



FACING REALITY

What happens when good schools are labeled “failures”?
Projecting Adequate Yearly Progress in Massachusetts schools

MassPartners for Public Schools

A Collaborative Venture of the:

- Massachusetts Association of School Committees
- Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents
- Massachusetts Elementary School Principals' Association
- Massachusetts Federation of Teachers
- Massachusetts Parent Teacher Association
- Massachusetts Secondary School Administrators' Association
- Massachusetts Teachers Association

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A Position Paper MassPartners for Public Schools

In an unprecedented collaboration, the members of MassPartners for Public Schools commissioned a study of the effect of the federal Adequate Yearly Progress requirement on Massachusetts public schools from 2004 through 2014.

Massachusetts Association of School Committees

www.masc.org

Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents

www.massupt.org

Massachusetts Elementary School Principals' Association

www.mespa.org

Massachusetts Federation of Teachers

www.mfteducator.org

Massachusetts Parent Teacher Association

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Massachusetts Secondary School Administrators' Association

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Executive Summary

MassPartners supports high expectations for every child, regardless of background or ability. However, we are critical of the United States Department of Education (USDOE) for its lack of engagement with the field in creating the conditions to support true school improvement so that all students may actually see the promise of education reform become a reality.

The 2002 reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the so-called No Child Left Behind Act (ESEA/NCLB), establishes the goal that all students be *proficient* on statewide standardized tests in mathematics and in reading by 2014. Each state sets its own definition and measure of *proficiency*. This study projects the number of schools in Massachusetts that will attain this goal, as measured by the *Adequate Yearly Progress* (AYP) requirement. Based on this analysis, a staggering 74 percent of Massachusetts schools are projected to fail to meet the federal standards.

Massachusetts 4th graders tied for first in the nation in the NAEP math assessment and 8th graders ranked second.

This study analyzes the impact of the AYP provisions on schools across the Commonwealth. Using a mathematical model, the study projects the outcome for all Massachusetts schools using the current AYP determination methods. This analysis was commissioned by MassPartners for Public Schools, a coalition of the leading state-wide educator organizations and a parent association, with support from Communities for Quality Education and the Civil Society Institute. The leaders of these organizations share a common commitment to improving public schools, to educating all children to high standards, and to supporting educator responsibility.

MassPartners supports the overarching goal of the ESEA/NCLB, which is to ensure that schools are able to educate all children effectively. MassPartners has deep concerns about the guidelines and regulations promulgated by the USDOE and the flawed notion of AYP. We believe that the way ESEA/NCLB is being implemented will actually harm our public school students.

A failure rate of this magnitude in a state whose students score at or near the top on all National Assessment of Educational Progress tests raises serious questions about the rate of improvement and the interpretation of results required under the AYP provisions. As many educators and policymakers across the country are saying, AYP provisions should be grounded in reality and the penalties should be abandoned in favor of identifying and disseminating proven school improvement strategies to close persistent achievement gaps.

Recommendations

No one can be served adequately when most schools are identified as failures. More important, public schools are undermined when the government imposes such labels on schools that by any other measure are successful. The USDOE, by defining penalties regardless of their appropriateness, appears to be furthering the privatization of public schooling instead of advancing real school improvement.

Based on the study findings, MassPartners recommends shifting attention toward school

improvement that will ensure that the ESEA/NCLB goal of providing all students with high quality schooling is achieved. Without changes, the intent of the law is likely to fail.

Policy makers should adopt a collaborative decision-making model instead of using negative labeling and prescriptive penalties which thwart the very improvement efforts they claim to be seeking. The substantial body of effective schools research should be used as the basis of school improvement.

Prescriptive penalties should be replaced with meaningful, effective technical assistance and capacity building. Rather than spending enormous time and resources claiming that the majority of schools are deficient, laser-like attention should be focused on priority schools.

Multiple measures of achievement should be used to evaluate school effectiveness rather than relying on the “one size fits all” use of standardized testing.

The prescriptive, rigid criteria used to trigger AYP penalties should be replaced by a thoughtful school-based evaluation process that results in better identification of school improvement objectives and more effective use of existing resources.

The Massachusetts Department of Education (MADOE) should work with MassPartners, capitalizing on our field-based expertise, to devise a simple and elegant school improvement model that takes into consideration the differing needs of rural, urban and suburban schools, as well as schools with special missions or unique populations.

The practice of excluding districts as supplemental services providers should end and these services should take priority over all other penalties – particularly those that take funding away from direct instructional services to students at the school site.

More appropriate assessments for English language learners and special needs students should be developed to allow more valid and reliable demonstrations of proficiency.

Statistical changes to both the growth formula and the minimum confidence interval must be adjusted to address the back-loaded high growth rates that unnecessarily stigmatize schools. The current choice Massachusetts has made allows some schools to make little, if any, progress in the early years and then requires rapid progress in the later years. We would prefer to see some progress along a continuum, rather than unrealistically rapid growth rates at the end.

Massachusetts has the highest SAT math scores among states that have more than 75 per cent of students taking the SAT and the second highest verbal SAT scores among the same states.

Findings

Most Massachusetts Schools Will be Labeled “Failures”

In April 2005, USDOE Secretary Margaret Spellings announced that states will be given some additional flexibility under ESEA/NCLB. However, only states that meet a new set of criteria will be eligible. While those changes are welcome, they do not go nearly far enough toward fixing the fundamental problem with ESEA/NCLB. Even with that flexibility in place, failure under ESEA/NCLB will be unavoidable. A federal government that creates a system under which a majority of schools and districts will inevitably “fail” is like a teacher who sets his or her students up for failure. ESEA/NCLB itself, not simply the guidelines and regulations under which it operates, should be amended, prior to its scheduled reauthorization in 2007.

Under ESEA/NCLB, states are given the option of measuring AYP in one of two ways: Statutory and Safe Harbor/Gain Score.¹ For this report, we analyze the failure rate under both methods. For both analyses, we presume that test scores from 2005-2014 will continue to rise at a rate based on the test score gains between 2001 and 2004. This assumption is generous since numerous studies have demonstrated that test scores historically plateau several years after a new state achievement test is established. For purposes of this analysis, however, we presume that continuous improvement is possible.

Even using this best case scenario assumption, we calculate that 74 percent of all schools will fail to make AYP under the Safe Harbor/Gain

Score AYP method, while 90 percent will fail to make AYP under the Statutory AYP approach.

Both systems will be described in greater detail in this report. In brief, under Statutory AYP 100 percent of students are expected to score at the proficient level or above by 2014, and all schools and student subgroups are judged against statewide target scores every two years. Under the Safe Harbor/Gain Score

Massachusetts has been named the “smartest state” in the country based on the quality of its public elementary and secondary schools.

provisions, as implemented in Massachusetts, schools are given credit toward meeting AYP goals if average scores improve – even if those improvements do not push the school score above the state target. Safe Harbor/Gain Score allows schools to make AYP even if some subgroups do not meet the Statutory AYP

requirements, as long as those subgroups are continuing to make improvements at a prescribed rate.

Statutory AYP Results

This AYP method establishes a statewide test score target that increases incrementally until it reaches 100 percent proficiency in 2014. This target is the same for all schools and subgroups regardless of what their current scores are. A school score that is above the statewide target makes AYP, even if its score does not improve over the previous year.

The number of schools that will not make Statutory AYP – all students are proficient – in reading and mathematics for the whole school and for all mandated student subgroups is striking.

- In 2004, 758 schools (48 percent) failed to make the Statutory AYP target.
- By 2014, 1,567 schools (90 percent) are projected not to make Statutory AYP.

¹ For this study the Safe Harbor method and the Gain Score method are treated together as the results from both are similar.

Safe Harbor/Gain Score AYP Results

Both the Safe Harbor and Gain Score AYP methods establish incremental targets for each school and subgroup based on its starting point. Under these methods, schools that improve at the required rate are considered to make AYP, even if they do not reach the state target. In both methods, a school could meet the AYP requirement in 2014 without reaching 100 percent proficiency.

Consequently, this is a softer approach than Statutory AYP.

Compared to Statutory AYP, more schools are projected to make sufficient progress toward proficiency or to reach the Safe Harbor/Gain Score AYP – in reading and mathematics for the whole school and for all mandated student subgroups.

- In 2004, 384 schools (22 percent) failed to achieve Safe Harbor/Gain Score or Statutory AYP and are now subject to federal penalties.
- By 2014, 1,286 schools (74 percent) are projected to fail to make Safe Harbor/Gain Score or Statutory AYP and will be subject to federal penalties.

Student Diversity and AYP

Schools that make AYP are far less likely to have diverse populations. Schools with certain ESEA/NCLB defined subgroups – black, Hispanic, low-income or special needs students – are less likely to make AYP under either method.

- By 2014, 77 percent (990 schools) projected to fail to make AYP have one or more of these subgroups in numbers large enough to be counted.

- In contrast, 44 percent (203 schools) projected to make Safe Harbor/Gain Score AYP have these subgroups.

Student Poverty and AYP

One purpose of ESEA/NCLB is to improve schools for students in poverty. The federal statute defines high-poverty schools as those with at least 40 percent low-income students. Schools receiving federal funding through ESEA/NCLB are subject to increasingly prescriptive penalties for failing to achieve AYP goals. By 2014,

- 86 percent of schools with more than 40 percent of their students in poverty are projected to fail to make AYP. Such schools tend to be either in urban or rural districts.

While the failure rate is lower for more moderate and low-poverty schools, it is substantial.

- 69 percent of schools with poverty rates below 40 percent are projected to fail to make AYP in 2014. These schools could be found in any district in Massachusetts.
- 59 percent of schools, with less than five percent of students in poverty are projected to fail to make AYP. Many are in the Commonwealth's highest performing districts by many measures.

Massachusetts 4th graders and 8th graders are first in the nation in reading in the National Assessment of Educational Progress.



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