

'R.I. Academy' would target minorities

By Robin J. Youngblood

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ROCK ISLAND — The new, two-campus "Rock Island Academy" would be targeted toward higher-achieving, mostly minority children from lower-income families.

Rock Island-Milan school district superintendent Rick Loy proposed Tuesday that the district close Grant Elementary and restructure Lincoln and Hawthorne-Irving elementaries into east and west campuses of the Academy. The Academy's boundaries would include the areas now served by the three elementary schools.

The closure and restructurings are being suggested, in part, as ways to address looming compliance problems with the federal No Child Left Behind Act standards. NCLB requires all schools to make "annual progress" on standardized tests, with the minimum requirements rising annually. The three schools have not been meeting those requirements.

The Academy would be set up on a "90-90-90" concept, Mr.

Loy said. That wasn't immediately met with 100 percent approval from the school board.

Mr. Loy said the concept has been successful in other districts, and used in 118 Illinois school districts. "There's no reason why that can't happen in Rock Island," he said.

"We believe the 90-90-90 research offers an approach that could be beneficial to all schools and all students," assistant superintendent of curriculum Jay Marino said. "We have not yet deployed that in any of our schools, but after doing the research on it we believe it's a perfect fit for our restructured schools to begin with."

In its true form, a "90-90-90" school would serve 90 percent minorities, 90 percent of the students would receive free or reduced price school meals, and 90 percent would have met or exceeded state learning standards.

In Rock Island's case, the percentages would be lower than 90, except the district believes it can reach a 90 percent success rate on tests, Mr. Marino said.

The idea was met with some skepticism Tuesday from board vice president Linda Dothard. She's concerned the children who currently aren't meeting state learning standards will be mixed with similar students, a scenario she believes won't breed success.

"People that become the best compete with the best," she said. She suggested partnering the poorer-performing schools with ones in the district that are meeting state standards.

Mr. Marino said the "90" concept works better than pairing up with another school from across town, because it is less invasive to the students.

And, Mr. Marino said, parents in the west-side neighborhoods want their children to attend a neighborhood school rather than be bused across town.

"When we went out into the community (to gather information), a pretty common theme was that (parents) still want a neighborhood school," he said.

The school board is scheduled to vote on Mr. Loy's proposal at its Jan. 25 meeting.