
Improving Achievement for All Students: Is NCLB Accountability Producing Results?

A Hearing at the Georgia Institute of Technology

Atlanta, Georgia

May 22, 2006



COMMISSION ON
NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND
THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
www.nclbcommission.org

There is broad agreement that districts, schools and educators must be held accountable for improving student achievement. Significant disagreements exist, however, as to how to measure and enforce this accountability. Under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), states have set benchmark goals to measure whether districts and schools are making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) toward ensuring that all children are proficient in reading and math by 2014. Some educators praise NCLB accountability provisions for increasing emphasis on subgroups of students and for working to close the achievement gap. They point to an overall increase in test scores and a decrease in schools labeled as “in need of improvement” as evidence that the law is working. Others criticize the AYP provisions, claiming that the law unfairly punishes schools and students by failing to recognize significant progress toward meeting AYP goals. Additionally, recent instances of states raising the minimum subgroup size in order to exclude the test scores of certain students for accountability reasons have fueled the debate over the effectiveness of NCLB’s accountability requirements.

Some have suggested the use of growth models as an alternative way to measure student progress. Given the complexity and importance of this issue, the Commission on No Child Left Behind has spent a great deal of time reviewing research and gathering opinions from various school leaders and others to inform our recommendations. As discussed at our Connecticut hearing on state assessment and data systems, however, the issue is further complicated by the fact that many states lack the technical capacity to track individual student progress from year to year. Many worry that growth models could damage accountability if they are designed in a way that creates the appearance of growth and progress without requiring students, schools or districts to reach intended achievement targets.

EMERGING ISSUES FROM TESTIMONY AT THE HEARING

- NCLB accountability provisions in general have had a positive impact on student achievement and school improvement
- Though there have been struggles, states have generally been successful in incorporating NCLB’s accountability and AYP provisions into their pre-NCLB accountability systems
- Growth models that track a student’s academic progress from year to year are gaining wide support as an effective way of gauging student achievement and informing educational decision making
- Recognizing that special education students face different challenges in learning than other students, many have argued for additional flexibility in assessing and determining AYP targets for some of these students
- As various growth models are considered as part of AYP requirements, states must maintain challenging academic standards and aggressive achievement targets for all students and should avoid lowering expectations simply to look better on state report cards

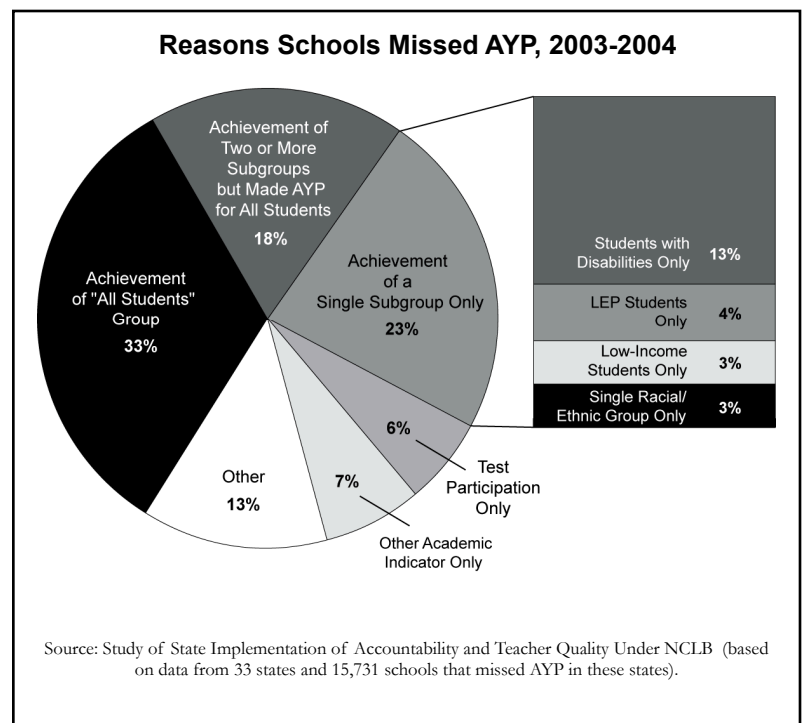
Witnesses at the hearing in Georgia expressed strong opinions regarding the potential use of growth models in conjunction with AYP requirements and other NCLB accountability issues. To access the witnesses' testimonies and view a complete webcast of the proceedings, go to www.nclbcommission.org. As it develops recommendations on these issues for the upcoming reauthorization of NCLB, the Commission will continue to consider information from a variety of sources, including testimony from witnesses and others at our series of public hearings, written comments sent to the Commission, quality research, and state, district and school performance data.

A Look at Accountability Across the Nation

The number of districts and schools making AYP appears to be increasing. An interim report, *National Assessment of Title I* by the Independent Review Panel (IRP), released in February 2006, found that 75 percent of schools and 71 percent of districts met all applicable AYP targets based on 2003-2004 annual assessments. The IRP reported, however, that the number of schools missing AYP based on these test results (21,540) nearly doubled the number of schools identified for improvement for the 2004-2005 school year (11,530). This means that the number of schools identified for improvement could rise substantially in 2005-2006 if many of the non-identified schools that did not make AYP in 2003-2004 miss AYP again this year.

Examining 2004-2005 testing data, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) found that approximately 14,121 schools did not make AYP. This amounts to just under 16 percent of all public schools nationwide. According to CEP's report *From the Capital to the Classroom: Year 4 of the No Child Left Behind Act*, released March 2006, approximately 2,347 districts (about 20 percent of school districts nationwide) did not make AYP based on 2004-2005 testing.

The IRP reported that schools most commonly missed AYP for the achievement of all students (33 percent of cases) and/or multiple subgroups (18 percent of cases). Only in a minority of instances (23 percent) did schools miss AYP solely due to the achievement of one subgroup. The Commission's staff report *Children with Disabilities and LEP Students: Their Impact on the AYP Determinations of Schools*, released May 2006, challenged a common claim by some school leaders and critics of NCLB that failure to make AYP was solely attributable to the test scores of children with disabilities and those with limited English proficiency. The Commission staff report found that only a small percentage of schools in California,



Florida, Michigan, Georgia and Pennsylvania were required to report test results for these subgroups. Most schools were not required to report subgroup performance because of small populations of these students. In cases where these subgroups were counted and did not meet their annual targets, most often they were not the sole reason a school failed to make AYP, the report stated.

The IRP did note in its assessment, however, that schools accountable for more subgroups generally were less likely to make AYP. Among schools for which AYP was calculated for six or more subgroups, 39 percent did not make AYP, compared with 10 percent of schools for which AYP was calculated based on only one subgroup.

What Does NCLB Currently Require?

Adequate Yearly Progress

AYP is a state-developed measure of progress for all local educational agencies (local school districts) and schools in the state. After the passage of NCLB, states had to define AYP in a manner that requires measuring progress by various subgroups of students, as well as the overall student population, to ensure that particular groups of children were not being left behind and the achievement gap was narrowing.

States must define AYP so that all students are expected to increase academic performance and by the end of the 2013-2014 school year all students will achieve at the state-defined “proficient” level on assessments of reading and math. Additionally, in order for a school to make AYP, 95 percent of each subgroup of children must participate in the assessments.

Making AYP also requires that schools show “progress” on an additional indicator, such as graduation or attendance rates. However, neither NCLB nor the U.S. Department of Education, through its guidance and regulations, has stipulated a specific amount of progress to be met on this additional indicator. Consequently, some states require schools only to maintain levels of performance on these indicators, rather than pushing for continued growth.

When NCLB was passed, states set the starting point—or the first achievement bar—toward reaching 100 percent proficiency by 2014. States were free to choose where to set the initial bar based on the lowest achieving subgroup of students or the lowest achieving schools in the state, whichever was greater. After the initial bar—or annual measurable objective (AMO)—was established, NCLB then required states to gradually increase the threshold of the percentage of students who obtain proficiency in equal increments. These thresholds must be raised at least once every three years.

Schools and districts that fail to meet their AYP goals for two consecutive years are determined to be “in need of improvement.” Once this determination is made, interventions are begun, such as public school choice and supplemental educational services (tutoring), followed by a series of escalating reforms and sanctions for those schools and districts that continue to miss AYP targets.

Flexibility in Meeting AYP

NCLB does allow some schools to meet AYP through a “safe harbor” provision if they reduce by 10 percent the number of children in each subgroup not meeting proficiency. For instance, if limited English proficient (LEP) children are at 20 percent proficiency one year and rise to 28 percent proficiency the next year, the school makes AYP because this 8 percent gain in proficiency equals a 10 percent reduction in the number of students not reaching proficiency for that subgroup.

Additional flexibility in AYP includes:

- Averaging scores: States can average scores from the current year with scores from either the previous year or the previous two years when calculating the scores that will be compared to state performance targets for AYP
- Minimum number of students for subgroup accountability: Schools are accountable only for groups of students that are large enough to reveal “statistically valid and reliable” data. Each state has discretion to set the minimum number of students required for subgroup accountability, commonly referred to as the “N-size”

WITNESSES WHO TESTIFIED AT THE HEARING

*Full witness testimony can be found
by going to www.nclbcommission.org*

- Kathy Cox
Superintendent
Georgia Department of Education
Atlanta, GA
- John Winn
Commissioner
Florida Department of Education
Tallahassee, FL
- J. Alvin Wilbanks
CEO/Superintendent
Gwinnett County Public Schools
Suwanee, GA
- Lester McKee
Executive Director for Research
Planning and Accountability
Atlanta Public Schools
Atlanta, GA
- Mercuria Chase Williams
President
Georgia Association of Educators
Tucker, GA

Some Observations From Witnesses

Overall, the panelists at the Commission’s third hearing described the impact of NCLB’s current accountability provisions on their communities as positive. Kathy Cox, Superintendent of the Georgia Department of Education, testified that “the benefits (of the AYP system) have far outweighed the drawbacks.” Cox named the increased emphasis on disaggregated data, the push for more focused instruction in the classroom and the creation of a state-wide accountability system for all schools (Title I schools *and* non-Title I schools) as three instances of the “profound positive impact” AYP requirements have had in Georgia. By merging federal policy with the state’s existing accountability system, she explained, Georgia has seen both a rise in student test scores, particularly for special education students, and a significant decrease in the number of schools labeled “in need of improvement” (from 533 in 2003 to 354 in 2005).

Alvin Wilbanks, CEO/Superintendent of Gwinnett County Public Schools, agreed with Cox, saying that NCLB and its AYP provisions aligned well with the county’s existing accountability model and have been helpful in improving student achievement: “Overall, the (AYP) requirements of No Child Left Behind have served to spur Gwinnett County schools toward increased student achievement across the board and closing the achievement gap for minority student populations.” Wilbanks noted that the percentage of African American students in grade 6 scoring at the “meets and/or

exceeds the standards” level of proficiency on the state’s criterion-referenced reading assessment has increased 16 percentage points since implementation of NCLB, while the percentage of Hispanic students meeting the standards has increased by 19 percentage points.

Testifying on behalf of the Superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools, Lester McKee, the district’s Executive Director for Research Planning and Accountability, described the impact of Georgia’s AYP system on Atlanta’s schools as “complementary” to the district’s comprehensive reform agenda implemented before NCLB. “Georgia’s AYP system enhanced and provided additional focus to Atlanta’s comprehensive reform agenda, particularly in the area of individual subgroup performance,” McKee said. Emphasizing that Atlanta was already looking at its lowest performing subgroups before NCLB, McKee conceded that the discussion regarding the law’s AYP provisions has created another important point of community dialogue on system progress and success.

While the panelists agreed that NCLB’s provisions have helped drive improved academic achievement, they also expressed some concerns regarding its AYP and accountability provisions. John Winn, Commissioner of the Florida Department of Education, called NCLB’s accountability provisions “groundbreaking,” but added that AYP calculations should not simply be pass/fail; rather, they should include measures of learning gains as well as achievement goals. He recommended the use of growth models as part of determining whether schools have made AYP.

Merchuria Chase Williams, President of the Georgia Association of Educators, argued that accountability systems should be based on multiple measures, including teacher-designed assessments, portfolios and graduation/dropout rates, as well as test scores. Williams asserted that while high accountability in schools is “necessary” and testing is “important,” the current accountability model prescribed under NCLB “fails to recognize that all children can learn, but all children do not learn at the same rate.” Instead, growth models and other measures that assess student learning over time should be used to inform instructional practices and curriculum, provide assistance to

WHAT IS A GROWTH MODEL?

Growth models measure student progress by tracking the achievement scores of the same students from one year to the next to determine whether student achievement has increased. By comparing data for the same students over time, progress—or lack thereof—can be measured more precisely. This can give school leaders and the public clear, more actionable information on school performance and student achievement. Growth models provide information on student performance and the performance of the school as a whole that goes beyond any single point in time; they measure a school’s ability to facilitate continuous academic progress in moving toward achievement targets.

students and offer appropriate professional development to educators. Williams stressed, however, that growth models and other measures of accountability should be used for enrichment, not for punitive aims.

Superintendent Cox added to the growth model debate, saying that her concern as a parent is that often growth models are not easily understood by the average person. Commissioner Winn responded by emphasizing the importance of keeping growth models simple, so parents, teachers and, most important, students can understand the data and work together to improve achievement. He also warned that states must avoid lowering standards in order to look better on state report cards; he urged states to implement and maintain challenging standards and high achievement expectations for all students.

With regard to students with disabilities, several panelists conveyed the desire for more flexibility when assessing and calculating AYP goals. Others expressed concern over the way NCLB's "highly qualified" provisions apply to special education teachers. To become "highly qualified" under the law, all teachers must obtain state certification or licensure, hold at least a bachelor's degree and demonstrate mastery of the subjects they teach. Some special education teachers would need to demonstrate subject matter competency in up to five different subjects. Limited time and resources often make it difficult for special education teachers to fulfill these requirements, panelists noted. CEO/Superintendent Wilbanks said, "As we try to serve special education students, we need to have teachers that really know what these students need," more so than teachers who are content-certified in multiple areas.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S GROWTH MODEL PILOT PROGRAM

On May 17, 2006, the U.S. Department of Education announced the approval of growth model accountability plans from North Carolina and Tennessee for the 2005-2006 school year as part of its growth model pilot program. Secretary Margaret Spellings said both states have strong models that adhere to the core principles of NCLB.

Tennessee has received full approval to implement its growth model for this year. Tennessee's projection model, which supplements the statutory AYP model, uses individual student projection data to determine the percentage of students projected to attain proficiency on the state assessment three years into the future. Schools and districts meet AYP requirements if all subgroups meet the AMO in both reading/language arts and mathematics. Based on analysis of 2004-2005 data, the state estimates that approximately 13 percent (47) of schools that do not meet AYP under the statutory status/safe harbor model will meet AYP with this projection model.

The Department has approved North Carolina's growth model for implementation provided that its assessment system is fully approved by July 1, 2006. Under North Carolina's model, after all other statistical methods and safe harbor have been applied to a school's proficiency targets, a four-year growth trajectory will be calculated for all students who have not yet achieved proficient status.

Visit www.ed.gov for more information on the Department's growth model pilot program.

Some Witnesses' Recommendations for Improving NCLB

- Allow the use of growth models as part of determining AYP results
- Consider using consistency of results in student performance on state test scores in comparison to state National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results as a significant determining factor in the decision to allow states to incorporate growth models in their AYP calculations
- Require states with the largest gap between performance on NAEP results and state test scores to raise their definition of proficiency
- Offer greater flexibility for the students with disabilities subgroup
- Allow schools to exclude LEP students from AMO calculations for longer than the current one-year period

- Develop accountability systems based on multiple measures, including teacher assessments, portfolios, graduation rates, in-grade retention numbers and test scores
- Include “gifted” as an AYP subgroup to help focus attention on NCLB’s effort to improve education for *all* students, not solely low-performing students
- Replace NCLB’s definition of “highly qualified” teacher with “highly skilled and effective” and modify such definition to include a focus on whether learning gains are being achieved by students
- Reverse the order of consequences for failure to meet AYP, allowing schools labeled “in need of improvement” to offer supplemental educational services (tutoring) before the required school choice option

Embracing the Spirit of NCLB: Centennial Place Elementary School

QUICK FACTS ABOUT: CENTENNIAL PLACE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

- Principal: Cynthia Kuhlman
- Student Population: 505
- Grades: K-5
- Made AYP: Yes
- Students with Disabilities: 1%
- LEP Students: 5%
- Economically Disadvantaged: 64%

After the hearing, commissioners visited Centennial Place Elementary School, a science, math and technology theme school in Atlanta. For each of its students, Centennial creates detailed profiles containing school history, test scores, interventions and other disaggregated data. Centennial’s teachers and principal use these profiles to “create a full picture of the child,” which, in turn, allows them to make projections and set achievement goals for each student (similar to a growth model).

Special education is an area particularly close to the hearts of Centennial’s teachers and principal. Two years ago, educators at Centennial discovered that although 90 percent of students had met or exceeded standards on state tests, only 47 percent of special education students were considered “proficient.” While the school did not have a large enough special education population to meet Georgia’s “N-size” requirements, leaders were nonetheless “devastated” by the test results and took action. Centennial hired a

special education teacher trained in research-proven methods, increased communication between its special education and regular teachers, and provided testing accommodations for special education students, such as additional time and smaller rooms away from distractions. The result has been significant gains in academic achievement for all of the school’s special needs students.

You can’t teach children material two grades below them and expect them to meet grade-level standards. You just have got to keep the bar up there, high. Exposure is very important. We say it is not OK to go backwards. Every child should grow.

—Cynthia Kuhlman, Principal, Centennial Place Elementary School

For Further Discussion

The Commission is seeking further comments from interested individuals on these topics:

- What successful strategies has your state or community used to implement the accountability provisions of NCLB?
- How have NCLB's current accountability requirements supported or hindered student achievement in your state or community?
- Would the use of growth models enhance or hamper student achievement in your state or community?
- How can NCLB help ensure that students with disabilities are not left behind in assessment and accountability measures?

Comments can be submitted to the Commission via email at nclbfeedback@aspeninstitute.org

About the Commission

The bipartisan, independent Commission on No Child Left Behind is examining the strengths and weaknesses of the No Child Left Behind Act and will make concrete and realistic recommendations to Congress, the Administration, state and local stakeholders, parents and the general public to ensure the law is an effective tool in spurring academic achievement and closing the achievement gap.

In seeking to accomplish its mission, the Commission is guided by these principles:

1. All children can learn and should be expected to reach high standards.
2. Accountability for public education systems in the United States must improve to enable students to excel.
3. The achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their non-disadvantaged peers must be eliminated to ensure that all children have the opportunity to succeed.
4. Education results for all students must improve in order for the United States to remain competitive in the global marketplace.
5. Parents have a right to expect their children to be taught by a highly qualified teacher. Teachers have the right to be treated like professionals, including access to sound working conditions and high quality preparation and ongoing professional development opportunities.
6. Education reform must be coupled with additional resources, but federal, state, and local resources must be used more efficiently and effectively to ensure results in return for the increased investment.

The Commission on No Child Left Behind is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Spencer Foundation. This document is published to communicate the results of the Commission's work. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in the Commission's documents are entirely those of the author(s) and should not be attributed in any manner to the donors.