

RESEARCH BRIEFS

Brief #9

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Adequate Yearly Progress: Unrealistic and Unattainable

Since 2002, the average test scores of students on the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations (WKCE) have improved, yet the numbers of schools and districts identified as in need of improvement in the state also have increased. This has occurred because of the way Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is applied under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Law.

The Federal Role in Education

The U.S. Constitution does not address the issue of education. For most of our history, the federal government left education in the hands of the individual states. Beginning in 1965 with passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) this hands-off policy changed from one of limited funding with few strings attached to funding programs that were directed toward specific groups (e.g., children in poverty and individuals with disabilities). Over time, these funds were accompanied with numerous guidelines and rules, along with requirements related to monitoring, auditing, and reporting. Currently, about 7% of Wisconsin's total budget for education consists of federal dollars.

The No Child Left Behind law and AYP

The culmination of federal involvement in public education occurred in 2001 with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, commonly referred to NCLB. This law required all public schools receiving federal funding to administer state-developed standardized tests in reading and mathematics to 95% of students in each building and district. In addition, each school was required to meet AYP by having a specific percentage of students tested in each building and district score Proficient or Advanced on these tests. Students in selected "subgroups" also had to meet these requirements.¹ Schools, districts, and subgroups of students also had to meet other requirements, including those related to attendance, graduation, and test participation.

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In total, there are 37 separate AYP requirements for each grade level tested in a school.² If there are four grades (as is true in a typical elementary school), there are 148 separate requirements (4 x 37). If a school misses just one of these requirements, it has not met AYP. If schools or districts fail to meet AYP for two consecutive years, they are identified as in need of improvement.

Annual Targets for the Percent of Students Who Must Score Proficient or Advanced

As for the tests themselves, NCLB allowed each state the flexibility to develop its own tests and to establish its own definitions of what it means to be Proficient. In addition, states were allowed to indicate what percent of students in each school and district had to be Proficient or Advanced for each of the next 13 years, with one important restriction: 100% of students tested in each school, district, and “subgroup” had to score Proficient or above by the 2013-14 school year.

Establishing Performance Standards in Wisconsin

In February, 2003 a group of 240 persons, including educators, government leaders, and representatives of business and labor, met for a period of three days to set performance standards on the WKCE. When they set these standards, they knew that 100% of students in each grade level had to score Proficient or Advanced by 2013-14.

The general descriptions of the four levels of performance on the WKCE are as follows:³

- **Advanced:** Demonstrates in-depth understanding of academic knowledge and skills tested on WKCE for that grade level.
- **Proficient:** Demonstrates competency in the academic knowledge and skills tested on WKCE for that grade level.
- **Basic:** Demonstrates some academic knowledge and skills tested on WKCE for that grade level.
- **Minimal Performance:** Demonstrates very limited academic knowledge and skills tested on WKCE for that grade level.

The annual targets for the percent of students who must score Proficient or Advanced (shown below) were established by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction. Note that the targets increase in a series of steps, ultimately reaching 100%.

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Wisconsin's Targets for Percent of Students Required to Score Proficient or Advanced in Each School, District, and Subgroup, 2001-02 – 2013-14

Year	Reading	Mathematics
2001-02	61%	37%
2002-03	61%	37%
2003-04	61%	37%
2004-05	67.5%	47.5%
2005-06	67.5%	47.5%
2006-07	67.5%	47.5%
2007-08	87%	68.5%
2008-09	87%	68.5%
2009-10	87%	68.5%
2010-11	87%	79%
2011-12	93.5%	89.5%
2012-13	93.5%	89.5%
2013-14	100%	100%

Labeling Schools and Districts in Need of Improvement

If schools or districts fail to meet AYP for two consecutive years, they are identified as in need of improvement and subject to sanctions. Initially, sanctions include creation of a school improvement plan, use of Title 1 funds for supplemental services, notification of parents, and the opportunity for students to enroll in another public school in the district.

The sanctions become progressively tougher if a school or district continues to miss AYP, and may include the following: implementation of a new curriculum, replacement of staff, creation of a plan for restructuring, conversion to a charter school, state takeover, and privatization.

As we move towards 2013-14, the number of schools and school districts in Wisconsin and other states identified as needing improvement will continue to grow for the simple reason that the annual goals for the percent of students who must score Proficient or higher continue to climb.

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How Improvement Becomes Failure

When NCLB became law in 2001, those who understood the requirements of this legislation recognized its long-term consequences. They knew that in time nearly every public school in Wisconsin would be identified as in need of improvement (invariably referred to as a “failing school” by representatives of the media) because the 100% target is unrealistic and unattainable.⁴ This would occur even if test scores improved during this same period.

This is exactly what has happened. On the reading and mathematics tests administered to meet the requirements of NCLB, the percent of students scoring Proficient or Advanced has increased since 2002 (see the table below). However, because the percent of students required to score Proficient or Advanced also has increased, more schools and districts in the state are labeled as in need of improvement

Percent of Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced on the Wisconsin Knowledge & Concepts Examinations, 2002 – 2010

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	Gain: 2002 to 2010
Reading Grade 4	81.0	82.6	81.9	82.3	81.9	81.4	81.6	81.4	83.1	+2.1
Reading Grade 8	83.0	80.0	84.5	84.6	84.1	84.4	84.7	84.0	86.5	+3.5
Reading Grade 10	71.0	69.9	74.9	75.0	74.9	74.6	74.9	76.3	74.7	+3.7
Math Grade 4	71.0	74.1	72.5	72.6	77.3	76.6	81.0	80.5	79.4	+8.4
Math Grade 8	73.0	65.9	73.6	74.2	74.9	75.3	78.4	78.0	78.3	+5.3
Math Grade 10	69.0	69.7	71.7	71.6	70.6	69.4	69.3	69.8	70.9	+1.9

For example, in 2005-06, 87 schools failed to meet AYP. In 2010-11 the figure had climbed to 223. During these same years test scores improved slightly in four areas and were about the same in two.

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The number of schools and districts not meeting AYP will only increase in 2011-12 because 93.5% of students in each grade must score Proficient or Advanced in Reading; the figure for mathematics increases 89.5%. Two years later the figures climb to 100%.

Written by: Russ Allen PhD and Jeffrey Leverich PhD

End Notes

¹Reporting by separate subgroups is required for each school and for the district as a whole--if there are 40 or more students in the subgroup (50 if required for the category, students with disabilities). The subgroups are American Indian/Alaska Native; Asian/Pacific Islander; Black, not of Hispanic Origin; Hispanic; White, not of Hispanic Origin; English Language Learners, English Proficiency, Economically Disadvantaged, and Students with Disabilities.

² A chart showing AYP requirements is available online:

<http://mc2.nmsu.edu/community/documents/AYP34ways.pdf>

³ See the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction website: <http://dpi.wi.gov/oea/profdesc.html>

⁴ This will not happen to all schools and districts because the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction calculates the standard error for each group of students who are tested (including the school and district totals) and creates a confidence interval. As a result, some schools and districts will meet the 100% requirement because their scores close to 100%.