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## ABSTRACT

For many years, most states have had strategies to support and improve low-performing schools. The recent passage of the 2001 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA 2001) provides states with an additional opportunity to ensure all schools perform at least at a proficient level. The revised ESEA contains two main components that directly affect low-performing schools. The first component is that states must adopt a single statewide system to show that all students are making adequate yearly progress (AYP) within 12 years. The second component applies a series of intervention to schools that fail to demonstrate AYP over time. This policy brief provides a general description of ESEA's requirements involving AYP and required school improvement practices; describes various types of interventions put into play should a school fail to make AYP; a sampling of state opportunities to leverage ESEA to support low-performing schools, including the requirements to develop school improvement plans, provide onsite research-based technical assistance, use data as an means for improvement, identify promising practices, and promote early learning; and key policy questions for states to consider as they support the improvement of low-performing schools within the ESEA environment. (Contains 11 references.) (RT)

# No Child Left Behind Policy Brief Low-Performing Schools

By Kirstin Craciun and Ravay Snow-Renner

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NCLB Policy Brief

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# No Child Left Behind Policy Brief

## Low-Performing Schools

**By Kirstin Craciun  
and Ravay Snow-  
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This is the fourth in a series of ECS reports examining the impact of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the newly revised Elementary and Secondary Education Act on state policy and policymaking. Other reports will focus on leadership, literacy, school choice, state information systems and teaching quality.

For many years, most states have had strategies to support and improve low-performing schools. The recent passage of the 2001 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) provides states with an additional opportunity to ensure all schools perform at least at a proficient level. The revised ESEA contains two main components that directly affect low-performing schools. The first component is that states must adopt a single statewide system to show that all students are making adequate yearly progress (AYP) towards achieving a state-defined "proficient" level within 12 years. The second major component applies a series of interventions to schools that fail to demonstrate AYP over time.

The concept of evaluating school performance relative to making adequate yearly progress is not new to states. What has changed is that states previously had more latitude in defining AYP. For example, Alaska judges Title I AYP based on the goal of more than 40% of students scoring at the proficient level on the state assessment every two years. By comparison, Illinois bases AYP on annual gains with a goal of 90% proficiency on the state assessment by 2007 (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). The revised ESEA, however, requires states to set a common performance goal – of all students performing at proficient or higher levels – to be reached in 12 years. Under the new ESEA, state responsibilities for intervention begin with providing technical assistance to schools and oversight of supplemental education service providers to districts. They end with ensuring that a series of defined consequences are applied to low-performing schools. This brief provides:

- A general description of ESEA's requirements involving AYP and required school improvement practices
- A sampling of state opportunities to leverage ESEA to support low-performing schools
- Key policy questions for states to consider as they support the improvement of low-performing schools within the ESEA environment.

### **ESEA's Adequate Yearly Progress and Intervention Requirements**

#### **Adequate Yearly Progress**

Holding schools accountable for the performance of all students is a cornerstone of the new ESEA. Under the new law, this accountability is based on whether or not schools, districts and states are making adequate yearly progress (AYP) towards the goal of bringing 100% of their students at least to academic proficiency by the end of the 2013-14 school year.

To track progress toward meeting this goal, the new law requires states to establish expectations for AYP. As a basic example, a state could choose to measure AYP by taking the percentage of students who have failed to reach proficiency and then dividing by 12 - the maximum number of years the federal legislation allows schools to bring all students to a proficient level. Under such a system, if 60% of the students have not reached academic proficiency, then the state could define AYP to require that 5% more students must reach proficiency each year ( $5\% \times 12 \text{ years} = 60\%$ ).

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## Low-Performing Schools (cont'd)

Progress in reading/language arts and in mathematics must be shown for all student subgroups, including economically disadvantaged students, limited English proficiency students, students with disabilities, and students in major racial and ethnic groups.

Performance on reading and math assessments is the main indicator of whether AYP is being met, but graduation rates and at least one additional indicator for elementary schools (decided on by the state) must also be included.

The AYP provisions in the new ESEA provide a "safe harbor" option to avoid over-identifying low-performing schools. Under this option, schools that do not make AYP in all subgroups can be counted as making AYP if the number of students in any one underperforming subgroup decreases by at least 10% in a year. Barring this "safe harbor" option, states are required to consider any schools and districts that do not make AYP for two consecutive years as "low performing."

### Interventions

Low-performing schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) over time face a variety of interventions that become more drastic upon repeated failure to demonstrate improvement. The new legislation requires that:

- Schools that do not make AYP for two consecutive years receive technical assistance from the district. These schools must also develop a school improvement plan and provide students with public school choice options if allowed under state law.
- Schools that do not make AYP for three consecutive years are required to provide supplemental education services to low-achieving, disadvantaged students. The students' parents choose the service, which may include private tutoring.
- More serious sanctions go into place when schools have not made AYP for four and five consecutive years. These include corrective actions such as replacing relevant staff members, appointing an outside expert to advise the school, implementing a new curriculum or reconstitution.

Schools that states have already identified as needing corrective action will begin to have sanctions applied to them as early as next fall.

While some states have experience with applying these types of interventions to school districts and schools, other states will be entering unfamiliar territory. As of March 2001, 30 states sanctioned school districts on the basis of student performance and 32 states sanctioned individual schools based on inadequate student performance. Interventions for schools ranged from a written warning and technical assistance to state takeover. In 24 states, technical assistance has to be provided by the state or another entity to low-performing schools (Ziebarth, 2001).



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## Low-Performing Schools (cont'd)

### Opportunities To Leverage ESEA To Support Low-Performing Schools

Given the continuum of interventions schools face if they do not meet their AYP goals, the state role in building local capacity and improving low-performing schools is more important than ever. ESEA provides opportunities for states to create an effective support system for low-performing schools. Some examples of different strategies states can use to help improve the lowest performing schools include: requiring an improvement plan from the school, district, state or a designated entity; providing onsite expertise to schools; encouraging data use; identifying promising practices; or promoting early learning.

### Requiring Improvement Plans

ESEA requires schools that do not make AYP for two consecutive years to develop school improvement plans. Twenty-seven states already require low-performing schools to develop improvement plans. For example, low-performing schools in Delaware are required to submit a school improvement plan that must be approved by the local school board. The school improvement plan must include the curriculum to be used, a plan for the assignment of instructional and non-instructional staff within the school, a plan for staff and professional development, policies and practices to promote parental and community involvement in the school and other components.

Improvement plans may be a useful tool at the district level, as well as at the school level. Eighteen states require low-performing school districts to create improvement plans. Missouri has taken the approach of requiring all school districts to create a Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP). The CSIP must contain the detailed goals, outcomes or objectives that will guide district improvement efforts for at least a five-year period. The rationale behind the CSIP is for districts to be proactive in considering school improvement rather than reactive to school failure.

States may also choose to require that an outside entity, such as the state itself, create the improvement plan for a low-performing school and/or district. Thirteen states require another entity to establish an improvement plan for a low-performing school district and 18 states require another entity to create a school improvement plan for low-performing schools (Ziebarth, 2001).

### Providing Onsite Expertise to Schools

The new ESEA specifies that school districts must ensure research-based technical assistance is provided to low-performing schools that fail to meet their AYP goals for two consecutive years. Technical assistance must include help in identifying and implementing professional development and instructional strategies that have been proven effective through scientifically based research. States are also required under ESEA to establish school support teams and designate distinguished teachers and principals to work in low-performing schools.



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## Low-Performing Schools (cont'd)

States have already shown that they can effectively help districts by providing low-performing schools with onsite experts who can identify successful teaching strategies and areas for professional development. Kentucky's Highly Skilled Educators Program, formerly the Distinguished Educators Program, offers an example of how teacher networking can be a powerful capacity building tool to improve low-performing schools. Started in 1994, the program has trained over 200 educators to work with schools identified as low-performing by the state accountability system. An early evaluation of the program found that 63% of schools that were declining had moved into a position in which they became eligible for rewards in the next accountability cycle (Davis et al., 1997).

North Carolina provides another example of how experienced educators can help turn around low-performing schools. State assistance teams provide a range of services to schools designated as low performing, including help with creating and implementing school improvement plans and evaluating principals and teaching staff. Results from an initial evaluation of the program show encouraging results. During its first year, the state assigned assistance teams to 15 schools. Within the year 14 schools had reached their target for improved performance and 13 schools achieved improvement that warranted cash bonuses from the state (Achieve, 2001).

### Encouraging Data Use

ESEA also requires districts to provide low-performing schools with technical assistance in analyzing data from state tests and other examples of student work. States can build on this requirement by considering the role that additional data collection and analysis can play in raising student performance and diagnosing the source of problems. For example, yearly state assessments in reading and mathematics for students in grades 3-8 are required under ESEA. These can provide useful information about school performance over time, but the results will not provide ongoing daily, weekly or even monthly feedback for teachers and students. States can encourage districts to adopt policies making this and other achievement information more "actionable" for schools and teachers to improve student achievement.

States can also build on the ESEA emphasis on strategic data use by developing policies that support appropriate practices. Several states have been developing programs to support the use of data at the school level. California's Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program is an example of one state's efforts to support strategic data use for school improvement. Under the program, schools become eligible for assistance awards when they do not meet the state's student-performance targets. In the initial planning year, awards are to be used to hire an external evaluator to help with the development of a school-action plan. External evaluators assist with the collection and analysis of school demographic, process and outcome data, which is used to help develop the action plan. The second and third years are to be used to implement the action plan with the goal of improved student achievement and school operations.

Another example is Nebraska, where state officials have provided a variety of professional development opportunities targeted towards assessment and the strategic use of



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## Low-Performing Schools (cont'd)

achievement data. The data used includes a broad state assessment, but relies mostly on local assessments, often developed by teachers. The state provides practitioners with professional development about how to use the data from those assessments to improve instruction.

### Identifying Promising Practices

The revised ESEA provides impetus for states to promote promising education practices in several ways. It encourages low-performing schools and districts to focus on professional development and intervention programs that are shown to be promising through scientifically based research. It also has extensive requirements for public reporting about program progress, which can help states more easily identify the most effective programs.

In addition to the impetus provided by the new ESEA, states can draw on a developing research base on "beat-the-odds" schools. These schools, which can be used to identify promising education practices, do exceptionally well on student achievement when compared to schools like them in terms of student and community demographics. One group that identifies, disseminates and trains educators regarding promising practices is the nonprofit organization, Just for the Kids. By using state assessment data, every school in a state can be compared with the 10 highest-performing schools with similar students. This identifies the "opportunity gap" between similarly situated schools. The Just for the Kids web site, [www.just4kids.org](http://www.just4kids.org), contains data from several states, including Texas, Washington and Tennessee

In one study, Just for the Kids examined 17 elementary schools in Texas where at least half of the students were from low-income families (students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches) and had high test scores over a three-year period. These schools were compared to 15 average-performing schools that served similar students. The results provide evidence that schools with a high proportion of disadvantaged students can attain high academic achievement. By examining the promising practices used in these schools, states and teachers can get a sense of the strategies most likely to be successful.

### Promoting Early Learning

The new ESEA focuses on reading and mathematics achievement, with a particular emphasis on early literacy programs. Two voluntary programs, the Reading First Initiative (\$900 million for fiscal year 2002) and Early Reading First (\$75 million for fiscal year 2002), provide states with opportunities to help all students achieve reading proficiency by the end of 3rd grade. Research has shown that students who learn to read on grade level by the end of 3rd grade do better throughout their academic experience (Slavin et al., 1992).

Research also has shown that early childhood programs can produce a number of positive effects, including enhanced school achievement (Behrmann et al., 1995). For example, the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project identified 123 African-American children living in poverty and randomly assigned them into a program group that received an active learning program at age 3 and 4 and a control group that did not receive the early learning



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## Low-Performing Schools (cont'd)

program. By age 27, 71% of the students receiving the early childhood program had completed high school or equivalent certification compared to only 54% of those in the control group (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1993).

Some state approaches to promoting early learning include:

- Providing a voluntary pre-kindergarten program, free of charge, for all 4- or 5-year-olds in the state for one year. Georgia has taken this approach.
- Allocating early childhood funding to districts, but allowing the district flexibility in determining which programs are most appropriate for their students. For example, North Carolina's Smart Start program is a community-based early childhood program in which a combination of state and private funds are passed to local partnerships that administer funding and programs.
- Providing additional state funds to supplement the federally funded Head Start program. In fiscal year 2000, 20 states provided supplemental state funding for Head Start programs (Education Commission of the States, 2002).

### Policy Questions for States To Consider

States should consider a number of important policy questions to work toward improving low-performing schools within the context of ESEA:

- How many, and which, schools in your state are categorized as needing improvement or corrective action under the 1994 ESEA reauthorization? What are the implications of ESEA 2001 for those schools?
- What types of technical assistance has your state provided to low-performing schools? Which approaches have been most successful? Which have been less successful?
- What are "promising practices" in your state in terms of low-performing schools becoming high-performing schools?
- What state structures support the provision of supplemental education services such as directories of service providers? What criteria will be used to evaluate the quality of supplemental service providers?
- How will your state attend to access issues for geographically isolated schools and districts? For example, what choice options will be available to students in failing rural schools?
- ESEA provides an initial definition for low-performing schools. What type of additional information should be collected to identify school problems and target technical assistance to different schools?
- What is the state's ability to build local capacity for school improvement at various levels? How will current resources be leveraged?





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## Low-Performing Schools (cont'd)

- Does your state have policies that allow for the full range of corrective actions included in ESEA 2001?

The new ESEA establishes high standards for students, creates consequences for continued poor school performance and provides additional resources to promote student achievement. What remains to be seen are the supports and resources that states will provide to ensure that low-performing schools are given the best opportunities to significantly improve student achievement.

### Related ECS Publications

*No State Left Behind: The Challenges and Opportunities of ESEA 2001* (GP-02-01), 70 pages, \$12.50 plus postage and handling – Summarizes the ESEA 2001 law, looks at where the states stand in regard to requirements of the new law and suggests policy questions to consider when deciding how to respond to ESEA.

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