

The truth about
Adequate Yearly
Progress
and its
implications for
school systems

Falling short of "No Child Left Behind" mandates does not equal failure

by Stephen Smith, TSBA director of government relations

"County Schools Leaving Children Behind! Half Fail Accountability Standards."

The headline in your morning paper provides the jolt usually supplied by your first cup of coffee. As a school board member in a district with a large population of low socioeconomic students, many of whom speak little or no English, you've witnessed first-hand the commitment of your educators to meet the unique challenges before them and to improve student achievement. Through the implementation of a targeted school improvement plan, as well as the conducting of community and student achievement forums, your district has made considerable progress. In fact, after being placed "on notice" last year for poor academics under the state's previous accountability criteria, your identified schools demonstrated marked improvement on state accountability measures, each moving off of the "on notice" list.

The newspaper is mistaken. Your board, superintendent and staff have sincerely committed to student progress – implementing new programs and allocating resources to areas of specific need. Your teachers and students have worked so hard. Parental involvement has never been greater.

How will the community react? How will this latest news affect teacher and student morale? How can the board make sense of it all and effectively communicate the truth about your schools to the media and the public?

Welcome to the new world of "No Child Left Behind," where "failure" is not always what it seems.

A year ago TSBA published an article titled "No Child Left Behind: What does it mean for Public Education?" At that time, school systems were still trying to grasp the basic components of the new federal law, which represented the most sweeping and intrusive changes to education policy in this country since the inception of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965. One such component was Adequate Yearly Progress, which is the centerpiece of school accountability under No Child Left Behind. In 2002, AYP was just another term. Few understood its true implications. However, those who did predicted the outcome of the September 2003 meeting of the State Board of Education, in which 47 percent of Tennessee's 1,650 public schools were identified as failing to meet AYP benchmarks.

Unfolding Adequate Yearly Progress

Before a true measure of success or failure can be made, it is imperative that the definition of AYP be understood. AYP is measure of year-over-year progress. The mandate of NCLB is for 100 percent of students to be proficient in reading/language arts and math by 2014. Each state establishes its own definition of proficiency within the guidelines of the federal law and then sets gradually increasing standards with the goal of all students performing at a proficient level in each subject within the next 11 years.

In September of this year, the State Board of Education adopted the starting points or baselines from which the state will measure future progress and set future AYP benchmarks. With the added additional indicators of attendance rate in elementary and middle schools and graduation rate in high schools, Tennessee's baselines/benchmarks under NCLB are as follows:

Tennessee's Targets for Reading/Language Arts and Math at the Elementary/Middle School Level Determined by the Percent of Students at the Proficient or Above Levels

School Year	Reading/Language Arts Target	Math Target	Attendance Rate
2002-2003 through 2003-2004	77.1%	72.4%	93%
2004-2005 through 2006-2007	82.825%	79.3%	93%
2007-2008 through 2009-2010	88.55%	86.2%	93%
2010-2011 through 2012-2013	94.275%	93.1%	93%
2013-2014	100%	100%	93%

Tennessee's Targets for Reading/Language Arts and Math at the High School Level Determined by the Percent of Students at the Proficient or Above Levels

School Year	Reading/Language Arts Target	Math Target	Graduation Rate
2002-2003 through 2003-2004	86%	65.4%	60%
2004-2005 through 2006-2007	89.5%	74.05%	
2007-2008 through 2009-2010	93%	82.7%	
2010-2011 through 2012-2013	96.5%	91.35%	
2013-2014	100%	100%	100%

So, in order to meet AYP in the current year, a high school must have at least 86 percent of its students proficient in reading/language arts and at least 65.4 percent of its students proficient in math. In addition, the school must have a graduation rate of at least 60 percent. Clear enough? Well, let's look further by using the following example:

School A, a high school, has 96 percent of its students achieving proficiency in reading/language arts; 85 percent achieving proficiency in math; and a graduation rate of 90 percent. All of these performance levels are significantly higher than the 2003-2004 baselines.

Obviously, then, School A is a high performing school and will not be identified as a target school for failing to meet AYP, right? Not so fast. School A is definitely a high performing school; however, 85 percent of School A's students with disabilities achieved proficiency in reading/language arts – one percentage point lower than the required baseline. Consequently, School A has now been identified as a target school for not meeting AYP. Here's why:

No Child Left Behind has very stringent requirements. Schools must meet proficiency benchmarks in nine different subgroups, including racial and ethnic groups; economically disadvantaged students; English language learners; special education students; and the school as a whole. If a school misses the proficiency mark in any one of the nine subgroups, or if NCLB's required 95 percent of each subgroup does not participate in the testing process, the school will be identified as failing AYP, meaning the school will be on the "target" schools list in Year 1 and face increasing scrutiny and sanctions in subsequent years if improvement is not made.

Going back to our previous example, School A's Adequate Yearly Progress report produced by the Tennessee Department of Education could closely resemble the chart on the following page.

HIGH SCHOOL	All	White	Hispanic	Black	Native American	Asian/Pacific Islander	Econ Disadv	Students With Disability	Limited English Proficient
ALGEBRA GATEWAY									
% Tested	+	+	+	+	<45*	<45	+	+	+
% Proficient	+	+	+	+	<45	<45	+	+	+
ENGLISH GATEWAY									
% Tested	+	+	+	+	<45	<45	+	+	+
% Proficient	+	+	+	+	<45	<45	+	X	+
Graduation Rate	+								
Met Federal Benchmark?	X								

*Tennessee has established an “N” count of 45 (the minimum number of students in a subgroup for accountability purposes.)

In this example, School A has met all of the benchmarks in every category, except for the percentage of students with disabilities proficient in Reading/Language Arts (English Gateway and Writing Assessment). And, remember, even this subgroup missed the benchmark by a mere percentage point. Yet, School A fails the AYP test and is placed on the “target” list.

Should School A strive to improve the language arts achievement levels of its students with disabilities? Certainly.

Is School A a failure? Absolutely not.

School A is not alone. Of all the schools on the state’s target warning list, 461 of them, or 65 percent, were placed on the list for falling short in only one of the accountability categories required under NCLB. Several schools were targeted simply because they did not meet the benchmark of testing 95 percent of students in each subgroup.

Does this mean that the targeted schools list is meaningless or that our schools do not need improvement? Of course not. The goal of NCLB – to ensure achievement for all students – has always been embraced by public schools. The Adequate Yearly Progress report is an excellent tool for schools to show where they need to focus attention and assistance. And the fact that

the State Department of Education will offer technical assistance to targeted schools to help prevent them from moving into “high priority” status and facing sanctions is commendable. This is exactly where the focus of the federal government and NCLB should be – using AYP data to help and support public schools and not as a means to label them, whether intentionally or not, as failures.

It seems that too often policymakers fail to understand that public schools have embraced accountability and never needed a law or a directive to strive for the success of every single student. This has been the goal of Tennessee’s public schools long before NCLB and this goal will undoubtedly continue. If Congress truly wants to help public schools succeed, they can start by focusing less on sanctions and lists and more on providing real and substantial encouragement and support, recognizing the unique challenges that face a system where children from all walks of life are welcome and where the life challenges of each child become the academic challenges of each school.

For more information on No Child Left Behind, including a downloadable PowerPoint presentation, visit the TSBA Web site at www.tsba.net. Just click on the “Capitol Watch” button and then “No Child Left Behind.”

Common Questions and Suggested Answers for Board Members about No Child Left Behind and Adequate Yearly Progress

The release of Adequate Yearly Progress data will unfortunately and in many cases unfairly stigmatize school systems and naturally place school board members on the defensive. It is important that the board, administration and staff carefully study the data and prepare a clear and consistent response. Remember, you know the facts about your schools better than anyone. Stay on message, stay positive and stay calm! Although the release of AYP data can be challenging to school systems, it can also provide an excellent opportunity and a vehicle to communicate the strengths of your schools and the accomplishments of your teachers and students.

Below are some examples of questions you are likely to be asked along with possible responses.

Question:

Are you aware that the State Board of Education under the rules of the federal No Child Left Behind Act has identified (#) of the schools in the district as failing? What is your reaction to this?

Answer:

Our board is looking closely at the Adequate Yearly Progress of our schools in each accountability category and is committed to improving student achievement in all areas.

Question:

Should parents be concerned that their schools are on the list for not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress?

Answer:

Obviously, parents are concerned with student achievement. Parental involvement is a key component of our school improvement process and we have always welcomed parents' input and support.

Question:

What are you going to do to improve those schools that did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress?

Answer:

We are closely examining all data, including the Adequate Yearly Progress report, and we will allocate our resources appropriately to the areas of most need.

Provide examples of current student achievement initiatives in your school system and note that improvement strategies have already begun. Show evidence of the board being proactive instead of reactive.

Question:

Why does your school district have (#) of schools on the target list while our neighboring county school system has none?

Answer:

Every school district has its own unique challenges. As a board member for this school district, my primary concern rests with our schools and how we can best serve our students.

Question:

Are you planning on firing teachers and staff from the identified schools?

Answer:

Our personnel decisions will continue to be based on student needs. We have outstanding educators in our school system and we have a solid staff evaluation process in place that relies on a number of factors, including state and federal accountability data.

Question:

Your school system received additional funding from the county commission/city council last year through a tax increase. At the time, your board said the additional funds were needed to improve student achievement. Why hasn't it worked?

Answer:

The additional funding is being used to *cite examples: technology improvements, school construction, additional teachers, etc.*, which will have a positive impact on student achievement for years to come. It is important to remember that Adequate Yearly Progress is only one measurement of student achievement and it's one that is based almost strictly on test scores. The truth is that our students are achieving. *Highlight areas of student achievement, including not only test scores but also such things as student projects, presentations, publications, athletics, etc.*

Primer On No Child Left Behind

Frequently Asked Questions

What is a target school?

A target school is a school that missed a federal benchmark in at least one area for the first year. There are no sanctions for target schools. The Department of Education offers technical assistance to help keep target schools from becoming high priority schools.

What is a high priority school?

A high priority school is a school that has missed the same benchmark for more than one year. There are different levels of high priority schools: School Improvement, On Notice, Probation, Corrective Action and Alternative Governance.

What is adequate yearly progress?

AYP is a measure of year-over-year student achievement. The goal of No Child Left Behind is for 100 percent of students to be proficient in reading, language arts and math by 2014. Standards for AYP are set to ensure that schools reach that goal. This year, a baseline is being established against which to measure progress in the future.

How is student achievement assessed?

In Tennessee, K-8 students take TCAP achievement tests in math, reading and language arts. In grades 5, 8, and 11, they also take a writing assessment test. High school students take Gateway exams in math and English. Because we are in the initial stages of implementing No Child Left Behind, only grades 3, 5, and 8 were used to determine proficiency for this school year. Performance on these assessments is measured against standards set by the federal government to determine if a school is proficient.

My child's school is excellent. Why is it on the list of target schools?

No Child Left Behind has very stringent requirements. If a school fails to meet every requirement in every subgroup – including demonstrating 95 percent participation on assessments – it fails to meet the federal benchmark and is identified as a target school. That does not mean the school is not excellent. If, for example, the test was given on a day when many students were out with the flu, it is possible that fewer than 95 percent of students took the test, causing the school to miss the benchmark.

How can I find out why my child's school is a target or high priority school?

The State Department of Education Web site includes information on target and high priority schools. For detailed information and At-A-Glance summaries identifying areas in which schools did and did not make federal benchmarks, visit <http://www.state.tn.us/education/>.

If this is the first year for implementing NCLB requirements, why was my child's school on a high priority list last year?

Tennessee was actually a pioneer in mandating school accountability and has had a system to identify high priority schools since the 2000-2001 school year. The issue now is that the state program must adapt to the new federally mandated No Child Left Behind criteria. This year, the state and federal systems are being merged.

What does my child's school have to do to come off the list?

If a school meets federal benchmarks for two consecutive years in the areas for which it was deficient, it will be considered to be in good standing.

What is the State Department of Education doing to improve my child's school?

Each year a school does not meet required benchmarks, additional resources are dedicated to helping improve performance. Assistance includes a range of initiatives, such as deploying Exemplary Educators (master teachers recently retired) to develop corrective action plans, providing training for teachers and administrators, and placing additional reading specialists in schools.

What is an Exemplary Educator?

Exemplary Educators are the backbone of Tennessee's efforts to improve teaching and learning. EE's are veteran teachers selected and trained by the State Department of Education and assigned to work with high priority schools for the purpose of improving student achievement.

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