Opinion:
GIPS State Accountability Report ('21-'22)

GRAD ISLAND (Neb.) -- In public education, the work is never “done”.

We operate on a continuum constantly measuring, (re)evaluating, providing support, and evolving all while teaching. No two school years are the same. Landscapes shift — especially in challenging seasons of uncertainty.

We show-up daily to bring our best for each student. Because the kids — every single one — deserve to have the opportunity to learn, grow, become, and do.

Every year the Nebraska Department of Education shares data on how our schools and students perform from the previous year by averaging school-level scores on standardized testing; specifically reading, math, and science.

Here’s a snapshot of how Grand Island Public Schools fared in the 2021-2022 school year:

- GIPS as a district was classified as “Good”.
- Two GIPS schools were classified as “Great”.
- Seven GIPS schools were classified as “Good”.
- Nine GIPS schools were classified as “Needs Support for Improvement”.

A few insights I want to share with you in response to our performance:

1. **We own the data.**

We have great ambition in our community and grand vision in our district, we may hold our heads high in that regard. But it is also important to recognize ownership and opportunity for improvement.
We have been here before. Prior to the pandemic we saw nine of our schools fall into the same category. We responded in rigorous fashion to bring that number down to two moving into 2020.

The infrastructure Grand Island Public Schools has put in place is a signifier of positive momentum.

The state of Nebraska saw a 7% decline across the board, we dipped by 6%. While that may not be the most “universally positive” news – it’s encouraging to see that we have outperformed the state trend in this regard. Progress matters.

While we still have room to grow going forward, we are optimistic about the meaningful growth we have seen in the district throughout the last few years of challenging times.

II. The work is not done — but we are making progress.

Other notable progress points include:

- Six of our Elementary schools made positive gains in both core categories of English Language Arts and Math with an average improvement of over 3%.
- ACT performance is up at Grand Island Senior High with ELA climbing 6% and Math and Science at 2% a piece despite the greatest decline of ACT scores nationwide in a decade.
- Students in our highest need special education programs made an 18% improvement across the board.

While we are committed to playing the long game in championing education and opportunities from cradle-to-career, I firmly believe we also have much to be encouraged by here at Grand Island Public Schools.

EARLY LITERACY:

In the fall of 2020, Grand Island Public schools began implementing a high quality instructional program in order to effectively build a foundation of literacy for K - 2 students.

By the end of last school year, 80% of our Grades 3 - 5 students were reading grade-level text with sufficient accuracy. Here’s how each grade progressed from the beginning of the year to year’s end:

- 3rd Grade: 38% to 81%
● 4th Grade: 54% to 81%
● 5th Grade: 55% to 82%
● All massive growth across the board.

In Fall of 2021, Grand Island Public schools began implementing a high quality English Language Arts program that is aligned with evidenced-based practices for teaching reading and writing. This fall (2022), our early projections for proficiency on the spring NSCAS are promising as well:

● 3rd Grade: 2023Projected Proficiency in ELA for NSCAS is currently 6% higher than where we ended last school year.
● Ten schools are currently projected to have higher proficiency in the spring of 2023 than they did in the spring of 2022.
● 4th Grade: 2023 Projected Proficiency in ELA for NSCAS is currently 9% higher than where we ended last school year.
● All 14 schools are currently projected to have higher proficiency in the spring of 2023 than they did in the spring of 2022.

While we have some exciting early data around our efforts, we still have work to do in order to ensure that every GIPS student knows and experiences the joy of learning to read and we will remain relentless in our vision of Every Student, Every Day, Literate!

MATH:

In the spring of 2021, a group of preschool through high school teachers, coaches, and administrators came together to develop new commitments on the experiences we want ALL students to have in every mathematics classroom.

Through rolling-out new curriculum in ‘20-’21, we started seeing almost immediate results:

● 3rd grade math, improved 2%
● 6th grade math, improved 3%
● Grades 6th, 7th, & 8th proficiency scores increased or stayed the same while Nebraska’s saw a decline in 2020–2021.

SCIENCE:

Our approach to science has transformed in the last four years both in terms of curriculum and classroom provisions. Due to the pandemic the last time our science benchmarks were tested was in the 2018-2019 school year.
We are pleased to report this year we are back with NSCAS state testing results by implementing a more rigorous testing infrastructure, and the results are encouraging.

- Our 5th grade state science proficiency improved by 14%.
- Our 8th grade proficiency improved by 17%.
- All grades science proficiency grew by 19% and went from nine schools earning proficiency to 12 and growing.
- Five of our schools are currently outpacing the state average.

There is good work taking place at GIPS but the work is not done; both things can be true at the same time. We want the best for your kids, our incredible teachers and staff, and our community.

As all of us have discovered and felt throughout the pandemic, regression in learning, social emotional well-being, and attendance have become key factors in our aim to champion continued, consistent learning.

III. We’re still feeling the long term impact of the pandemic, but we’re playing the long game.

While much of the world and our community have “returned to normal” one thing that is still playing catch-up is our adjustments on the educational front.

Chronic absenteeism has been notable nationwide, statewide, and, yes, here in Grand Island. Lingering effects of emotional trauma are still reverberating in our hallways for most of our students. Learning trajectories that took a hit during the days of online and hybrid classes take literal years to recover.

Let's take a look at the bigger picture:

- 23% of Nebraska students were categorized as chronically absent in 2021-2022 (per Nebraska Department of Education).
- 16% of teenagers suffered a major depressive episode in the last year (per Mental Health America).
- 60% of teens with depression did not get treatment in the past year (per Mental Health America).

Our kids and our teachers and our families are still recovering.
We lost ground throughout the pandemic. This signals, once again, the importance of educating the whole child. It signals that before we can expect kids to focus and perform on a standardized test we must empower them to attend school; we must provide resources to help them thrive like food, counseling services, and more.

Many of our kids are still unpacking trauma from the pandemic. We are in the throes of meeting each of our students where they are at and providing opportunities for them to engage in learning while attempting to gain back the ground that was lost.

What does this mean for us moving forward?

We share all of this information to provide a greater context of our landscape. Moreover, to confirm our commitment to bettering our education and learning opportunities for every single student in Grand Island Public Schools.

Our leadership is meeting with each of our Principals to review the data and to put plans in place for us to continue moving forward with rigor and focus.

Here are a few of our immediate takeaways:

- Individual school improvement plans for our buildings.
- Remain committed to our core areas of focus in our Strategic Plan.
- Partner with our community to better champion efforts towards consistent attendance.

We are a strong school district. We are a diverse school district with evolving, complex areas of need. We are a school district that is dedicated to making a positive impact.

We have been here before, we are doing good work, and we are confident we will see improvement as we progress.

Our district leadership is committed to expanding support and direction for teachers. Our principals are committed to anchoring the way forward for their teams, their buildings, their students.

Let us continue being better together.

-Dr. Tawana Grover
Superintendent, Grand Island Public Schools