council of the Ozarks has set collaboration among all levels of education as one of its major goals. The Springfield School District, for example, is now working with OTC on exams for high school juniors that will demonstrate areas needing improvement before college admission.



Source: Missouri Department of Higher Education

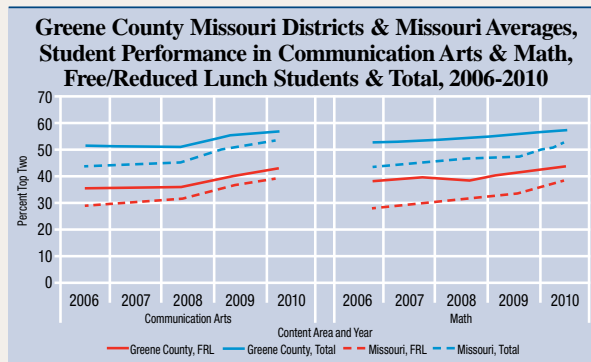
Achievement Gap

Poverty continues to affect student achievement. A simple measure of poverty is the number of school-age children eligible for free and reduced price school lunches (FRL). In the last five years, students in Greene County who participated in the FRL program showed lower scores on communication arts and math exams than the total student population. Closing this gap will require continued community collaboration.

There are, however, bright spots. Greene County had a higher percentage of students scoring proficient and advanced in both communication arts and mathematics than Missouri students in the FRL group as a whole. So while the percentage of students living in poverty has increased across Greene County, the performance of this group has not declined.

The Springfield community is rallying to help close this achievement gap. Notable is the Enhancing Children's Healthy Opportunities (ECHO) project. Sponsored by the Community Foundation of the Ozarks, the project focused on comprehensive counseling and family wellness service at two Springfield Title 1 schools. Another is Drury University's Summer Scholars Program, which identifies promising Pipkin and Central students and encourages them to pursue higher

education through challenging summer experiences on campus. Additionally, the privately supported Care to Learn Fund also has been established to meet the physical and practical needs of students in Springfield and many surrounding districts.



Source: Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education

Funding Volatility and the Shifting of Funding Responsibility*

The volatility in educational funding remains a red flag as identified in all previous *Community Focus* reports. The economic turbulence of the past few years only added to the annual unpredictability for local districts. In Missouri, funding comes from three sources - local property taxes, state funds, and federal allocations. The funding table shows the varying percentages local districts received from these sources for 2004 and 2010, as well as the differences. Federal stimulus funds resulted in an increase of federal funding percentages during the last few years. While the benefit and long-term impact of such funds has been debated, those federal dollars did allow local districts to continue to operate without a drastic shift of financial responsibility to local patrons. With that funding source now eliminated, and with continued decreases in state funding, local school districts face tough decisions about whether to ask their communities for increased levies aimed at maintaining adequate funding for quality public education throughout Greene County.

District	LOCAL			STATE			FEDERAL		
	2004	2010	Difference	2004	2010	Difference	2004	2010	Difference
Springfield	63.9	66.6	2.7	26.1	19.5	-6.6	10.0	14.0	4.0
Willard	51.0	51.1	0.1	41.9	34.8	-7.1	7.1	14.1	7.0
Republic	47.6	48.6	1.0	46.9	37.2	-9.7	5.4	14.2	8.8
Logan-Rogersville	58.2	58.1	-0.1	33.5	30.2	-3.3	8.2	11.7	3.5
Strafford	61.5	63.5	2.0	32.0	23.4	-8.6	6.5	13.1	6.6
Fair Grove	35.2	41.8	6.6	51.4	39.8	-11.6	13.4	18.4	5.0
Ash Grove	43.9	42.1	-1.8	48.8	40.2	-8.6	7.3	17.6	10.3
Walnut Grove	37.6	38.8	1.2	55.6	44.0	-11.6	6.8	17.2	10.4
Missouri	55.2	56.1	0.9	35.5	29.0	-6.5	9.2	14.9	5.7

Source: Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education

Teacher Salaries

Noted as a red flag since the 2004 *Community Focus* report, teachers' salaries remain a concern. All area districts' average teacher salaries are below the state average. Although there remains strong support from local patrons to address this gap, economic realities have left school districts



Springfield Public School students work on class project.

with no new funding to allocate to salary and benefits. In fact, most districts have opted to not raise salaries in order to avoid layoffs, maintain current staffing levels, and keep acceptable class size.

*Indicates Emerging Issue in 2009 Community Focus Report