

# TEST TALK

THIS ISSUE:

## My School Didn't Make Adequate Yearly Progress—So What Does That Mean?

Each year, usually in summer or early fall, states release lists of schools and school districts that have not made “adequate yearly progress” during the past year in raising student achievement. Schools and districts appear on these lists because they have fallen short of the annual test score targets and other performance benchmarks set by states to comply with the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

This process of monitoring and reporting on adequate yearly progress, or AYP, is a central concept of NCLB. It is meant to highlight schools and districts that aren't performing as well as they should and stimulate actions that will improve teaching and learning. Whether the AYP requirements are a fair and accurate gauge of school quality is a matter of intense debate, as discussed at the end of this report.

## What Are the Main AYP Requirements and Why Do They Matter So Much?

To make adequate yearly progress, schools and districts must:

- Ensure that a state-determined percentage of students in every major subgroup—including major racial and ethnic minority groups as well as low-income, disabled, and limited English proficient students—scores at the “proficient” level on state achievement tests in reading and mathematics
- Test at least 95% of the students in each subgroup and overall

*for leaders*

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- Jack Jennings, Director

- Meet at least one other state-determined academic indicator—graduation rates for high schools and attendance rates or another indicator for elementary and middle schools.

The test score targets—in other words, the percentage of students expected to score at the proficient level—go up over time, leading to the goal of 100% of students in every school achieving at proficient levels by 2014. The grade levels tested for AYP also multiply over time.

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When a school fails to make AYP, it's a serious matter, especially if the school receives funds under the federal Title I program for educating disadvantaged students. Schools that miss making AYP for the first year are placed on a "watch list" and must improve their performance in the next school year to avoid future consequences. Title I schools that fall short of making AYP for two consecutive years or more are "identified for improvement." They must develop a specific plan to boost student achievement and must give their students the option of transferring to a better-performing school if the parents so choose. Title I schools that fail to make AYP for three consecutive years or more are subject to increasingly stiff sanctions, starting with the transfer of some of their federal funds to providers of tutoring services and ending with extensive personnel replacements, radical reorganization, or takeover by a private management company or the state.

When a school fails to make AYP, it's also a cause for concern—and often confusion—among parents and other citizens. People may wonder, does this mean our school is a bad school? Should I transfer my children to another school?

For more than two years, the Center on Education Policy has been studying how states and school districts are implementing the No Child Left Behind Act, including its requirements for adequate yearly progress. On July 28, 2004, we also held a forum on ways to improve the NCLB accountability requirements. Based on our NCLB work, we have identified several reasons, highlighted on pages 3 through 12, why a school or school district may fail to make AYP. Although many of these reasons are tied to school quality, some may result in a school failing to make AYP even when it's improving. And as explained below, some of these reasons affect certain types of schools more than others. For example, schools with highly diverse enrollments or schools in states with more challenging achievement targets are more likely to fall short of making AYP.

Simply put, poorly performing schools will fail to make AYP, but not all schools that fail to make AYP are performing poorly. And the achievement targets for AYP keep going up every few years, as explained later in point 7. So trying to meet these targets is like running a marathon and a hurdles race at the same time, with hurdles that get higher and more numerous the farther you go.

## How Many Schools Are Affected?

In 2003, an estimated 28,134 schools across the country—or about 32% of all the public schools evaluated for AYP—did not make adequate yearly progress for at least one year, based on their test scores and other performance data from school year 2002–03 (Packer, 2004). Of this group, an estimated 6,565 schools, or about 7% of the schools evaluated, did not make AYP for two or more years in 2003 and were therefore identified for improvement.

In the summer of 2004, states began releasing their AYP lists for 2004, based on test scores and other data from school year 2003–04. Early reports from several states, such as Michigan, Maryland, and Georgia, suggest the percentage of schools that did not make AYP may be lower this year. In a few other states, such as Minnesota, South Dakota, and Indiana, this percentage of schools appears to be higher than or about the same as last year. The final tally for all states will not be available for some time, because states often change their lists after districts or schools have had a chance to appeal the AYP status or correct data errors.

If the number of schools failing to make AYP has indeed gone down in most states, that is good news and a sign that students and teachers are taking the NCLB achievement goals seriously. It may also be partly attributable to changes several states have made during the past year in their methods for determining AYP—changes that have given schools more breathing room, as explained in point 3. A drop in these numbers is also likely to be temporary, because test score targets will keep rising in coming years and the number of hurdles a school must clear will multiply.

## Why Could a School Fail to Make AYP?

Schools miss AYP targets for several reasons. It's important for parents, citizens, reporters, and policymakers to understand these reasons before making judgments about the quality of a particular school.

### 1. Some schools fail to make adequate yearly progress because they are doing a poor job of educating students.

The most obvious reason why schools do not make AYP is because they are not adequately educating students. Often these schools miss the mark in several areas. For example, they may have low test scores across the board, as well as for specific subgroups of students, and they may also have low graduation rates or poor attendance rates. These are clearly the kinds of schools that NCLB was designed to single out. For these schools, being identified for



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improvement can bring technical assistance, additional resources, and other supports to help them do better. It can also mean a loss of enrollments, if parents take advantage of the NCLB option to move their children to a higher-performing public school, and a diversion of Title I funds to pay for student transportation to choice schools or private tutoring services.

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**2. Schools with more diversity—in other words, more students from different racial, ethnic, income, or language backgrounds—are far more likely to fall short of making adequate yearly progress than small or homogenous schools.**

Under NCLB, all major racial and ethnic subgroups of students, as well as students from low-income families, students with disabilities, and limited English proficient students, must meet the state achievement targets for every grade and subject tested before the school or district is considered to have made AYP. In other words, even if the overall test scores for a school far exceed state targets, the school will fail to make AYP if too many students in just one subgroup score below the proficient level. (This requirement does not apply to subgroups too small to count, according to the state-determined minimum group size explained in point 3 below.)

The reason for tracking subgroup performance is commendable. Some subgroups have lower average test scores than others, and looking at subgroup scores can reveal achievement gaps that are not being addressed. A school with high overall test scores may still not be effectively educating one or more subgroups, such as American Indian, African American, or low-income students. A failure to make AYP will unmask the achievement gaps in these schools and serve as a wakeup call for schools that have become complacent. The school will have to put in place strategies to address the needs of its lower-achieving subgroups.

At the same time, the requirements for subgroup performance mean that diverse schools—those with more subgroups—have more hurdles to clear and more ways to miss. Oregon, for example, looks at subgroup performance for Asian, African American, Hispanic, White, American Indian, multiracial, economically disadvantaged, limited English proficient, and disabled students, as long as the subgroup numbers at least 42 students in the tested grades (Oregon Department of Education, 2004). Therefore, an Oregon elementary school must ensure that the percentage of students scoring at the proficient level in each significant subgroup meets the state achievement targets in English/language arts and math for grades 3 and 5 (the two elementary grades tested in 2004). In addition, the percentage of *all* students scoring at proficient levels in the tested grades must meet the target, so “all students” could be considered a tenth subgroup.

Although most schools don't have 10 subgroups of significant size, many urban or other diverse schools do have 7 or 8 subgroups, so the hurdles can

add up quickly. A hypothetical Oregon school with 8 subgroups (counting “all students” as the eighth) must clear 16 subgroup hurdles to make AYP—8 subgroups times two tested subjects—without even considering test participation or the other indicators used to determine AYP. By contrast, a school with just one additional subgroup—say, students with disabilities—would have just 4 subgroup hurdles to clear (2 subgroups times two subjects).

Not all states combine test scores across tested grades in a school, as Oregon does. Some states track subgroup performance separately for each tested grade, as well as each tested subject. So schools in these states must surmount three or four times as many hurdles as Oregon schools (Packer, 2004).

This relationship between diversity and AYP status was confirmed by a study of 7,000 California schools conducted by Policy Analysis for California Education (Novak & Fuller, 2003). This study found that schools with similar levels of poverty are less likely to meet AYP targets if they have more subgroups of students. For example, among higher-income schools (those enrolling 25% or fewer poor children), schools that serve just one major subgroup have an 83% chance of meeting the state’s academic targets, while schools serving six subgroups have only a 53% chance of meeting the targets. The pattern is even sharper for low-income schools (those enrolling 75% or more poor children). These schools have a 53% chance of making AYP if they serve only one subgroup, but if they serve six subgroups, their chances of making AYP drop to just 16%.

The Center on Education Policy reached a similar conclusion after analyzing data from a nationally representative survey of 274 urban, suburban, and rural school districts conducted for our 2004 report on NCLB. The very large school districts and urban districts we surveyed were much more likely than other districts to have schools that did not make AYP for two consecutive years. About 86% of very large districts and 50% of urban districts had at least one school in this category during school year 2003-04, compared to just 17% of small districts or rural districts. This is probably because the very large and urban districts tended to be more diverse, with more subgroups to track.

### 3. Whether a school makes AYP depends on which state it is located in.

The proportion of schools making AYP varies enormously from state to state. In 2003, just over 16% of the public schools in Florida and about 25% of the public schools in South Carolina made AYP, compared with 81% in Texas and 74% in North Dakota (South Carolina Department of Education, 2004; Florida Executive Office of the Governor, 2004; Texas Education Agency, 2003; North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, 2004). This does not mean that students in Texas and North Dakota have learned that much more than students in Florida and South Carolina. Instead, these wide disparities



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are partly the result of differences in state policy. Because of these different policies, comparisons of state AYP lists are not a meaningful indicator of the quality of schools in one state versus another.

#### *Differences in standards, tests, cutoff scores, and achievement targets*

The No Child Left Behind Act lets states make several key decisions about their accountability systems. Each state:

- Determines its own curriculum standards
- Develops or chooses its own tests to measure progress toward these standards
- Decides where to set the cutoff scores on state tests to define “proficient” performance for AYP purposes
- Sets its own targets for the percentage of students that must score at the proficient level each year to reach the goal of 100% proficient by 2014.

Some states have less rigorous standards or easier tests, while others have harder standards or tests. Some states set high cutoff scores or achievement targets, while others set lower ones. The interaction of all these factors—the rigor of the standards, the difficulty of the tests, the magnitude of the cutoff scores, and the ambitiousness of the achievement targets—affects how easy or hard it is for schools to meet state AYP benchmarks.

Consider the issue of cutoff scores on the state test. In Louisiana, for example, elementary students had to get 55% of the questions right on either the English or math state test in 2003-04 to be considered proficient for NCLB purposes, while in Tennessee, 3rd graders had to get only 34% correct in reading/language arts and 38% correct in math to be considered proficient (Brown, 2003; Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.).

Similar variations can be found in state proficiency targets. In Virginia, for instance, 61% of an elementary school’s students had to score at the proficient level on the state reading exam in 2003 for the school to meet the AYP target, while in the District of Columbia, only 30.3% of elementary students had to score at the proficient level on the reading test used by the district to meet AYP (Helderman & Mui, 2003).

A study of 14 states by the Northwest Evaluation Association compared student performance on the state reading and math tests used for NCLB with student scores on the association’s own set of tests geared to national percentiles (Kingsbury et al., 2003). The researchers found huge differences in states’ expectations for performance. In 8th grade reading, for example, Colorado set its proficiency bar so low that 88% of the students across the nation would pass. In Wyoming, by contrast, the bar was set so high that just 26% of students nationally would make the cut. The researchers examined the content of Wyoming’s test and found it to be more difficult than that of

many other states. For instance, Wyoming 8th graders are expected to master algebra to achieve a proficient score, while students in many other states only need to know higher-level arithmetic to be considered proficient.

A different analysis by Achieve, Inc. (2003), a group that advises states on standards and assessments, compared the percentage of students that various states had deemed to be proficient on state tests with the percentage scoring at the proficient level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a test used to track U.S. achievement trends. The analysis found some of the highest proficiency bars in Louisiana, South Carolina, Maine, and Wyoming, and some of the lowest in Texas, North Carolina, Mississippi, and Oklahoma. The bottom line is that students with exactly the same knowledge and skills would miss the mark in some states and easily surpass it in others.

### *Differences in subgroup size*

States have also set different minimum numbers for how large a subgroup must be in order to be counted for AYP. Testing experts caution that when the size of the group being tested is small, test score trends can be particularly unstable from year to year. For this reason, NCLB allows states to set minimum sizes for subgroups, but these sizes vary considerably.

In Maryland, for example, the test scores of a subgroup consisting of just five students are counted in AYP calculations. In other words, if a school had five or more students with disabilities in the grades being tested, low scores among these students could prevent the school from making AYP. In the neighboring state of Virginia, by contrast, a subgroup is not counted unless it comprises at least 50 students. In California, the minimum subgroup size is 50, when those 50 students account for at least 15% of a school's enrollment; otherwise, the minimum size is 100 (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). In some small, rural schools or districts, subgroup progress is not a factor because all of their subgroups except white students fall below the state minimum group size.

### *Other state decisions*

Finally, AYP is determined by numerous other state policies. To cite just some examples, states determine:

- Which other indicators, in addition to test scores, are used to gauge school progress
- Whether to combine student test scores from all tested grades in a school or consider each grade separately
- Whether to average test scores from the past two or three years, rather than just the current year, in AYP calculations
- Whether to use a statistical technique called “confidence intervals,” similar to a margin of error, to allow test results that fall just a little below the AYP target to be considered as having met the mark



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- Whether to use an “index”—a composite or weighted average of student performance—to calculate AYP. Although an index system can give credit for student achievement gains below the proficient level, the U.S. Department of Education does not allow states to use index systems that (a) give extra weight to students performing above the proficient level, because this could mask the performance of lower-achieving students; (b) do not involve separate calculations for reading and math and for each subgroup; or (c) permit schools to make AYP without also increasing the percentage of students scoring at the proficient level.

### *Changes in state policies*

Recently, many states have changed key elements of their accountability systems (Olson, 2004). Often these changes have the effect of reducing the number schools that don't make AYP. Several states, for instance, have raised the minimum subgroup size or set higher minimums for the disabled or limited English proficient subgroup. Several states have also added confidence intervals to their calculations. Some states have lowered their cut scores on state tests. And many states have adopted the more flexible procedures, endorsed this year by the U.S. Department of Education, for calculating test participation rates and for testing disabled and limited English proficient students. So the rules in effect for 2003 have already changed for 2004, and could change again in future years as federal and state policies evolve.

#### **4. Schools can have satisfactory test scores but still fail to make adequate yearly progress because they missed the test participation requirement.**

In fall 2003, many schools were surprised to learn that although they had met their state's test score targets, they had still failed to make AYP because they hadn't tested 95% of their students overall or 95% in each subgroup. This NCLB rule is intended to prevent schools from artificially inflating their test scores by exempting lower-achieving students from testing or subtly discouraging them from showing up on test day. Stories were rampant throughout the nation of schools that would have made AYP if just one or two more students in a particular subgroup had taken the tests. These situations left parents puzzled about why a school with an average SAT score of 1174, to cite a real example from New Jersey, was on the state AYP watch list (Newman, 2003).

Since schools have become more conscious of this requirement, participation shortfalls have been less of a problem in 2004. Also, the U.S. Department of Education made clear in 2004 that schools can average participation rates over three years to reach the 95% threshold and can exempt students with grave injuries or medical conditions from testing. Nevertheless, schools can't always control whether a student shows up for the tests. In some states, such as Colorado, parents have the right to opt out of state testing for their

children. If several parents use this option, it could thwart a school's best efforts to meet the 95% requirement.

It's also important to recognize that the participation requirement works in tandem with the test score targets. In other words, schools must meet both the test score targets and the participation targets each year to make AYP. In our hypothetical Oregon school with 8 subgroups (including all students) and two tested subjects, the addition of the participation requirement for all subgroups brings the total number of hurdles that must be cleared to 32 (16 testing hurdles, plus another 16 participation hurdles).

**5. Schools that meet test score targets can still fail to make AYP if they miss state benchmarks for graduation, attendance, or other indicators.**

The No Child Left Behind Act also requires states to base AYP decisions on at least one other academic indicator in addition to test scores. For high schools, this indicator must be the graduation rate, with specific benchmarks set by the state, and can also include another indicator if the state desires. For elementary and middle schools, states choose the indicators; many have chosen to use attendance rates. In 2003, some schools that met test score targets still didn't make AYP because their dropout rates were too high or too many students were absent too often.

Faltering graduation and attendance rates are critical signs of educational trouble that must be addressed. The AYP requirements can help call attention to these problems and force schools or districts to take action. Nevertheless, these additional indicators add more hurdles to the AYP process. So now our hypothetical elementary school in Oregon must surmount an additional hurdle—meeting the attendance rate target for the whole school—which brings the total number of hurdles to 33 as shown in the table below.

**HURDLES A HYPOTHETICAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL MUST CLEAR TO MAKE AYP**

**AYP DESIGNATION – NOT MET**

Subgroup	ELA scores	ELA participation	Math scores	Math participation	Attendance
All students	MET	MET	MET	MET	MET
White	MET	MET	MET	MET	
Black	MET	MET	MET	MET	
Hispanic	MET	MET	MET	MET	
Asian/Pacific Islander	MET	MET	MET	MET	
Economically disadvantaged	MET	MET	MET	MET	
Limited English proficient	MET	MET	MET	MET	
Students with disabilities	NOT MET	MET	MET	MET	

ELA = English/language arts  
 NA = Not applicable

Source: Adapted from Oregon Department of Education, 2003-04 preliminary AYP report, [www.ode.state.us/nclb](http://www.ode.state.us/nclb)

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**6. Test score gains don't count unless students reach the proficient level or the school meets the law's "safe harbor" provision. And schools get no credit for gains among students who already exceed the targets.**

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Annual targets for adequate yearly progress are the same for everyone, so subgroups and schools that are far behind have much more ground to make up than those that are closer to or beyond the target. It doesn't matter whether subgroups or schools miss a target by one percentage point or 20. They receive no credit for coming close or making great strides if they're still behind, unless the school is among the rare ones to qualify under NCLB's "safe harbor" provision, explained below.

Similarly, schools won't make AYP by moving students from "below basic" performance on a state test to "basic" performance. Although these students have improved, they are still scoring below the proficient level. Nor will a school get AYP credit for raising test scores among students who were already performing at or above the proficient level.

Consider the example of two hypothetical schools in Kansas, where 53.5% of students in elementary or middle schools had to score at the proficient level in math for a subgroup or school to meet the achievement target for 2003—a target that will rise to 66.8% in 2007 (Kansas Department of Education, 2003). A school in which 70% of students already score proficient could post no gains or could even decline for a few years without missing AYP targets. But if a diverse school in a poor neighborhood boosted its average achievement from 25% proficient to 30%, it would miss the mark. In other words, one school could stagnate, while students and teachers in the other school could easily become discouraged because their gains don't count. The same situation could arise with high-performing and low-performing subgroups.

NCLB does contain a safe harbor provision that gives certain schools credit for making significant gains. If a school does not meet state AYP targets but reduces by 10% the percentage of students scoring below the proficient level, and if the school also makes progress on the state's other academic indicator, then it will still make AYP. For example, if 75% of the students in a high school score below the proficient level one year, and 67% score below proficient the next year, and the graduation rate increases, the school will make AYP. But in reality, very few schools have been helped by the safe harbor provision (Linn, 2004).

**7. The AYP hurdles become more numerous and higher over time.**

By 2006, students must be tested yearly in reading and math in grades 3 through 8 and once during grades 10-12. By 2008, students must be tested in science, too. Many states are still phasing in the NCLB-required tests in science

or in grades not yet tested. In the 2003-04 school year, 11 states were administering tests in all the required grades and subjects, while the rest were still filling in gaps (Education Week, 2004). Reading and math test scores from all the grades 3 through 8 and from the high school grade tested will eventually count toward AYP, but states can decide themselves whether to include their science test results in their AYP calculations.

Even in states that don't count science, the number of AYP hurdles to clear will often multiply in the next few years, as testing is added in more grades. In states that do count science in their AYP calculations, the number of hurdles will increase even more, as science test score hurdles and participation hurdles are added for each subgroup.

In addition, the hurdles get higher as one gets closer to the year 2014. NCLB requires states to set intermediate goals that will lead to 100% of students scoring at proficient levels by 2014. Under the law, these goals, or AYP targets, must increase for the first time by school year 2004-05 and must continue to rise at intervals of three years or fewer. In Michigan, for example, the percentage of elementary school students who must score at proficient levels in math to make AYP rises as follows (Michigan Department of Education, n.d.):

- 38% in 2002
- 49% in 2005
- 59% in 2008
- 69% in 2011
- 79% in 2012
- 90% in 2013
- 100% in 2014

Several states have developed growth trajectories that call for gradual rises near the beginning of the timeline but much steeper gains toward the end. Indiana, for example, is requiring schools to improve the average percentage of students reaching proficiency by seven percentage points every three years for the first several years of the trajectory, then to make gains of seven points every year for the last four years of the timeline (Center on Education Policy, 2004). So schools in states with these policies will have to step up the pace of improvement tremendously, just when they may be feeling they've spent tremendous energy to get as far as they have.

Some experts have charged that the jumps in achievement expected by NCLB are unrealistic—they assume rates of improvement that are anywhere from 2.3 to 6.5 times faster than the actual growth in NAEP scores, and more rapid than gains seen in even the best-performing schools (Linn, 2004).



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**8. AYP is determined not by measuring year-to-year growth of the same students, but by comparing the achievement of this year's group of students in a grade with last year's group.**

In the AYP marathon/hurdles race, the runners change every year. In other words, progress is determined not by following the same students throughout their educational careers, but by comparing this year's group of 5th graders with last year's group. As teachers can attest, the composition of a class varies from year to year. One year's class could have several disruptive students, which affects the learning of the entire group, while another year's class could have an unusually high number of gifted students. Demographic changes in the student population—such as the addition of large numbers of immigrant children—can change the composition of one grade's group enough from one year to the next to make annual comparisons of achievement test scores unreliable, especially in smaller schools.

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## What Does All This Mean for Schools and States?

All of the factors mentioned above, plus others not cited, together create a long, difficult course with many hurdles that schools and districts must traverse to make AYP. Moreover, the sanctions are the same for schools that miss by a little or miss by a lot. For this reason, some educators, researchers, and policy analysts have concluded that the current AYP requirements are unrealistic or unfair.

Some state officials also charge that the federal requirements have pre-empted state accountability systems that were working well. This conflict between federal requirements and state systems becomes very confusing to citizens when schools that receive high marks or rewards under the state system fail to make AYP according to federal criteria. In Florida, for example, 68% of the state's schools earned an A or B grade in 2004 on the state's academic rating system, yet about 77% failed to make AYP according to the state list released in June 2004 (Florida Executive Office of the Governor, 2004).

The NCLB requirements have produced some positive outcomes. They have forced schools and communities to pay attention to children and subgroups that aren't achieving as well as they should and to close achievement gaps. According to our study, they also seem to be spurring schools to take concrete actions to improve student achievement, such as putting in place new research-based curriculum and instruction or extending the school day (Center on Education Policy, 2004). Some schools have "tested out" of improvement status, and in some states, the number of schools failing to make AYP appears to have gone down.

But the task of meeting AYP targets year after year remains enormous, and the targets will keep rising. As soon as schools surmount one set of hurdles, the bar is raised, and more hurdles appear. If a school does a good job and tests out of school improvement status one year, it cannot rest, because multiple obstacles await it the next year, and tripping over just one hurdle is all it takes to miss the mark. An analysis of AYP trends in Connecticut concluded that as expectations are raised and more grades are tested, 90% of the elementary and middle schools in the state will fail to meet AYP targets by 2014 (Study: 9 out of 10, 2004). Other states have projected similar outcomes.

These complexities of AYP have important implications for schools and districts. First, although federal and state officials are generally careful not to describe schools that miss AYP targets as “failing” schools, many citizens do not realize the various reasons why schools could miss the targets and could unfairly assume that something is seriously wrong with their local school, even when that’s not the case. Clearly, the AYP process will identify a lot of bad schools, but just because a school has been identified doesn’t make it bad.

Second, if too many schools do not make AYP it can undermine the credibility of the federal requirements and create incentives for states to lower cutoff scores or dumb down their tests.

Third, if too many schools are cited as needing improvement, states and districts will not have enough resources, staff, time, and expertise to help the schools with the most serious educational problems. This lack of capacity is already a concern, according to the Center’s 2003 survey of 47 states and the District of Columbia (Center on Education Policy, 2004). Officials in 38 of the states we surveyed reported that they lacked the capacity to carry out the requirements of the Act, and many were specifically referring to their ability to provide technical assistance to schools tagged for improvement. At the same time, the school districts responding to our local survey said that their state was the entity they relied on the most to help them carry out NCLB. So as more and more schools are cited for improvement, the “capacity gap” will widen.

## What Can Be Done to Improve AYP Requirements?

A rational and fair AYP process is crucial for NCLB to accomplish its goals and gain the support of the American public. Researchers, policy analysts, and state officials who participated in the Center’s July 28 forum made various suggestions for revising the law’s AYP provisions. Among the proposals were the following:



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- Set more reasonable performance targets and timelines for AYP that are based on the rate of improvement made by the best-performing schools in a state. Allow schools to average subgroup performance across two or three years (Linn, 2004).
- Identify annual achievement growth targets for individual students based on where each student begins, and judge schools based on the extent to which students met their growth targets. Give credit for student growth well above or below the proficient level (Kingsbury et al., 2004).
- Judge schools based on whether individual students are making enough progress annually to reach proficient levels of performance by the time they reach the highest grade in a school (Doran & Izumi, 2004).
- Allow states flexibility to design their own accountability systems—including “growth model” systems that give schools credit for year-to-year student achievement gains—as long as states narrow achievement gaps and show significant improvements in the percentage of students reaching proficiency (Payne, 2004).
- Base AYP on improvements in the percentage of students performing at or above grade level instead of the percentage reaching “proficiency.” Set realistic improvement targets that vary according to where a school starts (Popham, 2004).
- Move beyond test scores as the sole or primary measure of accountability and allow states to consider such factors as graduation and dropout rates, percentages of students taking honors and AP courses, or results from other state and local assessments. Identify schools for improvement only when the same subgroup misses the AYP target in the same subject for two or more years in a row (Packer, 2004).

Although states are changing some of their AYP criteria, they cannot change the rules built into the federal law or the regulations issued by the U.S. Department of Education. The ultimate goal of No Child Left Behind is to greatly increase learning for all groups of students by highlighting schools and subgroups with legitimate educational needs and marshalling resources to boost their achievement. To make it to the finish line, underperforming schools need technical and financial assistance to carry out proven strategies for improving student learning. The President and the Congress should consider revising the adequate yearly progress requirements of NCLB based on evidence from our study, other research, and the experiences of states and school districts.

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MY SCHOOL DIDN'T MAKE ADEQUATE YEARLY PROGRESS

TESTTALK 15

## KEY REASONS WHY A SCHOOL MAY NOT MAKE ADEQUATE YEARLY PROGRESS

- It could be doing a poor job of educating students overall.
- It could have a diverse student enrollment and could have missed the achievement targets for one or two major groups of students.
- It could be located in a state with higher achievement targets or harder tests than other states.
- It could have satisfactory test scores but could have failed to test 95% of the students in each major group.
- It could have missed the state-set benchmarks for graduation rates, student attendance, or other performance indicators.
- It could have raised achievement for struggling students, but not enough to bring them up to the state's definition of "proficient" performance.
- It could have made the mark one year but missed new targets the next year, as the state institutes additional tests in more grades and raises the achievement targets over time.
- It could have experienced changes in its student body, such as an influx of immigrant students, that affect the achievement of this year's class compared with last year's class.



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