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Education

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Quality Counts 2007 says Alabama children have less chance for success

■ **New School Improvement Specialist on the job to ensure continued improvement in Choctaw Co. schools**

By **Dee Ann Campbell**
 The Choctaw Sun

BUTLER — “We need to feel a sense of urgency, like every minute counts,” says Dr. Dana Harwell, new School Improvement Specialist for Choctaw County Public Schools.

The beginning of the new year ushers in an urgent time for local schools. With 2007 comes not only the beginning of a new year, but what could be the dawning of a new day — a day when, for the first time in 8 years, all local schools are performing at or above academic standards.

With a new report citing serious problems for students statewide, seeing such success in Choctaw County schools may be crucial, not just locally, but for Alabama as a whole.

According to the Quality Counts 2007 report released by Education Week magazine last week, Alabama’s students have less of a ‘chance for success’ than students in 44 other states. The report lists the state as 45th in the country when it comes to potential success for its children.

The Quality Counts 2007 report ranks the educational success of each state using some 80 factors that track the student from birth to college. Using such factors as low birth weight, attendance in preschool, standardized test scores, the income of families, and graduation rates, and college attendance, the study determined that, based on these factors, Alabama was not doing well in the area of educating chil-



Choctaw Sun photo by Dee Ann Campbell
 Dr. Dana Rolison Harwell is pictured at CCHS with chemistry teacher Sarah Rolison and junior Latreal Bell.

dren.

Although the news was not good for Alabama, the state did outrank some other states that are typically perceived as more ‘successful’ states in most studies. In fact, Alabama scored higher than the much larger, oil-rich state of Texas, as well as Arizona, Louisiana and New Mexico.

The report cites problems that begin at birth — such as the state’s large percentage of low birth weight babies — as leading factors in the lack of success for students. Such problems, say statistics, lead to mild learning disabilities and attention deficit disorders.

When students reach preschool age, Alabama is again shown to be deficient. Reports show that only 42.1% of Alabama’s 3- and 4-year-olds are currently enrolled in a preschool program, compared to 44.8% nationally.

The report continues to evaluate the ‘chance for success’ by using the

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to compare middle and elementary school students not only in the United States, but internationally. According to Quality Counts 2007, Alabama’s students consistently score lower on the NAEP than students in most other states.

The report, however, does not take into consideration assessments such as the SAT and state-mandated assessments like the Alabama Reading and Math Test (ARMT), where Alabama students typically score very well.

When it comes to graduation rates and college attendance, students in Alabama still come up short, says the report. Only slightly more than 60% graduate from high school, and only 42.2% go onto to pursue college or technical degrees.

For Choctaw County, the school system has had its share of problems through the years. Although all schools have

had their own unmet goals, Choctaw County High School has seen over 8 years of struggles to reach academic standards set down by the state. During the upcoming school semester, the school will be seeing the results of assessments that could determine whether the school will be in the clear academically. Now listed as ‘in delay’, the results of this year’s assessments are crucial, with success in Choctaw County adding to overall success statewide.

Helping CCHS, as well as all of Choctaw County’s public schools, to garner such success will be the new School Improvement Specialist, Dr. Harwell.

Having grown up in the area since mid-elementary school, Harwell earned her B.S. Degree in Elementary Education from Mississippi State University in 1989. She taught at the former Butler Elementary School for the first years of her

teaching career, working with students in the earliest grades.

“Before I ever started school, I knew I wanted to be a teacher,” Harwell recalls. “It never entered my thoughts that I would have any other career.”

In 1999, Harwell decided to return to college to pursue her masters degree. Again she attended MSU, completing her degree in 2000.

In 2001, she received her National Board Certification, the only educator in the county to receive that distinction. But Harwell was still not yet finished with her pursuit of higher education.

“I’ve always thought that if I was going to do something, I wanted to go as far as I could with it,” she explains. “I wanted to get my doctorate. But I thought it was such a far off dream that I’d never do it.”

However, in May of 2004, she got her opportunity. When MSU in Meridian offered her position as a faculty member, she took it.

“I requested leave from the board here, and they granted it,” she says. “I took the job at MSU because that meant I would be able to travel to Starkville for classes. There was no way I do that if I continued to teach here.”

With two young children, including an 11-year-old and a very active 2-year-old, Harwell returned to the her studies. With the help of her family — in particular her oldest son and her husband who often kept the baby for her while she studied — Harwell completed her doctorate last year, returning to Choctaw County to teach at Southern Choctaw Elementary.

Today, Dr. Harwell’s role is not just to work with one classroom of children. Instead, it is a role that will touch every student in the school system.

As she begins her new position, one of her top priorities will be to work toward academic success for CCHS. Although she has only been in the position for a few days, she is already taking steps

toward ensuring that success.

“First of all, we want to maintain the progress they’ve made,” she says. “They have a plan in place. My agenda includes helping them follow it. I’m going to go in, sit down with the team that is in place, and work with them to do what needs to be done.”

But her agenda as School Improvement Specialist includes much more than working with CCHS. It includes helping to improve such ongoing county-wide problems as the drop-out rate.

“I want to look into creative ways to keep children in school,” Harwell adds, citing a Georgia school system’s work with career-oriented courses that has shown tremendous success in lowering the drop-out rate. “With that and everything else, I want to sit down with Ms. (Sue) Moore and say, ‘This is what the research shows, and this is what we need to work toward.’”

With Harwell expecting continued improvement at CCHS — and potentially the schools removal from its ‘school improvement’ status in the coming year — as well as ongoing improvements at the other schools, the school system may soon have reason to celebrate success, regardless of the state’s ranking by Education Week.

Many of the problems cited in the Quality Counts 2007 report are obviously not issues that Harwell can change, and improvements in such issues as low birth weight and family income levels will not be seen through assessments or consistent test scores.

But, Harwell says, by focusing on education with a sense of urgency that every minute counts, it will be possible to give Choctaw County children a greater chance for success.

“Everyone needs to feel that every day in the classroom is important,” Harwell says. “We only have the students for so many days, every day that we don’t feel that urgency is a day that we’ve lost.”



Choctaw Sun photo by Marcus Gates

Sup’s office gets facelift by volunteers

BUTLER -- Faculty members from local schools, as well as members of the community, turned out to help newly-elected Superintendent of Education make her transition into office. Workers spent several hours over the Christmas break to give her new office a make-over, and faculty members from each of the four schools sent food items and decorations not only for her office, but to decorate the Butler Senior Center for her swearing-in ceremony last Wednesday. Moore told the Sun that people from every part of the county have overwhelmed her with their help and support as she begins her new role in the Superintendent’s office. Pictured is part of her newly decorated office. Moore invites the public to go by and visit her and see the renovations done courtesy of local volunteers and merchants.

A thank you from the Superintendent’s office

Thanks to my family, community friends, church family, Board members, Central Office Staff, Senior Citizens’ group, and school staffs for attending the swearing in ceremony on January 3, 2007. Also, thank you for your contributions of food for the reception and the time that you donated to prepare for the event. I am so proud of the teamwork.

I look forward to seeing you and serving you as your superintendent. Please drop by the Central Office and see the re-modeled superintendent’s office which was accomplished by volunteer teamwork from the school staffs and local merchants. Again, this spirit of collaboration to accomplish goals is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely
Sue Moore
 Superintendent of Education
 Choctaw County Public Schools

Choctaw County High School will have a PTO meeting, Thursday, January 11 at 6:00 p.m. Report cards will be issued following the meeting.