



Many States Have Taken a “Backloaded” Approach to No Child Left Behind Goal of All Students Scoring “Proficient”

Summary

The Center on Education Policy, an independent nonprofit organization, analyzed the interim objectives for student achievement established by states in their accountability plans for the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). These objectives lay out the percentages of students that must score at or above the proficient level on state tests each year, on the way toward meeting the law’s ultimate goal of 100% of students achieving proficiency by school year 2013-14. These annual objectives are used to determine whether schools and districts have made adequate yearly progress (AYP) under the NCLB accountability system.

We found that states have taken two main approaches in establishing annual objectives:

- Almost half of the states (23 states) have “backloaded” their trajectories for reaching 100% proficiency. In other words, they have called for smaller achievement gains in the earlier years of the trajectory and much steeper gains in later years, as 2014 grows nearer. Some of these states assume large, and probably unrealistic, leaps in percentages proficient of more than 10 points per year in the outyears.
- Another 25 states and the District of Columbia have adopted a more incremental approach that assumes steadier progress toward the 100% goal.

The two remaining states have blended trajectories that do not fit readily into the backloaded or incremental categories.

Although states may have had logical reasons for choosing a backloaded approach, it appears that schools and districts in backloading states are likely to have more difficulty making AYP than in previous years, and the number of schools identified for NCLB improvement in these states might rise.

Background and Information Sources

The No Child Left Behind Act requires each state to create a timeline to show how 100% of its students will perform at the proficient level on state tests by school year 2013-14. (State definitions of “proficient” performance vary considerably, as does the difficulty level of state

tests, so comparisons of percentages proficient should not be made between states.) Each state had to lay out a schedule of interim goals, which the law refers to as “annual measurable objectives” (AMOs). These AMOs indicate the percentage of students who must score at or above the proficient level on state tests each year—for example, 65% of students reaching proficiency in reading by 2004-05. Together, the AMOs create a trajectory of rising goals that culminate in all students scoring proficient in 2013-14. Schools and districts that fall short of their state’s AMOs for two consecutive years are cited as not making AYP. If schools and districts do not make AYP for more than two years, they are identified for improvement under the NCLB accountability system.

When the law was first enacted in 2002 and states had to submit NCLB accountability plans, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) strongly encouraged states to establish intermediate goals that required steady progress over time instead of requiring smaller rates of gain in the early years followed by sharply escalating growth in later years (Center on Education Policy, 2004). Despite this advice, ED approved many state plans that used a backloaded approach of calling for less improvement in the early years and much steeper gains later on.

School year 2007-08 marks the midway point between 2002-03 and 2013-14 and is a good time to take stock of states’ expectations for future achievement gains. To learn more about this issue, the Center on Education Policy analyzed the AMOs and trajectories for improvement contained in state accountability plans. This analysis complements the broader studies of state and local implementation of NCLB that the Center has been conducting since the law was enacted in 2002.

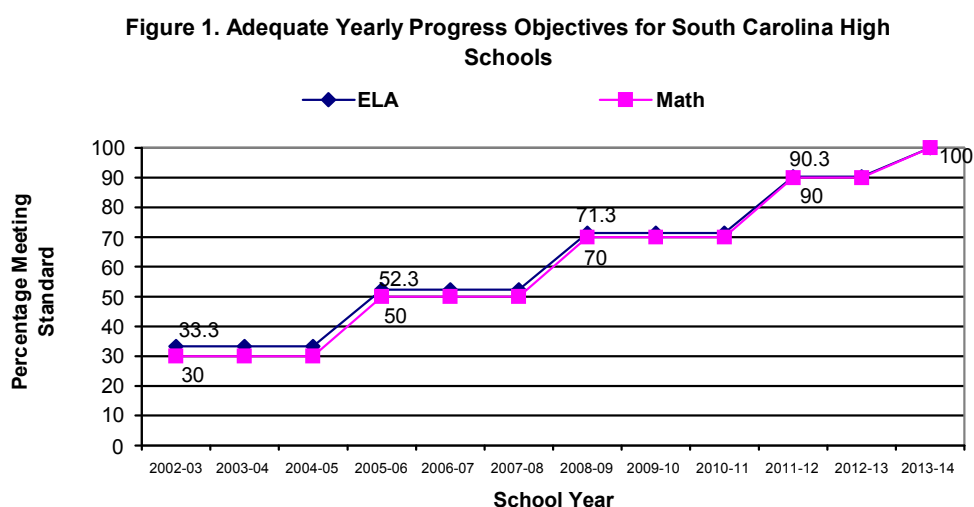
Most of the information in this policy brief comes from the state accountability plans posted on the ED Web site at <http://www.ed.gov/about/contacts/state/index.html?src=gu>. For eight states (Alabama, California, Hawaii, Indiana, Maryland, New York, Oklahoma, and Virginia) and the District of Columbia, the AMO information was not available on the ED Web site, so we retrieved the information directly from the relevant state department of education Web site. All the data were retrieved in January 2008.

State Goal Trajectories

Based on a review of the current accountability plans of all 50 states and the District of Columbia, we distinguished three different types of goal trajectories: incremental, backloaded, and blended. Each type is explained below and illustrated with figures and tables from specific states.

1. Incremental Trajectories

States with incremental trajectories require steady movement toward the 100% goal. The objectives for the percentage proficient might increase each year, or every two or three years, in roughly equal increments for the most part. Twenty-five states and the District of Columbia have adopted this approach. As an example, **figure 1** shows South Carolina's incremental schedule of AMOs for elementary math and reading. The state lays out increases of even increments every three years, but the increments are quite large—up to 20 percentage points every third year.



Source: South Carolina Consolidated State Application Accountability Work Book, retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/stateplans03/sccsa.doc>.

As another example of an incremental trajectory, **table 1** shows Tennessee's AMOs for elementary reading and math. Here the increments are smaller because the starting percentage in 2002-03 was higher.

Table 1. Tennessee's Targets for Elementary and Middle School Reading/Language Arts and Math (Percentage of Students Scoring Proficient or Above)

School Year	Reading/Language Arts	Math
2002-03 through 2003-04	77%	72%
2004-05 through 2006-07	83%	79%
2007-08 through 2009-10	89%	86%
2010-11 through 2012-13	94%	93%
2013-14	100%	100%

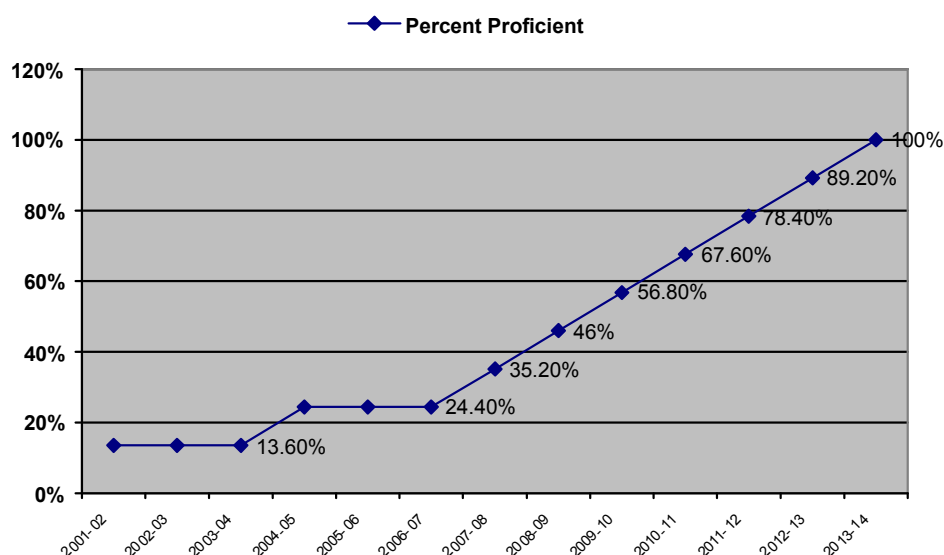
Source: Tennessee Consolidated State Application Accountability Workbook, retrieved from www.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/stateplans03/tncsa.doc.

2. Backloaded Trajectories

As explained above, backloaded trajectories require less progress in the early years followed by substantially higher gains in the years closer to 2014. Twenty-three states (45%) have opted for this approach. In the coming years, some of these states expect large gains in the percentage proficient of 10 or more percentage points per year.

Figure 2 illustrates a backloaded AMO schedule, using California's goals for English language arts at the elementary and middle school levels. Between 2001-02 and 2006-07, the AMO increases just once, from 13.6% to 24.4%. Then, starting in 2007-08, the trajectory assumes rapid and steep jumps of at least 10 percentage points per year until 2013-14.

Figure 2. California's Intermediate Goals for English Language Arts at the Elementary and Middle School Levels



Source: California Consolidated State Application Accountability Workbook, Attachment I, retrieved from <http://www.cde.ca.gov/nclb/sr/sa/documents/yr03wb0131atti.pdf>

Many other states have decided to wait until 2010 or 2011 to begin the steep portion of their AMO trajectories. An example is Oregon, which set the AMOs shown in **table 2**.

Table 2. Oregon's AYP Targets for Reading and Mathematics (Percentage of Students Scoring Proficient or Above)

Subject	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
English language arts	40%	40%	40%	50%	50%	50%	60%	60%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%
Math	39%	39%	39%	49%	49%	49%	59%	59%	59%	70%	80%	90%	100%

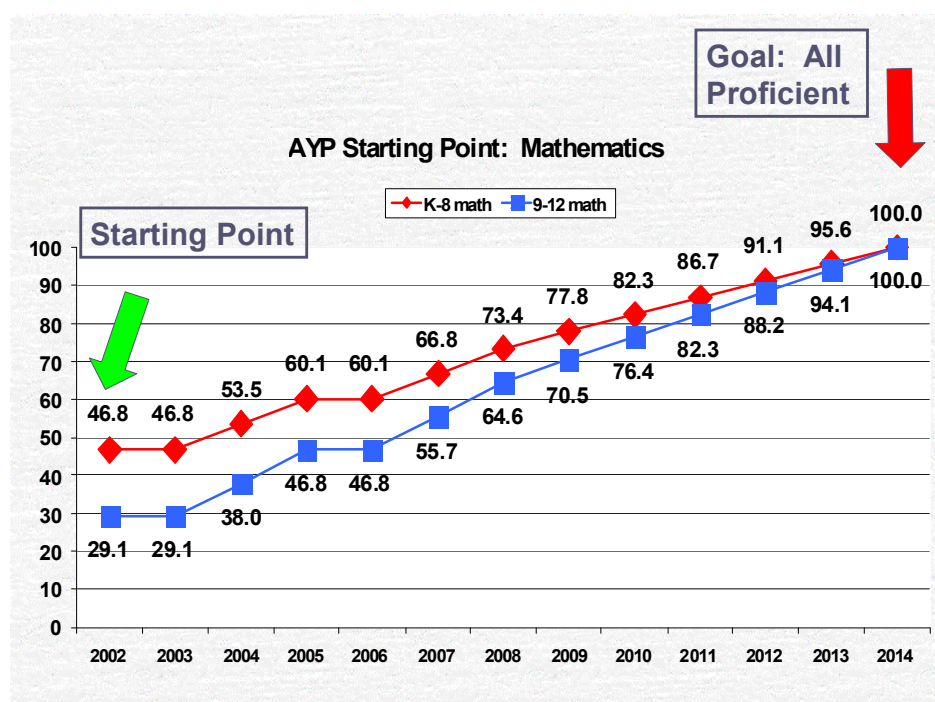
Source: Oregon Consolidated State Application Accountability Workbook, retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/stateplans03/orcsa.doc>

There are several reasons why states may have chosen a backloaded approach. Some states may have assumed that they would need a few years to implement new testing programs. Some may have wanted to give school districts more time to ensure that curriculum and instruction were aligned with state tests and that teachers received the necessary professional development. State officials may have felt that the positive effects of these efforts, as reflected in higher student test scores, would be more likely to appear in the outyears than in the early years. In addition, many educators have viewed the 100% proficiency goal as unrealistic, and some may have hoped that the goal would be reconsidered at a later point. A 2003 report from the National Education Association speculated that states were backloading large increases after the law's scheduled reauthorization, in the hope that the 100% proficiency goal would be relaxed (NEA, 2003).

3. Blended trajectories

Florida and Kansas have trajectories that do not fit neatly into either the incremental or back-loaded categories. Florida kept its AMOs low for the first three years, and then started an incremental schedule in 2004-05. Kansas has a mostly incremental schedule that does include a few years where the AMO does not increase, as shown in **figure 3**.

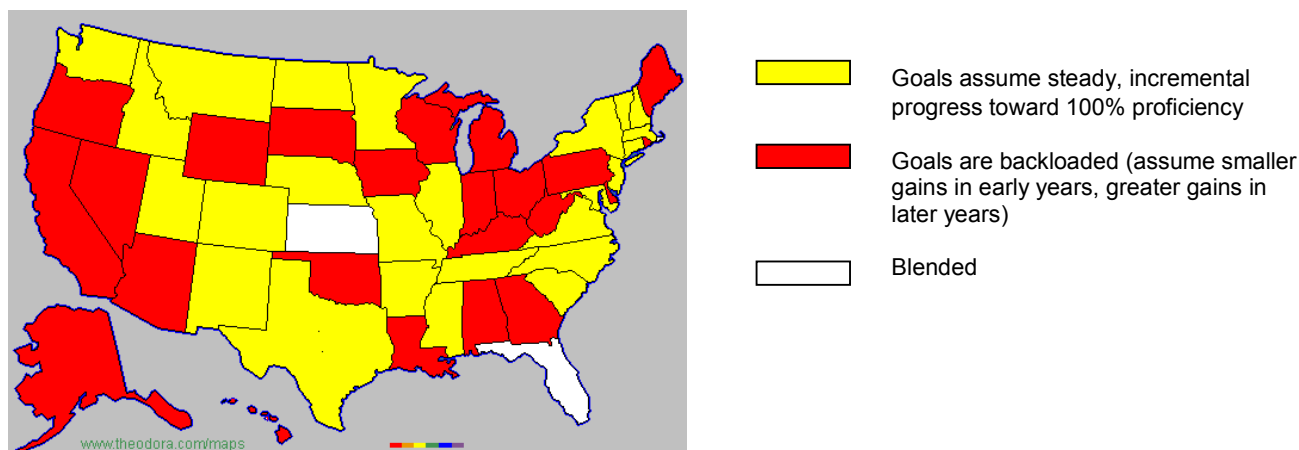
Figure 3. Kansas's AYP Targets for Mathematics



Source: Kansas Consolidated State Application Accountability Workbook, retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/stateplans03/kscsa.doc>.

Figure 4 shows the regional distribution of states with different types of goal trajectories, along with a list of the states using each type. In general, no clear regional pattern emerges in states' preferences for either the incremental or backloaded approach.

Figure 4. States and Type of Goal Trajectories



Incremental		Backloaded	Blended
1. Arkansas	14. New Hampshire	1. Alabama	1. Florida
2. Colorado	15. New Jersey	2. Arizona	2. Kansas
3. Connecticut	16. New Mexico	3. Alaska	
4. District of Columbia	17. New York	4. California	
5. Idaho	18. North Carolina	5. Delaware	
6. Illinois	19. North Dakota	6. Georgia	
7. Maryland	20. South Carolina	7. Hawaii	
8. Massachusetts	21. Tennessee	8. Indiana	
9. Minnesota	22. Texas	9. Iowa	
10. Mississippi	23. Utah	10. Kentucky	
11. Missouri	24. Vermont	11. Louisiana	
12. Montana	25. Virginia	12. Maine	
13. Nebraska	26. Washington		

Source: Center on Education Policy, analysis of state accountability plans and state annual measurable objectives, 2008.

Conclusion

Almost half of the states, 23 states, have backloaded their trajectories for meeting the NCLB goal of 100% of students performing at the proficient level by 2013-14. It is unclear how schools in these states will be able to produce large annual gains in the percentages of students scoring proficient. Consider the example of California (figure 2). Between now and 2013-14 the state hopes to increase the percentage of students scoring proficient in English/language arts by about 11 points each year.

States with backloaded trajectories are likely to have more difficulty meeting their AMOs than those that took an incremental approach, although states with incremental trajectories will probably have difficulty, too. A recent ED report to Congress on NCLB, *National Assessment of Title I*, indicated that most states would not reach the goal of 100% proficiency unless their percentages proficient improved at a faster rate than in the earlier years of NCLB (Stulich et al., 2007). According to this ED report, only 24% to 38% of the states, depending on the subject and subgroup, would meet the 100% goal based on their recent rates of improvement. The ED report did not break down states by type of AMO trajectory, but suffice to say that many states using an incremental approach, as well as those using a backloaded approach, will find the goal difficult to meet. The varying difficulty of state standards and tests must also be taken into account. ED's report provides some evidence that states with lower standards and easier tests will find it easier to meet the goal of 100% proficiency.

In the near term, one possible way out of this dilemma is through NCLB's "safe harbor" provision. When a school or district does not meet the state's AMO, it can still make AYP if it reduces the number of students below the proficient level by 10% from the previous year and makes progress on another academic indicator. It may be that the use of the safe harbor provision will become a more widespread tool for making AYP as the AMOs in some states increase dramatically over the next six years. The goal of 100% proficiency, however, may not be achieved in those states.

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