

Schools explain NCLB concerns to federal official

By Tanner Kent

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ST. PETER — A top federal education official did more listening than talking during a Thursday visit to St. Peter High School.

What he heard was a representative spectrum of successes and struggles for schools in southern Minnesota.

“This is the exact audience we’re trying to reach when we travel around the country,” said John White, the U.S.

Department of Education deputy assistant secretary for

Please see SCHOOLS, Page [B3](#)



John White, the U.S.

Department of Education’s deputy assistant secretary for rural outreach, visited St.

Peter High School on Thursday to collect feedback on issues facing rural schools. He is pictured (at left) visiting with Glenn Morris, director of technology and applied academics at South Central Service Cooperative.

Tanner Kent

Article Continued Below

[See SCHOOLS on Page B03](#)

SCHOOLS: Punitive NCLB measures are said to undermine programs

Continued from Page B1

rural outreach, as he addressed a gathering of about 20 school administrators, teachers and business leaders from the region.

In 2009, White was charged with advising U.S.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan on policy matters involving rural schools after the former superintendent of Chicago public schools was criticized for his urban-oriented programs.

Since then, White has traveled to 29 states to collect feedback on the particular needs of rural schools and, especially, their concerns with No Child Left Behind as it awaits federal revision.

Sheri Allen, superintendent of Mankato Area Public Schools, said NCLB's punitive measures for missing goals — which include such consequences as diverting district money to fund transportation for students to attend other schools — require districts to shuffle resources and undermine programs.

Several teachers relayed their concern that standardized tests are not always an accurate representation of a student's abilities. And Barb Embacher, vice president for Greater Mankato Growth, said NCLB's emphasis on reading and math achievement has been detrimental to the formation of other academic skills.

“We've lost some of that developmental, skill-building aspect of education,” she said.

White did say NCLB has produced valuable changes — most importantly, the identification of students who are following behind.

But he largely agreed that the NCLB revision should include a more accurate testing measure and more focus on creating students with broad academic skills.

“When we do reauthorize, we need to get kids on the track to colleges and careers,” he said.

Perhaps White left the meeting with a few ideas.

Jeff Olson, superintendent of St. Peter Schools, shared his district's initiative to create career academies where students enroll in a two-year program to prepare for a career in health science or agri-science.

Susan Kratzke, chief operating officer for The Thro Company (which operates assisted- and independent living facilities), shared her success with Mankato's nursing certification program. Through a partnership between the school district and Thro, students receive the 75 required hours of clinical experience needed to gain state certification as a nursing assistant. Kratzke said the program has not only benefited students but also her own workforce.

“As 17-year-olds, they are many steps ahead of a 20 or 21-year-old already in college,” she said. “Fifteen years from now, we'll need these people in the field.”

Those in the audience noted, however, that such examples of success often require a significant private or corporate partnership — luxuries to which many rural schools do not have access. And for that reason, White said, the federal department of education is trying to pay particular attention to the needs of rural schools.

“Early on, we realized we needed to know the difference from place to place in the country,” he said.

White's visit to St. Peter was organized by the office of U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar.