

Times Union (Albany, N.Y.)

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Date: Sunday, May 7, 2006

This child left behind

Meet Dylan Schroeder, a teenager. Meet his parents, Howard and Sherry Birch. They say the Schenectady schools system is failing their son.

By Anne Miller

Staff Writer

SCHENECTADY - One word epitomizes a teenager's struggle in a failing school:

"America."

Last year, then Schenectady seventh-grader Dylan Schroeder could not spell the name of his own country. His mistake appears twice in a social studies assignment, which also asked for five facts learned from a video shown in class. Dylan offered four. He also misspelled cradle as "kratle," and other words. His grade for the paper: 100 percent.

His overall grade for social studies last year was a barely passing D, although he had failed one quarter and the final exam.

Dylan, 14, wants to learn to read and write well, but his teachers mostly give him a pass. For the last three years his parents have pleaded with teachers and school officials, and at times have berated them, for not getting him help, but to no avail.

It's unclear exactly how many other Dylans live in Schenectady, but there are easily hundreds more. The overwhelming majority of students at all three Schenectady middle schools fail the state's mandatory competency exams, earning scores of 1 or 2 out of a possible 4.

The statistics are astonishing. Approximately 540 city eighth-graders failed the state math test last year, and 600 failed the English language arts test, out of more than 790 students total.

Dylan himself has never passed a state-mandated test.

His parents, Sherry and Howard Birch, are angry and frustrated. They are a blue-collar couple who have little experience with the education system or navigating government bureaucracy, and they are at a loss for how to help their son.

They don't know where to turn in a school district they say has never followed through on its promise to educate Dylan - in a nation that claims no child should be left behind. While Dylan struggled as early as second grade, the Birches now believe his problems began late in elementary school. He would start a semester with one teacher, but finish the second half of the year with a substitute. His basic English skills suffered.

As Dylan stumbles through middle school his parents have begun to worry increasingly about his falling grades, especially with high school looming.

"If there's no child left behind," asked Dylan's stepfather, Howard Birch, "what the hell happened here?"

In an act of desperation, the Birches offered to make their son's plight public in the Times Union. They authorized the release of his academic records, and they and Dylan shared their story as a cautionary tale about what can happen to an academically troubled student at a troubled school.

School administrators said the district offers tutoring programs the Birches didn't try and in-class help Dylan hasn't responded to. Dylan is passing his classes, they say. In fact, they insist Dylan is not failing - even though state and federal guidelines label his standardized test scores as not meeting proficiency standards, and F's dot his report card.

"Dylan's responsibility, as with any student, is to do his homework and keep up with his assignments," said Eric D. Ely, who became Schenectady's superintendent of schools three months ago. "Schools rely on parents to help their children with

homework and allow children to take advantage of after-school programs provided by the district."

The Birches say they do just that - but the school district has a responsibility to help Dylan, too.

"After three years of fighting, it just became, enough's enough," said Sherry Birch, Dylan's mother. She imagines her children in jobs that require suits and ties and college degrees - not work shirts and rubber gloves like their parents.

New York state requires schools to offer what it calls Academic Intervention Services (AIS) to children who perform poorly in classes or on state-mandated tests. The services can include additional classes, tutoring before or after school or extra in-class attention.

When schools perform badly for several years, sections of the sweeping federal No Child Left Behind act kick in. Regulations identify schools in need of improvement based on low test scores.

After two years without improvement, parents can move their child to another school in the district unless, as in Schenectady's schools, all are failing, and the students have nowhere to turn. In that case schools are required to shift money they receive from Washington to pay for what the federal government calls Supplemental Educational Services for low-income students, such as optional tutoring or after-school activities, from contractors hired by the state.

"The bottom line is that there are a variety of ways for students who need extra help to get that help," said Jonathan Burman, a spokesman for the state Department of Education. "It doesn't matter so much whether the help is provided pursuant to state requirements or federal requirements; rather, what's important is that schools must now give extra help to every student who needs it."

The Schenectady City School District has sent a standard state letter to parents offering SES. District officials said the Birches did not take advantage of the services.

Although the letter encourages parents to talk about special programs with their child's teachers and counselors, the Birches said no one at Dylan's school mentioned

the plan to them during conversations the family had with teachers and administrators during Dylan's middle-school days.

They just didn't understand what SES meant. Even parents who investigate the federally mandated program often turn down the services, which can require driving children unusual distances to a special class or tutor. Though hundreds of Schenectady middle school students could demand SES tutoring right now, only 15 students are enrolled, school officials said.

Policies adopted by the Schenectady City School District require middle schools to outline specific plans for a student's state-mandated Academic Intervention Services, with quarterly progress reports and report card conferences. The policies also note the existence of a handbook for parents and suggest distributing it to them.

The Birches have never seen the handbook mentioned in the school policies - a thick handout composed mostly of recommended educational activities for parents to practice with their children.

The district offers several after-school programs as well as in-class remedial help, officials said. Optional summer school programs are available, too.

School officials maintain all those options give students ample opportunity to excel. If they don't, the superintendent said, the problem must lie with the child, not the school district - despite hundreds of students who don't make the grade.

"Dylan is not failing," Superintendent Ely said. "He's struggling, but he's at grade level and on track to eventually graduate with his class," Ely said, although Dylan's assessment test scores remain below grade level.

Experts contend school districts have a responsibility to not only offer help, but to make sure parents understand what the school offers.

"They can't just send one letter and say the family didn't respond," said Janine Lounsbery, of the nonprofit group Families Together of New York State, an organization that assists parents in navigating educational systems.

"I don't think the schools are doing anything malignant," she said. "There are plenty of times that families don't understand what the school is asking," Lounsbery added, explaining that schools often do a poor job of educating parents.

Dylan Schroeder has a whisper of a mustache and round, baby cheeks. He wears a man's button-down shirt, but it's an ambitious few sizes too big. He is quiet and polite. After dinner he takes out the trash without being asked, says "excuse me" to his mother when he reaches around her in the kitchen and offers a soft "sorry" when his father asks him not to play with the family's parrot, which has just calmed down.

When his parents ask about school, the teenager tells them everything is fine, then disappears into the yard or the basement to hang out with his friends.

One night last winter, Dylan sat at his kitchen table, pages of failed tests riddled with red ink spread before him.

For the past two years Dylan has been listed as needing state-mandated AIS. The school has sent home letters detailing the subjects he needs help with, notifying the Birches that Dylan's teachers and guidance counselor are working on a plan, and letting them know Dylan has been getting help. School officials said a teacher has worked in-class with Dylan on remedial reading and math lessons.

Yet the Birches say assistance is slow in coming, if it comes at all.

Dylan's school records, which the Birches instructed the district to release to the Times Union, include no detailed plan for reaching the 14-year-old. School officials said Dylan's AIS plan is kept in the school guidance office, separate from his academic records.

Sherry Birch is 34. She cleans houses in upscale neighborhoods in Loudonville and Latham - several members of the Pataki administration are among her clients.

Howard Birch, 33, drives a tow truck. He is on call several times a week, some days working 4 a.m. to 10 p.m., and beginning again at 4 a.m. the next day.

The Birches have two other children - Dallas, 11, and Jordyn, 8. They live in a house just inside the Schenectady city limits beside the more affluent town of Niskayuna - a house they bought at a city foreclosure auction and are fixing up themselves.

Howard Birch describes his family as lower-middle-class, and says he and his wife are trying to better themselves for their children.

"If I could afford it, he'd be in a private school in an instant," Howard Birch said of Dylan.

Howard is Sherry's second husband. Sherry dropped out of high school in her junior year and ran away from home with a boyfriend she later married - Dylan's biological father. She said she stood in welfare lines for Dylan's diapers. She said she is determined to see her children graduate and, hopefully, attend college.

Dylan had bad luck, she said, at Yates Elementary school, a magnet school in Schenectady's public school system. School records show that Yates initially offered Dylan extra assistance. In second and third grades a federally funded reading teacher worked with Dylan for 45 minutes to an hour daily. At the end of third grade the teacher wrote that Dylan no longer needed the additional instruction. Then he failed math.

His teachers passed him on to the fourth grade without suggesting summer school or repeating a grade, the Birches said. When he moved to sixth grade, the school sent letters home saying Dylan was in danger of failing.

The teacher mentioned tutoring before school, Sherry Birch said. She said she would have been happy to take her son to tutoring, but then the teacher said Dylan's grades improved, and told the Birches maybe he didn't need tutoring after all.

Dylan is now in eighth grade and still frequently fails from one quarter to the next. His report cards show he often fails to turn in homework. The Birches said they received no notice of missing homework, even though the district's AIS policies stipulate that a counselor or teacher should check Dylan's homework assignment list daily and contact parents.

Notes home from teachers reprimand Dylan, a quiet student, for not speaking up in class and asking for help. His math teacher noted on a January report card: "does not seek help when needed."

Dylan said his classes are unruly, and teachers spend most of their time keeping other students in line. He doesn't want to make trouble, he said, so he keeps his head down.

Still, he barely manages to pass, with C's or D's on his report cards. The Birches, judging from his test scores and the homework they see, believe Dylan should more often receive failing grades.

His Spanish tests, for example, are riddled with red marks, with more than half the answers wrong. Yet Dylan passed that class. The Birches said they would rather Dylan had received an F in seventh-grade math, after he admitted to not understanding fractions at all, than a D+.

They believe Dylan's grades are kept just good enough to deny their son help.

Social studies is his worst subject, Dylan said. His grades the past three years were mostly F's and D's, with an occasional C-. He failed both his final exams.

"I'll take all my notes, but it just doesn't quite help me," he said.

Dylan admits he could do more in class and that sometimes he gets lazy. This year, he said, "I'm trying to get all good grades."

"I wish they would help me so I could understand it, instead of dealing with all the bad kids," Dylan said. Maybe, he hopes, telling his story publicly will prompt some action.

The Birches said the school never called them about their son, never set up meetings and only occasionally returned their phone calls. This year they engaged in an all-out, last-ditch battle to improve their son's education.

In the fall they enrolled Dylan in an after-school program that offered an hour of study and tutoring and an hour or more of basketball. Dylan's grades didn't rise, though. The 14-year-old said just one teacher watched over about 50 kids. Dylan said the teacher tried to help students with homework, and played math games with those who had finished their work, but with so many kids, the teacher couldn't offer much undivided attention.

The Birches said they have called a half-dozen administrators to ask for tutoring, testing for learning disabilities - anything. This winter the school tested Dylan's intelligence to see if he qualified for special education programs. He didn't.

Howard Birch sums up the family's frustrations with a story from Dylan's seventh-grade year: The couple finally met with Dylan's teachers and guidance counselor. Both parents took a day off work to attend. Some teachers came late, others left early. The Birches figure they had maybe 10 minutes at the table with everyone and all that resulted was everyone traded e-mail addresses.

Notes from the meeting in Dylan's file say Howard Birch told the assistant principal that his son cannot spell or write. "Father is very worried about what Dylan doesn't know," the file says.

"Dylan's not failing," the Birches recalled telling the group, "you failed him."

"I don't believe we're failing Dylan," Superintendent Ely said. "We are trying to present him with an opportunity."

"Our level of success certainly needs more work," he acknowledged, "but it's a partnership."

Factbox: Troubled schools in Schenectady

Rounded percentages show proportion of students receiving a score of 1 or 2 on assessment tests, which indicates a level of proficiency below or far below a student's grade level.

Failure Rates -- State Assessment Tests

School	English 2003	2004	2005	Math 2003	2004	2005
Oneida Middle School	70%	73%	73%	65%	70%	69%
Central Park Middle School	66%	72%	69%		72%	67% 67%
Mont Pleasant Middle School	81%	74%	82%		75%	62% 65%
New York State	55%	53%	52%	49%	42%	45%

Source: State Department of Education

Not 100%

Dylan Schroeder, 14, misspelled America twice on this in-class work sheet last year and made other mistakes. Still, he received a perfect grade. Based on state guidelines for learning English Language Arts, here are skills a student his age should have learned:

- Observe rules of punctuation, capitalization and spelling.
- Write clear, concise sentences.

_ Understand the purpose for writing. For example, explain, describe, narrate, persuade and express feelings.

Source: NYS Dept. of Education

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Date: Sunday, May 7, 2006

Failure common at middle schools

Schenectady superintendent says solutions take time

By Anne Miller

Staff Writer

SCHENECTADY - For the past four years, the overwhelming majority of Schenectady middle school students have failed state assessment tests - a performance so poor that students who don't need remedial programs are the exception.

In 2005, more than two-thirds of the city's eighth-graders failed state math and English language arts exams, earning a 1 or 2 on a scale of 4.

In some subjects, at some schools, the failure rate runs closer to three-quarters of all students. In the English test given May 2005 to eighth-graders:

82 percent of Mont Pleasant students scored 2 or lower.

73 percent of Oneida Middle School students scored a 2 or lower.

69 percent of Central Park students scored 2 or lower.

The average failure rate state-wide was 52 percent.

On the most recent math tests, given in September 2005, Oneida students performed the worst of the three schools with 69 percent of students scoring 2 or

below. At Central Park, 67 percent of students failed, with 65 percent failing at Mont Pleasant.

The state average: 45 percent.

At Oneida, 350 students receive Academic Intervention Services and 112 receive special education help, more than half the student population of 622.

Mont Pleasant has 679 AIS students and 114 in special education, out of 829 students.

Central Park has 667 students with 492 receiving AIS.

The state and federal governments have mandated sweeping changes.

New York requires Academic Intervention Services for struggling students, while the federal No Child Left Behind act mandates optional tutoring and after-school help.

Schenectady School Superintendent Eric D. Ely acknowledges his city's middle schools need major improvement.

"We certainly have problems in terms of student achievement," he said, "but I don't want people to think we aren't doing anything about it."

The school system is considering a major change: moving sixth grade classes to elementary schools, where performance is better. "We're doing things," Ely said.

"We're taking a lot of steps to see that our teachers are better trained," he said. "We're working with state and regional help centers."

"People judge us on test scores, which I think is very unfair," Ely said. "We really believe we'll start to see an increase, but we didn't get into this situation in one year ... and we're not going to get out of it in one year ... or five years."