



NEWS RELEASE

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Many States Have Taken “Backloaded” Approach to No Child Left Behind Achievement Goals

Proficiency Targets Will Dramatically Increase in Many States This Year

WASHINGTON (May 20, 2008) When the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) became law in 2002, states were charged with the controversial goal of bringing all students to “proficiency” within 12 years. This year, halfway to the ambitious 2014 deadline, that challenge is about to become much more difficult for about half of all states, according to a new report from the Washington, D.C.-based Center on Education Policy (CEP).

The report finds that while half of all states (25 states and the District of Columbia) have adopted incremental achievement goals that assume steady progress toward the 100 percent proficient goal, the other half of the states have taken a “backloaded” approach that will soon mean dramatically higher—and potentially unreachable—achievement goals.

Twenty-three states have taken the backloaded approach, generally setting lower expectations for the percentages of students reaching proficiency between 2002 and 2008 in contrast to much steeper expectations later on. The higher goals are now becoming a reality for states, which in some cases will need to increase the percentage of students reaching proficiency on state assessments by 10 points or more each year between now and 2014.

California, for example, set goals for English language arts at the elementary and middle school levels that increased just once between 2001-02 and 2006-07, from 13.6 percent to 24.4 percent. However, starting in 2007-08, California will expect rapid and steep jumps of at least 10 percentage points per year in order to reach the goal of having all students reach proficiency by 2014.

“Many states may have originally set lower achievement goals for the first few years under NCLB in hopes of getting systems into place or gaining some flexibility from Washington later on,” said Jack Jennings, president and CEO of CEP. “But right now, they are still on the hook for the academic equivalent of a mortgage payment that is about to balloon far beyond their current ability to pay.”

The independent, nonprofit Center on Education Policy prepared the report based on an analysis of student achievement objectives established by states in their accountability plans for NCLB. These objectives cite the percentages of students that must score at or above the proficient level on state tests each year on the way toward meeting the law's ultimate goal of 100 percent of students achieving proficiency by the 2013-14 school year. These annual objectives are used to determine whether schools and districts have made adequate yearly progress (AYP) under the state's accountability system for NCLB.

According to the report, "it is unclear how schools in these states will be able to produce large annual gains in the percentages of students scoring proficient." The report suggests that states with backloaded achievement targets will need to prepare for dramatic increases in the numbers of schools identified as being in need of improvement under the law—in some cases after the number of schools that have already been identified for improvement has already grown significantly.

In addition, the report indicated that states which took a more incremental approach to achievement targets will also likely face difficulty in reaching 100 percent proficiency. Citing research sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, the report notes that based on recent rates of improvement, only one-quarter to roughly one-third of the states would reach the 100 percent goal, and that there is some evidence that states with lower standards and easier tests will find it easier to meet the goal.

"This problem cannot be solved by states alone. Congressional leaders must provide some assistance in the reauthorization of the law to help create a more reasonable and workable solution," said Jennings.

The report, *Many States Have Taken a "Backloaded" Approach to No Child Left Behind Goal of All Students Scoring Proficient*, is available online at www.cep-dc.org. The report is part of CEP's multiyear effort to track the state and local implementation of NCLB. Additional reports are available online at www.cep-dc.org. Most state proficiency schedules can be found in each state's accountability plan on the U.S. Department of Education's Web site <http://www.ed.gov/about/contacts/state/index.html?src=gu>. For eight states (AL, CA, HI, IN, MD, NY, OK, and VA) and the District of Columbia the proficiency schedules were found on the state's Web site.

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Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in January 1995 by Jack Jennings, the Center on Education Policy is a national, independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. The Center does not represent any special interests. Instead, the Center helps citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.