

CLOSE-UP

ON EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY



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INTRODUCTION

Louisiana's School and District Accountability System was recently ranked first in the nation by the national publication *Education Week*. Yet, students in the fourth and eighth grades ranked at the bottom of the nation in mathematics and reading on the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exams. The state has the reform structure in place, but a long way to go in improving student performance.

While many states ignored the 1994 federal mandates on standards-based instruction and testing, Louisiana went beyond the federal requirements and developed its own comprehensive accountability program. As a result, the state was better prepared to adapt to the mandates of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 at little added costs.

The NCLB Act requires a highly qualified teacher in every classroom by 2006; additional standards-based testing by 2006; annual yearly progress for all student subgroups and schools; a goal of having all students performing at the proficient level by 2014; and sanctions for failing schools, including school choice (transfers), supplemental services (tutoring), and restructuring or alternative governance.

The national furor over the potential costs and implications of NCLB pitted state governments against an inflexible federal administration committed to its rules. However, the U. S. Department of Education (USDOE) recently relented on several points, allowing the states some flexibility regarding qualified teachers in rural districts, testing students with cognitive disabilities, testing limited English proficient students and the 95% test participation rule.

Any major changes in NCLB will likely have to await the upcoming presidential election and possibly the 2007 reauthorization of the federal education law. Many states are anticipating significant changes, including an easing of the ambitious performance goal set for 2014. Louisiana is among the states that have "backloaded" their performance growth targets to require more of the growth to occur in the later years.

Louisiana is one of at least 14 states that had accountability systems in place prior to NCLB and now have dual systems. In most states, schools are much more likely to fail to meet federal improvement goals than their own state goals. By contrast, Louisiana's system has already identified as needing improvement most schools that are failing to meet federal goals. However, this could change in a few years, having a potentially devastating effect on the state's accountability program.

Louisiana has continued to adapt its system to the federal requirements with some positive results. New annual tests will allow better tracking of student progress; schools are focusing greater attention on student subgroups; and existing efforts to improve teacher quality have been energized.

PAR has monitored the development and implementation of the state's school accountability system, now in its sixth year. This fourth and final annual report in the "Close-up" series examines the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act on the state's accountability system and discusses concerns for the future.



Important changes made to the state's accountability system include: resetting performance goals, using the performance of student subgroups to rate schools, altering the schedule of rewards and punishments for failing schools, refining education standards to provide grade-level expectations and gearing the Iowa tests to the state standards. However, the state's system has become much more complex.

Adequate Yearly Progress



By far, the most significant change to Louisiana's accountability system is the NCLB requirement that schools demonstrate adequate yearly progress (AYP) for each student subgroup toward reaching the goal of proficiency by 2014. The original state system did not report subgroup performance for schools, much less use it as a measure of school performance. Rather, schools were only expected (1) to pass the state's performance bar and (2) meet their respective growth targets. Thus, in order to comply with the new mandates yet maintain its existing accountability system, Louisiana now requires schools to meet the state's original criteria as well as to ensure that all student subgroups demonstrate AYP. Student subgroups include economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, students from major racial and ethnic groups, and students with limited English proficiency.

Each state must set an annual goal in mathematics and English/language arts, requiring a minimum percentage of students within each school and student subgroup to score at the proficient level in both subjects. If any subgroup fails to hit the target for either subject, the entire school fails. However, the school may still make AYP under a "safe harbor" provision, which requires the subgroup to at least make acceptable progress. Acceptable progress requires at least a 10% reduction in the percentage of students scoring below proficiency.

In addition to safe harbor, NCLB rules provide two ways to lessen the impact of subgroup performance on a school's rating. First, to be considered a subgroup and included in a school's AYP score, a subgroup must have a minimum number of students (10 in Louisiana).



Second, a statistical technique called a "confidence interval" can be applied to the average sub-

group score, which creates a test passage range for each subgroup and makes it easier for a subgroup to demonstrate AYP without actually meeting the state's annual objectives. The smaller the subgroup, the larger the range. For example, if the state's annual objective requires 30.1% of students within a subgroup to pass mathematics, a confidence interval may create a passage range of 28% to 32%. Thus, only 28% of students in the subgroup must pass mathematics in order to make AYP.

Currently, AYP calculations are based only on testing results of subgroups in grades 4, 8 and 10. When new tests are added in 2006, students in grades 3, 5, 6 and 7 will be included in the calculations. As more students are added, the range of the confidence interval will become smaller and less useful in saving schools from being identified for improvement.

A school with AYP failure two years in a row must allow its students to transfer to another public school, requiring the district to pay for their transportation. After three years of failure, the school must offer supplemental educational services, or free tutoring. Finally, after five years of failure, the school is subject to reconstitution, ranging from staff changes to state takeover. Subgroup performance was first used in 2003 to evaluate schools, so it will be another year before schools can be placed in improvement due to AYP failure.

Thus far, Louisiana has not seen the high AYP failure rates that have troubled many of the other states with dual state/federal systems. For example, 87% of all Florida schools failed AYP, including many that were rated "A+" by the state system. In 2003, only 6% of Louisiana schools failed AYP. However, the state system identified a significant proportion of schools for improvement. Of its 1,377 public schools, 620 were identified because they either failed the state's performance bar or failed their growth target. In 2006, however, the number of schools identified as failing AYP is expected to rise dramatically.

Based on a random sample of school report cards, PAR estimates that about 360 additional schools would have failed AYP last year if they had not been saved by the use of one or more confidence intervals. Adding this number to the 620 already identified, nearly three-quarters of all schools could be identified for improvement within the next few years as the use of the confidence interval becomes less effective.

In addition, it is estimated that of the 620 schools in school improvement, half were also saved by one or more confidence intervals last year. Most of these schools are sitting in improvement level 1, because they are adequately performing schools that have simply missed their growth targets. However, if they fail AYP for two consecutive years, they will be moved into improvement level 2, where in harsher federal accountability sanctions are applied.

Recently, Louisiana joined 13 other states in requesting NCLB changes to allow alternative methods to assess the progress of subgroups. They argued that the current method would eventually identify a majority of all schools as failing and require a shifting of limited funding to bus transfers and to pay tutors. NCLB supporters suggest the estimates of failing schools were too high and that easing the requirements for subgroup performance would make it impossible to reach the goal of having all students proficient by 2014.

The question being raised in many states is whether these subgroups can realistically be expected to meet their growth targets over the next decade without forcing many, otherwise successful, schools into costly school improvement. Louisiana is one of as many as 15 states that have made the targets easier to hit, at least for the first eight years, by backloading the expected improvement. Many states obviously are hoping that the goals will be eased well before 2014.

Louisiana's improvement schedule requires subgroups to grow 5.8% a year on average from 2002 to 2010, but at an average rate of 14.6% each of the next four years to reach the 2014 goal. The slow rate of improvement in student performance in the past few years makes meeting these goals quite unlikely. In addition, it is mathematically possible for a subgroup in a Louisiana school to meet its growth targets each year until 2014, using safe harbor when necessary, and still have as many as 24% of its students scoring below proficient. Thus, the ultimate goal of NCLB may be unrealistic for several reasons.

Success of Louisiana's Accountability System

With the release of the 2003 school performance scores, Louisiana's accountability program completed its fifth year and second two-year cycle. Each year, schools receive a school performance score (SPS) calculated using a formula primarily based on student test scores. The 2003 scores again show some improvement, but the growth rate

is slowing for K-8 schools and high school scores have not risen as rapidly as expected.

For 2003, the average K-8 SPS of 83 exceeded the growth target of 81.6. The K-8 SPS grew 13% in the first two-year cycle (1999-2001), but only 3.9% in the next two-year cycle (2001-2003). In the last year, the rate of growth declined to 1.1%.

High schools entered accountability later than the K-8 schools. The first statewide average high school SPS was 75.9 in 2001. The score dipped slightly in 2002 and then rose to 79.2 in 2003, short of the goal of 80.

The scores indicate that the lowest performing schools have not been improving. Currently, 79 of the 1,377 public schools are labeled "Academically Unacceptable," the lowest rating. Seventeen of these schools (16 in Orleans Parish and one in East Baton Rouge Parish) have carried this label since 1999. Most of the 17 have received additional resources for several years, but to little avail. By contrast, twelve other schools that also received "Academically Unacceptable" ratings in 1999 have improved each cycle to avoid this label in 2001 and 2003.

Concerns for the Future

Thus far, the implementation of NCLB mandates has not required extensive changes in Louisiana's accountability system. Some of the problems ahead for the accountability system would have occurred regardless of NCLB.

Several aspects of the system have yet to be implemented, negotiated with the USDOE or tested in practice. These aspects, together with imminent deadlines for using new tests, applying sanctions and providing highly qualified teachers create a number of immediate concerns.

Serious long-range concerns about the future of the accountability system are posed by the potential collision between the slowing improvement in student performance and accelerating achievement goals. The current progress offers little hope that the steep increases in performance expected between 2010 and 2014 can actually be met.

A particularly difficult and continuing challenge will be to determine how best to deal with the state's chronically failing schools. A decision will have to be made regarding the reconstitution of 14 schools of this type later this year. Should state takeover be considered and, if so, how will its use affect public opinion regarding accountability?



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Perhaps the most challenging concern in the short run involves the NCLB requirement that all student subgroups make adequate yearly progress or AYP. While less than half of Louisiana's schools are now identified for school improvement due to a failure to perform or meet growth targets, three-quarters of the schools could be identified as failing in the next few years as AYP scoring gets tougher. Other factors, such as the slowing performance gains in recent years, could add more school failures. A massive increase in the number of schools identified as failures could result in a major shifting of scarce resources and destroy public confidence in the accountability system, if not in the public school system itself.

The progress to date merits continuation of the state's accountability system. But stronger reforms are required to meet the state's performance goals.

Conclusion

Louisiana's accountability system has generally benefitted from accommodations to the NCLB mandates. Some of the problems created are being mitigated by federal relaxation of rules, and further alter-

ations should and will be made as the 2014 deadline grows closer.

Currently, the NCLB mandates are not a significant problem for Louisiana. Failing schools are being identified, resources are being targeted and subgroup performance problems are being recognized. New standards and tests are being developed at little, if any, additional cost to the state. The federal law is a strong motivator to encourage state and local education reforms.

While Louisiana is adapting its accountability system to NCLB relatively easily and inexpensively, the cost of providing the education needed to meet the new student performance goals is still a matter of speculation. Other states have widely varying estimates of this cost to bring all students up to a minimum level of performance. Even if the appropriate level of funding were known, the state's resources are limited.

Since Louisiana first created its School and District Accountability System, PAR has strongly supported maintaining its integrity and giving it time to prove its potential effectiveness. Regardless of what is ultimately done at the federal level, Louisiana should continue to use its system to place accountability for improving student performance squarely on schools, districts and, ultimately, the state itself.

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