

The No Child Left Behind Accountability Bomb

by Kevin R. Kosar

[Op-ed published by EducationNews.org on September 5, 2006]

During her tenure as Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, has spent a good deal of time brokering deals with states. This is because states have been trying to craft their testing programs to avoid the sanctions imposed by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

NCLB offers states a deal—if they accept NCLB money, then states must see to it that all children score proficiently on mathematics and English examinations by the school year 2013-2014. States also must set academic performance targets that require schools to raise the percentage of students scoring proficiently each year. Schools that reach these targets are deemed to have made “adequate yearly progress” (AYP). In schools where the targets are not met, students must be provided with tutoring and public school choice.

Thus, there has been much wrangling between the states and the Department of Education over how many children must be tested, what sort of tests are to be used, and how the results may be computed. To her credit, Secretary Spellings has shown a willingness to find creative solutions to the various issues associated with AYP.

Unfortunately, all this patchwork fails to confront a fundamental problem with NCLB’s accountability metric. In short, AYP is a time bomb and it is only a matter of a few years before it detonates, destroying itself and making a real mess.

It appears indisputable that few schools will be able to get all their children scoring proficiently on their tests. Ask any school teacher and he will tell you that some of the children he teaches are struggling to learn. It could be a learning disability or a problem with brain development. Children who are bullied by peers, abused at home, or denied adequate nutrition may struggle academically. This teacher might also remind us that not all children test well.

In which case, it is only a matter of time before all schools hit what might be called a “sticking point.” A school might get 65 or 73 or 87 percent of its children testing proficiently but find itself stuck, unable to overcome these non-school factors.

Thus, it is only a matter of time before every school fails to make AYP. This will create quite a mess. School districts will have to expend huge sums of money to provide tutoring for children in all schools. Districts will also have to devise giant school choice programs, even though students will not have an AYP-reaching school to which to transfer. Parents, meanwhile, will be bewildered when they see all schools labeled as “in need of improvement.” As a result, AYP, the metric for measuring state and school accountability under NCLB, will cease to mean anything.

This is a daunting problem that needs addressed soon. The answer is not to return to the days of old, when the federal government handed over money to states and demanded nothing more than bureaucratic compliance (forms properly filled out, i's dotted, t's crossed). States should be held accountable for results. But how?

AYP might be repaired by adjusting its goal to better reflect the limited ability of schools to get all children testing at a proficient level. Concretely, that means lowering the goal of 100 percent proficiency. Perhaps, an amended NCLB might say, a successful school is one where 80 or 85 percent of the children are scoring proficiently in reading and mathematics. That would be a simple, incremental change, one that could fix many of the problems of AYP.

Or one might take a more radical approach—scrap AYP entirely. Federal education policy would move beyond state to federal accountability entirely. Such would seem to be the principle behind the “100% solution” being promoted by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. It proposes attaching federal money to every child, who may then use the funds to attend the school chosen by his parents. This would redefine accountability, replacing governmental-bureaucratic accountability with market-based accountability. Parents, if dissatisfied with one school, could send their child to another.

Secretary Spellings may wheel and deal for the short term, but it will not defuse the AYP time bomb. Congress must amend NCLB. Let the debate on how to do so begin now. The clock is ticking.

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