Defining Adequate Yearly Progress: Strengthening Responsibility for Results Without Toppling State Accountability Systems

By Mary Jean LeTendre

Efforts to determine adequate yearly progress pose key questions to policymakers. If we are to hold schools responsible for results, for student performance, and for school progress – just how much should we expect? How good is good enough? As Congress considers the House's No Child Left Behind Act and the Senate’s Better Education for Students and Teachers Act, what may seem to some just a technical consideration in the design of state accountability systems really is at the core of any effort to hold schools accountable for performance.

This paper argues that there are ways to strengthen the federal law around adequate yearly progress. States must pay attention to the performance of economically disadvantaged and minority students. States need to set reasonable timelines for improving the performance of all students. And the federal role can be strengthened through peer reviews, oversight, and technical assistance. But a single, federally-mandated definition of adequate yearly progress will not work for the states. If enforced, the micromanagement of state accountability systems by the federal government through a prescribed definition of adequate yearly progress has the potential to either topple state accountability systems or make them virtually meaningless to schools, educators, and the general public.