

## Baldwin grad rate beats state's

Posted by Franklin Hayes, Staff Reporter October 20, 2008 6:37 AM

A majority of Baldwin County high schools produced more graduates, and their students scored higher on the graduation exam last year, than state averages, according to figures recently released by the Alabama State Department of Education.

Five out of seven of the county's high schools posted graduation rates of more than 90 percent in 2008.

All seven showed improvement from 2007, according to state data.

Only one school, Baldwin County High, did not meet the state's academic standards because of test scores. But even that school showed a 1 percent improvement in the number of students graduating.

Those figures are expected to drop drastically next year as the state plans to change its formula for calculating the graduation rate. The new formula will put the county average at closer to 67 percent, according to a recent study by the Montgomery-based Voices for Alabama's Children group, which used a nationally recognized formula.

That's higher than the state average of 65 percent, but officials have said much work needs to be done.

"As we move to this new standard of reporting graduation rates, they are going to look lower," said Linda Tilly, executive director of Voices for Alabama's Children. "But instead of scratching our heads and saying, 'What's going on here?' or saying, 'Oh, this is terrible,' we need to invest that energy in programs that will help all young people graduate."

The federal No Child Left Behind Act requires states to judge schools based on standardized reading and math test scores and other factors, including graduation rates for high schools.

A school must have a graduation rate of at least 90 percent or show improvement from the year prior to be in compliance. For the past couple of years, Alabama has used its own formula to calculate graduation rates, resulting in a state average this year of 83 percent.

But starting next year, Alabama and many other states will move to a formula adopted by the National Governors Association, meaning the rates will easily drop as much as 20 to 30 percentage points.

That formula takes the number of students graduating and divides that figure by the number of ninth-graders that entered that school four years prior.

Schools will not get credit for students who graduate in five years or leave and get a GED. And school officials will have to track students who transfer to other schools so those students don't count against them.

Gulf Shores High School had Baldwin County's highest graduation rate at 98 percent.

Spanish Fort High followed with 97 percent. That was despite the 800-student school's decision not to establish a freshman academy, which other schools use to ease the transition into high school by keeping the youngest students away from the older pupils.

Baldwin County Public Schools spokesman Terry Wilhite said Spanish Fort's former principal, Mike Lucci, decided to forgo the academy.

Principal Beverly Spondike served under Lucci as assistant principal and said that although she plans to establish an academy in the future, the lack of one now didn't seem to affect the school's graduation rate.

Foley High and Robertsedale High, which serve more than 1,500 and 1,200 students respectively, saw 7 percent jumps in graduation when compared to last year's numbers. State figures show Robertsedale had a graduation rate of 87 percent, and Foley posted 94 percent.

Robertsedale Principal Theresa Bryant credited her teachers for always being open to new ideas and trying new strategies.

Bryant said an algebra program that tests students' knowledge early and often has helped boost the school's math scores on the graduation exam. According to the state department of education, 93 percent of Robertsedale's students passed the math section, compared to an 84 percent average across Alabama.

At Foley High, Principal Kenneth Dinges said his administrators are using a strategy designed to foster a community atmosphere and keep a close eye on an individual's progress.

Dinges said that every three weeks homeroom teachers receive a progress report that includes a student's grades in every class. Dinges said homeroom teachers also keep track of unexcused absences.

"One teacher is responsible for one group of kids," Dinges said. "We do that so they don't become a lost Social Security number out in the hallway."

(Staff Reporter Rena Havner contributed to this report.)