

Award-winning school facing test-scores probe

By Bruce Smith
Associated Press

CHARLESTON, S.C. | When MiShawna Moore became principal of one of Charleston's poorest inner-city schools five years ago, she sought to make it a beacon among the nearby housing projects and homeless shelter.

She helped parents pay bills and threw open doors to the two-story brown brick and glass building on weekends. She washed students' clothing and made sure each of the more than 300 students at Sanders-Clyde Elementary had a gift to open each Christmas.

Standardized test scores shot up. Plaudits and an award soon followed. Talk of demolishing the building and sending students to a different school evaporated.

But Moore departed last spring for a job in North Carolina, and scores from the tests taken shortly before she left dropped dramatically.

Officials are now questioning what they call an unusual number of erasure marks on old tests. Law enforcement is investigating, and parents once impressed with the school's record are second-guessing enrolling their children and worried what the publicity will do to the school.

"We registered because they said the school had changed and it had turned around," said Steven Holmes, a 29-year-old longshoreman who enrolled his daughter in Sanders-Clyde preschool this fall because of the great things he heard about the school. "Then we heard about the test scores. We're not going to pull her out because she just started, but she won't be here next year."

Big turnaround

Sanders-Clyde drew praise and even won a \$25,000 award last year from the federal government for its progress.

When Moore took over, the school's state rating based on the Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test was "unsatisfactory." The test assesses student skills in English and math and, in 2004, just over 60 percent of students tested had at least basic English skills and half the students had at least basic math competency. Three years later, 83 percent had at least basic English skills and 88 percent had at least basic math competency. The school's rating made it to "good."

But school district officials questioned the jump and the state Education Department also found an unusual number of erasure marks on the previous year's tests — a red flag something might be wrong.

'Little bit suspicious'

"When you have five, six, or seven erasures and they go from

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wrong answer to right answers, it's a little bit suspicious," said Janet Rose, who heads assessment and accountability for the county school district and who thought the monitoring would simply prove her wrong.

"I just thought this would validate the high scores they got," she said. "Maybe they were doing a miracle over there. That was the perception over the years."

Moore heads to N.C.

But after monitors watched the most recent round of exams given last spring, English competency dropped to 58 percent and math fell to 51 percent. The district asked the State Law Enforcement Division to investigate.

Moore was already gone. She left a few weeks after last spring's testing for a job as an assistant superintendent in Halifax County, N.C. She did not return several phone messages and e-mails from The Associated Press seeking comment, but did issue a recent statement asking for a 30-day leave to answer questions in South Carolina.

"I was not involved in any unethical or illegal activities as it pertains to the administration of the state test at my school," she wrote, adding she gave information to Charleston County regarding testing procedures and thought everything was fine. That information has now been turned over to investigators.

Repeated, widespread failure on the tests can require schools to spend money on tutors and teacher training and can lead to administrators getting fired.

Each year, the state Education Department receives between 40 and 80 inquiries about alleged testing violations. There are strict guidelines for administering the tests and serious complaints are routed to state law enforcement. Tampering with the exams is a misdemeanor punishable by a \$1,000 fine and 90 days in jail.

Test complaints generally center on individual teachers. Education Department spokesman Jim Foster said the Sanders-Clyde case is the first time in at least 15 years an investigation in South Carolina has focused on scores from an entire school.

Some local educators were suspicious of the turnaround at Sanders-Clyde, where tests showed some children's scores rising two performance levels, which is unusual.

Larry DiCenzo, principal of

Orange Grove Elementary Charter School, raised questions in May after reading a newspaper article on Moore. He said three Sanders-Clyde students transferred to Orange Grove, out-standing PACT scores in hand.

"But when they came to us, the kids were struggling or even having a hard time getting C's," he said. "We felt there was something not right here."

Kids fall victim

At Sanders-Clyde last week, as students in red, white or blue shirts and khakis ran in the playground nestled between a cluster of mobile classrooms behind the school, the sign outside said the school is a place "Where Every Child is More Than a Test Score."

Current principal Melvin Middleton doesn't think there was any wrongdoing during Moore's tenure and worries the publicity will hurt the children.

"Say whatever you want about MiShawna Moore. You can wring her through the mud. You can wring Melvin Middleton through the mud as well. But the bottom line is it really affects these students," he said. "No one is saying Sanders-Clyde is a terrible place, but when you make these connections, the children internalize that."