

By EARL WATT

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While three schools from Liberal have been identified as “persistently low achieving schools,” they were not alone.

A total of 45 Kansas schools were identified as having low achievement on the No Child Left Behind federal mandates.

One difference for Liberal, however, might be that many of the other schools were located in the state’s metropolitan areas.

Liberal’s South Middle School was listed as a low achieving school among schools defined as “Tier I” schools. South is one of 32 schools in Kansas that receives Title I funds that are earmarked as schools needing improvement.

According to state program coordinator Dr. Julie Ford, a Title I school is a school identified as having a high rate of poverty. The state measures this by the number of students who qualify for free or reduced lunches.

Those districts with schools that qualify for Title I receive a portion of the \$190 million the federal government gives Kansas to help meet the educational needs for poverty-stricken districts.

“At that point, a district has a decision to make as to which schools they will serve,” Ford said.

Typically, a district will allocate the resources to elementary schools first, and then middle schools. The money rarely reaches the high school level.

“The money is mostly for staff,” Ford said. Title I schools are able to add reading instructors and other personnel to help poverty-stricken schools provide a quality education.

“Basically, a non-Title I school may have fewer teachers,” Ford said.

South Middle School was identified along with Curtis Middle School in Wichita and three Kansas City schools, including Emerson Elementary, Mark Twain Elementary and Northwest Middle School.

Liberal High School was targeted as one of the lowest achieving schools on Tier II. That means Liberal High School qualified for Title I funds but does not receive them.

Liberal High School was joined by five Wichita high schools, five Kansas City high schools, one from Topeka and one from Cherokee County, the most southeast corner of Kansas.

“These are mostly what we consider urban districts, except for one,” Ford said. “While Liberal is not urban but it does have urban characteristics — with ethnicity and diversity.”

Liberal’s Cottonwood Elementary was listed as a Tier III school, which means they are eligible for Title I funds but were not listed in Tier I or II. Ulysses’ Kepley Middle School was also listed along with eight Wichita schools, two Hutchinson schools, eight Kansas City schools, four Topeka schools and two others.

Garden City and Dodge City did not make the lists even though they have a similar community make-up as Liberal.

“Dodge City doesn’t have any schools on improvement,” Ford said. “That’s pretty good. Garden City is a district on improvement on the corrective action phase. Their last school just came off improvement, but subgroups are causing them to be on improvement.”

Subgroups are defined as specific ethnic or gender specific groups that while the school as a whole may achieve the desired benchmark, the subgroup did not.

“In some ways, you have to go to each district to see what is working,” Ford said.

Liberal made the list when the rules changed on measuring schools on missing Adequate Yearly Progress for more than two consecutive years to taking a three-year average.

Still, Ford said Liberal has taken proactive steps to address the district’s issues.

“They are moving toward getting off the list,” Ford said. “Liberal has implemented a number of programs to help reading and math. The positive from this is you will get some funds to help.”