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## Schools seek change in rating system

### Lebanon lends support to Ohio bill

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**LEBANON** - Mark North, superintendent of Lebanon Schools, took his fight to Columbus last week, trying to persuade lawmakers to change part of the academic ranking system used by the state to rate school districts.

Lebanon schools recently made history in a negative way by recording the steepest rating drop of any Greater Cincinnati-area school system - after earning the state's highest ranking for seven consecutive years.

The Warren County district dropped three categories in a single school year, from the highest ranking of "excellent with distinction" to "continuous improvement," the third lowest among the six.

But North wasn't alone in his testimony to the Ohio Senate Education Committee considering a bill whose sponsors say will fix an unfair glitch in the current rankings.

Joining him was Mike Taylor, superintendent of Lakota Schools in Butler County, whose district did not experience the same sort of plummet that Lebanon did, but where school officials fear it may happen in the future.

Lebanon Superintendent Mark North says the problems stem mainly from two relatively small sub-groups of students: Limited English Proficient (LEP) and Hispanic students who were tested - among the 2,962 who took the state exams.

Only recently has Lebanon seen the influx of non-English-speaking students that districts closer to the Cincinnati-Dayton growth corridor along Interstate 75, such as Lakota and Mason, have been seeing for years.

Despite Lebanon Schools achieving 29 out of 30 academic indicators and improving its "performance index" in each of the previous four school years, the district still fell.

North told senators the problem isn't limited to any particular group, but rather the way the state measures LEP and Hispanic student groups.

Specifically, a single Hispanic student is counted in each sub-group or is counted twice.

"The overall district rating is determined by an extremely small percentage of students who did not pass a test. Two thousand nine hundred and sixty-two students took tests and the overall district designation dropped from Excellent with Distinction to Continuous Improvement when ten of the students - one third of 1 percent - did not pass reading," North said.

Like North, Taylor stressed in his statements to the senators that school officials aren't trying to avoid accountability and welcome the annual scrutiny of the rankings, which has seen Lakota consistently earn the state's top academic score.

But both said they are concerned about public perceptions from a lowered ranking during a time when voters are often reluctant to approve any new local taxes for schools, especially during an economic recession.

"The focus should be on ensuring that this is a fair and equitable system that accurately communicates the school system's accountability and achievement to their community," Taylor told the committee.

That's why, said Sen. Gary Cates, R-West Chester and sponsor of SB 167, he created the bill now being considered by the committee.

"Taxpayers may use performance ratings to determine whether they will vote yes or no an important levy," Cates said.

"While Ohio's schools should make every effort to ensure all kids have the opportunity to succeed in the classroom, traditionally high-performing districts should not see their ratings plunge, and their reputation tarnished, because of the performance of a small subgroup of students," Cates said.

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