



Week of Aug. 29-Sept. 2, 2011

Failing While Improving: Leaving all Californians Confused

By UCLA IDEA

The federal Adequate Yearly Progress—or AYP—scores for each elementary, middle and high school were released Wednesday. AYP is the measure of how a school or district fared in meeting federal benchmarks for proficiency in English language arts and math under the No Child Left Behind law.

NCLB was meant to improve public schools by giving them information about their performance and motivating them with the promise of positive recognition for success or the threat of sanctions if they failed. When NCLB became law in 2001, many critics immediately recognized that it violated some fundamental principles of how individuals and schools learn and improve. Now, a decade later, their dire predictions have been realized.

There are two broad problems with this misguided national policy: first, it didn't work and, as written, it *couldn't* work; second, it took the place of other reforms and positive actions that the federal government might have taken. Because the law has constantly raised the bar by requiring a higher percentage of students to score at the "proficient" level (until reaching 100 percent in 2014), each year more schools fail to make "adequate progress" toward this seemingly unrealistic goal. This year, an additional 913 California schools were added to the list of failing schools.

There are severe consequences for falling short, including being placed in "Program Improvement" after two back-to-back failings. The longer in Program Improvement, the stricter the sanctions—state takeovers, school shutdowns, replacing principals and entire teaching staffs. Not surprisingly, many states, including California, have asked for flexibility around these sanctions from the U.S. Department of Education.

The logic behind Program Improvement was to identify low-performing schools and not allow them to continue their low performance year after year. If schools didn't improve after several steps of intervention, eventually they might be "restructured." Before moving to dramatically change school structures, the law promised to provide information, resources and supports so schools could have a reasonable chance to improve student achievement. But in California and elsewhere, supports have shrunk at the same time that the number of schools deemed in need of improvement has grown. California's Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson projected that nearly 80 percent of schools receiving Title I funding would join those ranks this year, with even more in coming years. Additionally, California schools are not getting the kind of information that would help them improve. The information is neither fine-tuned nor timely enough. Scores are released in the summer, long after students have left the classrooms and teachers where they were learning the material.

Confusing the matter still further, some schools get mixed messages from the state and federal accountability systems. In fact, California's state accountability system could be praising some schools

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IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of Aug. 29-Sept. 2, 2011

Page 2

for their gains in the same year that those schools are failing to meet the federal standards for "adequate yearly progress."

The Academic Performance Index score is a number based on a 1,000-point scale that measures how schools have performed on a set of standardized tests. The goal for schools is 800. California has actually shown considerable progress, with a record 49 percent of schools meeting this goal in 2010-11. A number of other California schools, though not yet scoring 800, demonstrated significant improvement toward this goal. However, many of these high-scoring or improving schools are among the 913 California schools added to the federal government's failing list. One school in Sacramento County scored an 832 API, and fell into Program Improvement. "It doesn't seem plausible," said David Gordon, Sacramento County superintendent, "They will say it's a darn good school and ask why is it in Program Improvement."

Across the country, similar competing systems have confused the public. And as NCLB's rising expectations for proficiency swell the ranks of "failing" schools, the public is left with a diminished sense of our school system. A larger portion of the public assigned a grade of D or F to the nation's schools than ever before, according to the annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll released this month. This assessment likely reflects the overwhelming negative media attention on the nation's public schools.

It is noteworthy that the public holds a far more positive view of local public schools. In the same PDK/Gallup poll, a record number of Americans gave their neighborhood public school an A or B grade. Respondents explained that they based these grades on their intimate knowledge of local schools—knowledge that often extended beyond published test scores.

A decade on, the No Child Left Behind Act fails to adequately support school improvement even as it designates more and more schools as failing. Rather than threatening to reconstitute more than half of California's schools, we would be well served to reconstitute NCLB.

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