

A Third of Beaufort County Schools Not Meeting State Standards

SC public schools just got graded. How did your child's Beaufort County school stack up?

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A third of Beaufort County public schools are performing below S.C. standards — and two schools are among the bottom 9 percent in the state, according to a new report released Thursday.

For the first time in four years, the S.C. Department of Education released [school report cards](#) Thursday that give nearly every public school across the state a rating of excellent, good, average, below average or unsatisfactory for the 2017-2018 school year.

Intended to help hold district and school administrators accountable for student achievement, grades are based on students' scores on standardized tests, English learners' proficiency, school quality, high school graduation rates and more.

In Beaufort County, eight of 31 schools were rated as below average and two schools — Hilton Head Island Middle and Whale Branch Middle schools — were rated unsatisfactory.

Overall, schools north of the Broad River — where the majority of the district's poor students live — received grades on the lower end of the spectrum compared to those south of the Broad.

That mirrors the nationwide [achievement gap between white students and minority students](#), including African-American and Hispanic students, who are [disproportionately affected by socioeconomic disparities](#).

Bonnie Almond, the district’s chief instructional officer, said that improving the ratings at the lower-performing schools will take incremental steps, but that figuring out how to best serve students in poverty will be essential to the process.

“We’re going to have to address that in our schools and give them opportunities they haven’t had before,” Almond said Thursday.

The school ratings were suspended for the past four years as the S.C. Education Oversight Committee, the S.C. Department of Education and other key stakeholders developed a new accountability system to meet state and federal requirements.

The majority of Beaufort County schools saw a decline in their rating from 2014, but the S.C. Education Oversight Committee said that was expected.

“While previous systems looked exclusively at student achievement measures, the new system also looks at measures like student engagement and the progress English learners are making in learning the English language,” Neil Robinson, the committee’s chairman, said in a press release. “I can’t overemphasize that this new system sets higher expectations for students ...”

Excellent	Good	Average	Below Average	Unsatisfactory
		Broad River Elementary,		
		Hilton Head Island School	Beaufort Elementary,	
	Bluffton Elementary,	for the Creative Arts, M.C.	Hilton Head Island	
Coosaw	Okatie Elementary,	Riley Elementary, Mossy	Elementary, Shanklin	
Elementary,	Pritchardville	Oaks Elementary, Port	Elementary, Lady’s	Hilton Head
May River	Elementary, Red	Royal Elementary, Robert	Island Elementary, St.	Island Middle,
High	Cedar Elementary,	Smalls International	Helena Elementary,	Whale Branch
	River Ridge Academy,	Academy, Beaufort Middle,	Whale Branch	Middle
	Riverview Charter,	Bluffton Middle, H.E.	Elementary, Lady’s	
	Bluffton High, Hilton	McCracken Middle,	Island Middle, Battery	
	Head Island High	Beaufort High, Whale	Creek High School	
		Branch High		

Beaufort County’s two failing schools

At a Beaufort County Board of Education work session earlier this month, Interim Superintendent Herb Berg gave a presentation to the board on three areas that the district should work to improve the achievement gap among students.

Berg's presentation ranked each school in the district by the number of students in poverty, English language learners and black students in order for the district to pinpoint "where should we put our time, effort and resources to make the most difference to improve the most student learning," he said.

Hilton Head Island Middle and Whale Branch Middle, which ranked among the worst performing schools in South Carolina on the new report cards, are both strongly affected by the socioeconomic status of their students.

Hilton Head Middle has the fifth-highest percentage of English language learning students in the district.

About 30 percent of its students are not proficient in English, which is nearly double the district average and five times the statewide average.

Whale Branch Middle, on the other hand, has the third-highest number of impoverished students in the district and the highest concentration of black students — 83 percent of its student population. It also has the lowest percentage of professional licensed teachers in the district.

School board member JoAnn Orischak, who represents the south end of Hilton Head, said that unfortunately, she was not surprised by the "less-than-stellar ratings" at the two schools.

Talking with teachers and parents at Hilton Head Island Middle School over the last several years, Orischak pointed to several reasons for the school's low ranking, including its "revolving door of leadership" and "loose oversight of student discipline issues," which resulted in several teachers filing reports with the Beaufort County Sheriff's Office over students assaulting teachers last school year.

Patricia Freda, former principal of Bluffton Middle School, took over as principal at Hilton Head Island Middle for the start of the 2018-19 school year and quickly began implementing some new initiatives she hopes will "bring good results" for next year's ratings.

Freda added reading and writing workshop courses for ESL students so that they receive two hours of English each day instead of one, and she revamped the school's positive behavior interventions and supports program to encourage respect and responsibility among students.

Freddie Lawton, who became principal of Whale Branch Middle School in 2017, said he also recently tweaked the school's reading and math tutoring programs and its behavior intervention program.

“My ultimate goal is to motivate my students and let them see the value of education and how they can use that for their future goals,” Lawton said Thursday.

Almond, the district’s chief instructional officer, said that finding programs and best practices to implement at all of the low performing schools will be the district’s “first priority” following the release of the report cards.

As a next step, Almond said her office will focus on developing metrics and targets for growth “not just for this year to the next but three to five years out as well.”

The new South Carolina school report cards can be found at SCReportCards.com.