

**The Accuracy and Effectiveness of
Adequate Yearly Progress,
NCLB's School Evaluation System**

by

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Executive Summary

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is the key element of the accountability system mandated by the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). This report reveals that AYP in its 2006 form as the prime indicator of academic achievement is not supported by reliable evidence. Expecting all children to reach mastery level on their state's standardized tests by 2014, the fundamental requirement of AYP, is unrealistic. The growth model and other improvement proposals now on the table do not have sufficient power to resolve the underlying problems of the system. In addition, the program, whether conceived as implementation costs or remedial costs, is significantly underfunded in a way that will disproportionately penalize schools attended by the neediest children. Further, the curriculum is being narrowed to focus on tested areas at the cost of other vital educational purposes.

It is therefore recommended that:

- AYP sanctions be suspended until the premises underlying them can be either confirmed or refuted by solid, scientific research and unintended, negative consequences can be avoided.

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Background

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is the linchpin of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), passed in 2001 but only beginning to reach uniform full implementation in 2006. AYP uses year-to-year gains in standardized test scores as the primary measure of school quality and progress. Schools not making large enough gains—that is, not making Adequate Yearly Progress—are often labeled “failing”¹ in media reports. If a school does not meet AYP targets for several years, it faces increasing levels of sanctions, ultimately leading to restructuring, which may include a state takeover, conversion to a charter school, or hiring a private firm to manage the school. With such fundamental effects on schools and the future of public education, it is essential to understand whether the premises underlying this mechanism are valid, and whether evidence exists to support the claim that AYP can spark the reforms its supporters promise.

What is Adequate Yearly Progress?

The fundamental requirement of AYP is that all children meet mastery levels on their state's standardized tests by 2014. The tests must include annual reading and mathematics examinations in grades 3 through 8 and another state-selected basic skills examination in the high school grades, the latter frequently given in the 10th grade. By the 2007-2008 school year, each state must administer a science test in an elementary, middle, and high school grade. Requirements also include graduation rate as an "academic indicator" for high schools. For elementary schools, the most commonly used academic indicator is attendance rate.

Progress is measured by comparing the percentage of students who attain target scores in a given grade with the percent of students who attained them in the same grade the previous year. If the school meets its performance goals for the year (its annual measurable objective, or AMO), it is said to have made Adequate Yearly Progress. It is important to understand that this procedure compares two entirely different groups of students rather than measuring the progress (or lack thereof) of a particular cohort of students. Additionally, it does not reflect progress made by students who, despite having made strong gains, have fallen short of target scores.

The law requires states to have a uniform accountability system, applicable to all public schools (but not private schools), whether the school receives any federal money or not. The states also define goals for intermediate success (or AMOs) so that all students meet standards by 2014. For schools that are making significant progress but still falling short of targets, the NCLB accountability system includes a safety net called "safe harbor." If the school does not make AYP but does reduce the percentage of

children scoring below the mastery level by 10 percent per year, the school meets AYP through safe harbor. Since safe harbor often requires larger test score gains than AMOs, however, it is not applicable in many cases. For example, a school with 60 percent mastery in 2004 would be required to average only a 4 percent gain per year by 2014. For this same school, safe harbor's requirement of a 10 percent gain would not provide an effective alternate route.

AYP further requires that each subpopulation (such as minority groups, poor children, and special education students) also attain mastery by 2014. These groups generally start from a lower score level and, consequently, must make bigger improvements each year. Scores are "disaggregated" for each subgroup; that is, the score for each subgroup is considered separately. If a school fails to make the target growth for the entire group *or* for any one of the potential disaggregated groups, it is judged not to have attained AYP. For example, in Figure 1, this "non-performing school" did not reach proficiency in reading for students with disabilities (the red x). Although it passed all the other 36 criteria, this one deficiency means the school as a whole failed to make AYP.²

