

Forecasting NCLB's Impact

The Education Policy Studies Laboratory of Arizona State University has just released a study entitled "The Impact of the Adequate Yearly Progress Requirement of the Federal 'No Child Left Behind' Act on Schools in the Great Lakes Region." The study attempts to project the rate of AYP failure by 2014 of schools and school districts in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin. Even using conservative estimates, an overwhelming majority of schools in these states are expected to fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress by the year 2014, a result that the researchers emphasize is likely to be repeated across the country.

Objections to NCLB

Authored by Edward W. Wiley, a professor at the University of Colorado—Boulder; William J. Mathis, the Superintendent of the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union in Vermont; and David R. Garcia, a Professor at Arizona State University, the study begins by introducing the much-debated "No Child Left Behind" Act (NCLB) and outlining the primary practical and philosophical objections to its requirements and implementation. The authors outline what they view as the act's primary error: its accountability provisions. In addition to the problems inherent in judging schools, districts, and states by the results of a single test that fails to give credit for improvement that occurs below the proficiency threshold, "...there is no relationship between the percent of schools identified as needing improvement by NCLB compared with an outside indicator of state academic achievement [the National Assessment of Educational Progress]."

Investigation into the analyses of NCLB implementation through 2005 reveals extremely variable accounts by different researchers of the law's immediate impact. The authors posit that this variability has resulted from states' learning to manipulate the data and mine the law's flexibility in order to gain temporary increases in the number of schools making AYP. They cite another author who has predicted a rapid decrease in that number over the next several years due to: the administration of the test to an increasing number of grade levels; the constant increases in state standards; the exhaustion of federal flexibility and state waivers; and the simple impossibility of certain categories of students reaching a level approaching proficiency.

Analysis of the Facts

Having cited evidence that predicts the increasing failure of schools under NCLB, the authors go on to support this hypothesis with statistical analysis. After reviewing the current status under NCLB of each of the Great Lakes states, the authors then use statistical projections (detailed in a supplemental report) to estimate the rate of failure to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the act over the years from 2005 to 2014. By projecting high, medium, and low growth rates for schools, the authors are able to identify a range of increasingly conservative projections. Several factors skew the projections towards higher levels of proficiency than may actually be realized: the study does not account for the possibility that a school fails AYP based on the attendance indicator; it looks only at ethnic minority groups, rather than ELL, economically disadvantaged, or special education subgroups; and it ignores the introduction of science assessments in 2007.

Despite these caveats, the school failure rates projected by the analysis are overwhelming. Progress towards high rates of failure vary according to the state's growth expectations under NCLB, but by 2014, each state was projected to see at most 17.6 percent of schools making Adequate Yearly Progress, with a percentage of schools

eligible for the safe harbor provision. These dismal results persist across the Great Lakes states, and are consistent for high-, medium-, and low-growth models.

Implications for NCLB

As the authors state:

Although states differ in the timing and rate at which schools fail to make AYP, the ultimate outcome is clear and consistent across all states: even in high-growth scenarios, states are likely to observe high rates of school failure relative to the annual objectives, especially as targets increase in later years.

They conclude that, based on these extremely high levels of failure, which reach across the states and into the most successful districts, it is clear that AYP does not accurately reflect a school's academic success, and further argue that relying on narrow test results ignores the myriad functions that public schools serve. They also emphasize that funding beyond the simple administrative costs of the law and a consideration of the social factors impacting test scores will be necessary to change the law's outcomes.

Beyond these more general conclusions, the authors make specific recommendations for improving the accuracy and usefulness of the Act. They argue that states must: improve the quality of their academic standards, and link them to external indicators; use value-added measurements to calculate AYP; make expectations for progress towards 100 percent proficiency more realistic; use confidence intervals and adjusted subgroup sizes extensively; and make adjustments to the law for students with disabilities, English language learners, and migratory students.

The authors emphasize the likelihood that these failure rates, which were consistent across states with different demographics and education programs, are likely to be replicated across the country. Their projections paint a bleak picture for the future of schools under No Child Left Behind.

Prepared by Nelly Ward, September 27, 2005