

Montgomery school system loses out on Broad Prize for Urban Education

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Montgomery County public schools came close to winning the country's largest award for urban school systems Tuesday but lost out to a suburban Atlanta district.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan announced that Gwinnett County was the winner of the Broad Prize for Urban Education, which recognizes urban school systems making the most progress in raising student achievement and closing the achievement gap between ethnic and socioeconomic groups. The prize carries a \$1 million purse for use toward college scholarships, and Montgomery, along with the other three finalists, will receive \$250,000 for scholarships.

That the school system made it to the final round at all is a marker of the demographic transformation that has taken place in Montgomery County over the past 10 years. Once a mostly white, affluent suburban area, the 144,000-student system has retained many of those characteristics while accommodating a growing Hispanic and non-English-speaking population, as well as an increasing number of low-income families. About 13 percent of the county's public school students received services as English-language learners last school year, and nearly 30 percent of students qualified for free or reduced meals, an indicator of poverty.

"Most people don't look at us as urban," said Superintendent Jerry D. Weast. "What this shows is that we've become urban and can still compete. . .it reflects well on our teachers, our students and our community."

The other finalists were Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (N.C.), Socorro Independent School District (El Paso) and Ysleta Independent School District (El Paso).

Though the prize is for urban school districts, any school system with more than 100,000 students is considered. Last school year, 62 percent of Montgomery County public school students were minorities, another marker by which the Broad Foundation determines whether or not a school system is urban.

The school system has diverted resources from its more-affluent areas to less-wealthy parts of the county, a strategy that has contributed to its success. Soon after his arrival in 1999, Weast divided the county into a high-performing, more affluent green zone and a high-needs red zone, targeting schools with high proportions of low-income and minority students with extra help - just under \$2,000 per student this year.

Under the effort, the share of black students who graduate with a passing score on at least one Advanced Placement test has doubled since 2000, and the percentage-point gap in reading pass rates for black and white students has narrowed from 32 points to 14. Countywide SAT scores also increased to record highs this year.

But the honor comes at a time of transition for the school system. The budget was cut this year for the first time in memory, leading to larger class sizes, and Weast is retiring in June. The school board recently started the search for a replacement.

Troublesome gaps also remain on key indicators, including SAT scores and graduation rates. Disparities have widened by those measures, although minority students in Montgomery outperform their peers nationwide. The performance of students with special needs also remains a problem.

In a study of low-income students in Montgomery County schools released last week, education researcher Heather Schwartz found that students in public housing who attended wealthy schools performed better than their peers in lower-income schools.