

# IMPACT OF THE FAILURE TO MAKE ADEQUATE YEARLY PROGRESS ON SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS\*

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## Abstract

Since the implementation of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002, the impact upon America's schools has been significant in many areas. In a positive sense, NCLB has caused schools and school districts to examine the performance and academic achievement of subgroups, often for the first time. This examination has certainly highlighted the fact that the academic performance of many of our subgroups is below that of students as a whole. Historically, when teachers and administrators examined standardized achievement scores, for example, they were often satisfied if their students were achieving at or above the national average. The review of cumulative test data often masked the poor performance of students in various subgroups. The implementation of NCLB has certainly changed that situation.

Based upon the overall requirements of NCLB, 100 % of the nation's public school students are to be meeting or exceeding academic standards by the year 2014. While states have been given some flexibility in the pace at which their students will meet these standards, the process is similar nationally. Increasing percentages of students must meet these standards on a graduated basis. Successfully achieving these standards is referred to as making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). The schools and districts not meeting these standards are being subjected to a series of sanctions, which become more severe with each year's subsequent failure.

The NCLB Act has been in existence long enough that some schools and districts across the nation are beginning to face sanctions. The first level of this penalty process occurs when students in a particular subgroup fail to make AYP for two consecutive years. As increasing numbers of schools and districts have reached the initial two-consecutive year failure stage, termed Academic Early Warning (AEW), reports of declining teacher and administrator morale have begun to abound. According to the principal of one school, "When you work in a school and there is a dragon in your backyard, you had better prepare for the dragon. The dragon, of course, is the accountability system..." (Craig, 2004, p. 1129).

Students, teachers, and administrators alike suffer morale problems in lower-performing schools. One failure leads to another, and soon, those in the school are caught in a downward spiral of emotions. Nichols (2005) addressed the phenomenon by stating:

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So, once a school has been labeled failing, the children of that school belong to a failure. Leaving that school may not be a real option for many of the children, so they are stuck in an inferior school. Further, each such labeling depresses the job quality of the teachers and administrators in those schools. (p. 177)

Beyond the morale issues, there seems to be a growing body of evidence that high-stakes tests are having unintended consequences on our nation's schools. A number of studies have shown that such tests can narrow the curriculum and seem to move instruction toward the teaching of lower level cognitive skills (Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey, & Stretcher, 2000; Koretz & Barron, 1998; Koretz, Linn, Dunbar, & Shepard, 1991; Linn, 2000; Linn, Graue, & Sanders, 1990; Stretcher, Barron, Kaganoff, & Goodwin, 1998).

The study outlined in this article is an outgrowth of the "narrowing" concept mentioned above. Specifically, what impact is the failure to make AYP having on selected school districts in terms of both school improvement and staff development efforts?

#### Research Design and Methodology

The survey was conducted during the months of February and March of 2006. The superintendents of 240 Illinois public school superintendents were asked to respond to a 30 item anonymous online survey regarding the impact of NCLB on their districts. The 240 targeted districts were those that had failed to make AYP for two or more consecutive years, as of the end of the 2004-2005 school years. These districts were identified from a list readily available on the website of the Illinois State Board of Education ( [www.isbe.net](http://www.isbe.net)<sup>1</sup> ). Only Title I eligible districts were surveyed. The superintendents submitted their responses to a secure server and once their responses were received, their email addresses were deleted. The superintendents of 63 Illinois school districts completed the online survey, which constituted a response rate of just over 26%. Surveys were received from a wide range of districts in terms of size of student enrollment, student ethnicity, and socioeconomic level.

Superintendents were surveyed regarding a range of topics and areas of information. First, the respondents were asked to address the demographic and socioeconomic nature of their districts. They were also requested to identify the student enrollment of their districts, and whether they considered their districts to be rural, small to medium sized communities, suburban, or urban in nature. They were instructed to designate the specific areas of AYP failure, as well as to identify the particular subgroup or subgroups that failed in those areas. They were also asked to divulge whether these failures had been at the individual building level, the district level, or both. Additionally, they were asked about the organizational type of their districts. Illinois is somewhat unique because state law allows for elementary districts, high school districts, and K-12 unit districts. Superintendents were also requested to comment upon the degree of funding that their respective districts received from the state in relation to local taxpayer funding.

Once the nature of the participating school districts was established, the respondents were asked to answer a series of questions regarding the types of changes, if any, that had been instituted in their districts in the areas of school improvement planning and staff development efforts. Specifically, they were asked to reveal whether their school improvement planning and staff development efforts were becoming more focused and more content oriented as a result of the failure to make AYP for two or more consecutive years. Additionally, the participants were requested to respond to questions regarding any changes in spending on staff development, any sources of outside assistance in their efforts to again meet AYP, and where they were in terms of the entire sanctions process. Were they being required to offer school choice and/or tutoring? Were all of their teachers highly qualified according to NCLB standards? What had been the reaction of their communities to their respective districts' failures to make AYP? Finally, they were asked to comment upon the impact of the failure to make AYP on their own lives and jobs.

#### Results of the Survey

There was a range of district types and service areas represented among the responding districts. Nearly 37% of the responding superintendents categorized their districts as rural in nature. Almost 27% said that their districts were comprised of small and medium sized communities. Just over 30% reported that they were suburban, and slightly over 6% called themselves urban.

Harkening back to the unique structure of Illinois public school districts, 45.3% of all Illinois school

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.isbe.net/>

districts are elementary districts, 11.5% are high school districts, and 43.2% are K-12 unit districts. Among the districts responding to the survey, nearly 24% of the districts were elementary districts, 17% were high school districts, and almost 59% were K-12 unit districts. It is clear from viewing the nature of the districts responding to the survey, the K-12 and high school districts are overrepresented and the elementary districts are underrepresented in the pool of respondents. These numbers would seem to confirm the folklore on the street that high schools and middle schools have often been the first to run into AYP difficulties.

The average free and reduced lunch count of the 63 responding districts was 34.5%, compared with an overall Illinois state average of 40%. The two largest minority groups represented in Illinois public schools are African-American students, at 20.3% of the total state student enrollment and Hispanic students, weighing in at 18.3% of the total. The percentage enrollment of these two subgroups among the responding districts showed an average African-American enrollment of 15% and a Hispanic enrollment of 15%.

Table 1 shows the student enrollments of the responding districts.

Table 1

Student Enrollments of Responding Districts

Under 500 students	3.2%
501-1000 students	12.7%
1001-3000 students	55.5%
3001-5000 students	15.9%
Over 5000 students	12.7%

Upon examining the areas in which the surveyed districts failed to meet AYP, 40 of the districts failed to meet the standards in mathematics and 35 failed to meet the goals in language arts. There is some overlap in the sense that some districts failed in both mathematics and language arts, accounting for a total larger than 63.

An examination of the specific subgroup failures proved to be quite illuminating. Whether in mathematics or language arts, students with disabilities constituted, far and away, the largest failing subgroup. This group was cited as failing to make AYP in 69.8% of the responding districts. Ethnic or racial subgroups failing to make AYP were reported in 27% of the districts, and low income students were identified as failing in 25.4% of the surveyed districts. Eleven percent of the districts cited failure among their Limited English Proficient (LEP) students and 1% of the districts stated that either their male or female subgroups failed.

Moving into the heart of the survey, nearly 62% of the superintendents reported that the failure to make AYP had impacted their school improvement planning either significantly or very significantly. An additional 28.5% reported that their school improvement planning had been impacted somewhat by their failure. In a related, but separate topic, 54% of the respondents said that AYP failure had made either a significant or very significant impact upon their staff development efforts. Another 36.5% stated that this failure had caused somewhat of an impact in the area of staff development. Specifically, the respondents' comments regarding the nature of the impact on school improvement planning are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2

Impact of Failure on School Improvement Planning

More Narrow Focus	55.5%
More Content Oriented	52.3%
More Teacher Involvement	43.0%

In an overwhelming fashion, the superintendents reported that both the focus and content of school improvement planning were increasingly being targeted towards mathematics and language arts.

In a related series of questions, superintendents were polled regarding the impact of the failure of their schools or districts to meet AYP upon staff development efforts. Their specific comments pertaining to this area are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Impact of Failure on Staff Development Efforts

More Narrow Focus	57%
More Content Oriented	59%
More Teacher Involvement	41%

Again, the superintendents reported that both the focus and content of staff development efforts were being increasingly directed towards mathematics and language arts. However, a third topic was commonly mentioned regarding evolving staff development efforts. Many districts reported an increase in training teachers to assist students with test-taking skills.

Fifty-seven percent of the respondents reported that their spending on staff development had increased, or increased significantly, as a result of their failure to make AYP. Over 77% of the surveyed districts had sought outside assistance to help with their AYP issues. About two-thirds of the districts had called upon their area Regional Office of Education and/or their Educational Service Center for help. These are intermediate levels of assistance available in Illinois under the auspices of the Illinois State Board of Education. Another 35% of the districts employed private consultants in their improvement efforts and approximately 14% utilized the services of university personnel. Some districts used multiple sources of external assistance.

Some of the districts surveyed were already involved in sanctions as a result of their AYP failures. A third of the responding districts had been required to offer school choice to their students. While most of this had been offered internally, within the district, over 12% reported that their students had been offered external choice. In both cases, students of chronically failing schools were given the opportunity to transfer to another school. A great majority of the districts that offered choice reported that fewer than 5% of the eligible students had taken advantage of this option. However, one school district indicated that up to 15% of the eligible students had exercised the choice option.

Nearly 21% of the surveyed districts have been required to offer tutoring services to their students due to their repeated failure to make AYP. Typically, these services have been offered by a variety of private firms. In most of the districts, less than 5% of the eligible students have taken advantage of the tutoring. However, in two districts, up to 15% of the students have availed themselves of this opportunity and two districts reported that up to half of the eligible students have been involved in tutoring. One district stated that over 50% of its students have participated in outside tutoring.

A major area of concern uncovered by the survey pertained to the issue of highly qualified teachers. By July 1, 2006, all public school teachers are required to be highly qualified according to NCLB guidelines. In general, being highly qualified means that a teacher holds the proper certifications for the areas in which he or she is teaching. However, each state must have its definition of highly qualified approved by the United States Department of Education. This was an area of significant confusion among the superintendents surveyed. When this survey was administered, just a few months before the federal deadline, 63% of the districts claimed that their teachers were highly qualified. However, over 25% of the districts stated that they had some teachers not meeting the highly qualified requirements and over 11% admitted that they were confused regarding this issue and could not give a definitive answer. Of those districts admitting that they had unqualified teachers, the reported deficits were in the following areas: special education, bilingual education, middle level teaching, recently employed full-time substitute teachers, and vocational education teachers. The special education and bilingual deficits were most frequently cited, with middle school certification running a close third.

Two final areas were addressed by the survey. The question of community reaction to a district's failure to make AYP, or to its admission that it is employing teachers that are less than highly qualified, was one topic queried. Interestingly, over 77% of the respondents reported that they had noticed little community reaction to this failure and only 22% reported a moderate community reaction. None of the responding districts reported a significant community reaction.

The final major area examined was that of the impact of the failure to make AYP upon the jobs of the superintendents of the failing districts. Seventy percent of the superintendents surveyed reported that this issue had brought about either a moderate or significant impact upon their daily professional lives. In this section of the survey, respondents were given the opportunity to provide unstructured comments via a drop-down box. The angst and frustration were evident in several repeated themes. Among these was the narrowing of focus of school improvement planning and staff development to mathematics and language arts, often to the exclusion of other subject areas, such as the arts. Respondents also frequently mentioned the feeling of loss of control on the part of teachers, which led to morale issues and increased anxiety levels. Some superintendents also expressed concern over the increasing amount of dollars that their districts were

spending on AYP issues.

#### Conclusions

One of the first findings of the study was that failure to make AYP is an equal opportunity employer in Illinois. In other words, districts of all sizes, ethnicities, and financial backgrounds are beginning to fail to meet the AYP hurdles in Illinois public school districts. The results highlight the fact that this struggle with academic achievement is not primarily an urban, or even rural, phenomenon. Indeed, the bulk of the districts failing to make AYP described their service areas as either small to medium size communities, or suburban. A similar pattern emerged in terms of student enrollments. While some very small and some urban districts did report AYP failures, over 84% of the failing districts had student enrollments between 501 and 5,000 students. Among these, districts in the enrollment range of 1,001-3,000 students led the pack, with 55.5% admitting AYP failures.

A number of authors have decried the impact of socioeconomic conditions on the ability of some districts to produce high levels of academic achievement and there seems to be the underlying assumption that most of the AYP failures are occurring in the poorer districts. For example, Burback and Butler (2005) claimed the following in one article:

One of these problems begins with the acknowledgement that high income districts receive many more applications for each position than do low-income districts. Another is that in districts with schools that serve families at both ends of the socioeconomic scale, teachers tend to seek transfers from schools with large numbers of children from low-income families to those with a higher percentage of children from wealthier families. (p. 26)

Another author (Mathis, 2005) is convinced that our educational problems are social in nature, and the solution must expand beyond the individual school building, or even beyond a school district. He further addressed the problem:

As any inner-city teacher can tell us (and many rural and suburban teachers as well), to pretend that schools can single-handedly overcome a lifetime of deprivation through a “whole-school action plan” or through rigorous and intensive adherence to a particular reading program is more an exercise in ritualistic magic than a realistic solution to social, economic, and personal problems. (p. 591)

Mathis (2005) later reinforced this theme by stating, “Six hours of instruction a day for 180 days a year cannot overcome the effects of a deprived and impoverished home environment for 18 hours a day, 365 days a year” (p. 592).

While it may be difficult to dispute the claim that socioeconomic factors have an impact upon student achievement, this study showed that all types of Illinois public school districts were failing to make AYP. As previously stated, the average percentage of students entitled to free and reduced price lunches from the responding districts was over 5 % below the Illinois state average. It is also instructive to examine the funding mechanism for Illinois public schools when examining this particular issue. Illinois, like several other states, uses a foundation level approach in its funding of schools. Illinois schools are funded through a combination of local property taxes, state funding, and federal dollars. However, all districts do not receive the same proportion of general state aid funding. In actual fact, the percent of state funding varies greatly, depending upon the local property tax contribution. In general, as the proportion of a district’s income derived from local property taxes increases, the corresponding proportion of the district’s revenues received from the state decreases. Typically, those districts relying more heavily upon local property taxes are able to spend more money educating each child in Illinois. With this in mind, it is interesting to note that 50.8% of the districts involved in this study, i.e., those failing to make AYP, reported that a majority of their funding came from local sources. Another 36.5% received a majority of their funding from the state, and the remaining 12.7% reported that their levels of local and state funding were fairly balanced.

An important finding of this study was that those Illinois public school districts that have failed to make AYP for two or more years have begun to make changes in both their school improvement planning and their staff development efforts as a result of their failures. Clearly, both school improvement efforts at the building and district level, as well as staff development efforts at the same levels, are now much more focused and targeted. More efforts are being directed toward improving teacher practice, and subsequent student achievement, in mathematics and the language arts. In this respect, it could be said that NCLB may be

beginning to have the impact desired by its framers in these districts. As with many issues, there are both positives and negatives associated with this approach. In 2004, researchers working under the auspices of the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University (Sunderman, Tracey, Kim, & Orfield, 2004) surveyed the teachers of Fresno, California, and Richmond, Virginia, regarding their perceptions regarding NCLB. The response rate was 77.4% and included teachers from schools making AYP and from those needing to improve. The authors commented:

In Richmond, we asked teachers “what overall effect do you think NCLB is having on your school?” Teachers in Richmond were divided about the overall effect of the law, perhaps reflecting the complexity of the law. Close to half the teachers believed that the overall effect of NCLB was negative, with 45.7% of the teachers in improvement schools and 47.3% in adequate schools responding negatively. But substantial numbers of teachers also thought the overall effect was positive, with 36.4% of teachers in improvement schools and 39.4% of teachers in adequate progress schools responding positively. Few believed that NCLB was having no effect. (p. 28)

This study adds to the previously mentioned concept that there seems to be a growing body of evidence that high-stakes tests are having unintended consequences on our nation’s schools. In a more recent study of four public schools in Chicago, Diamond and Spillane (2004) found that higher and lower performing schools responded differently to assessment results, when they stated:

In probation schools, responses focus narrowly on complying with policy demands, focusing on improving the performance of certain students, within benchmark grades, and in certain subject areas. In contrast, higher performing schools emphasize enhancing the performance of all students regardless of grade level and across all subject areas. (p. 1169)

In a study that was released at the same time that the results of this survey were being tabulated, the Center on Education Policy (2006) found a clear narrowing of the curriculum in response to NCLB. The study, which included 299 school districts with representatives from all 50 states concluded:

Seventy-one percent of the school districts we surveyed reported that they have reduced elementary school instructional time in at least one other subject to make more time for reading and mathematics – the subjects tested for NCLB. In some case study districts, struggling students receive double periods of reading or math or both – sometimes missing certain subjects altogether. Some officials in case study districts view this extra time for reading and math as necessary to help low-achieving students catch up. Others feel that this practice has shortchanged students from learning important subjects, squelched creativity in teaching and learning, or diminished activities that might keep children interested in school. (p. 2)

Some scholars believe that NCLB has taken us away from our historical roots in American schools – the education of the whole child. According to Noddings (2005):

Some people argue that schools are best organized to accomplish academic goals and that we should charge other institutions with the task of pursuing the physical, moral, social, emotional, spiritual, and aesthetic aims that we associate with the whole child. The schools would do a better job, these people maintain, if they were freed to focus on the job for which they were established.

Those who make this argument have not considered the history of education. Public schools in the United States – as well as schools across other different societies and historical eras – were established as much for moral and social reasons as for academic instruction. In his 1818 Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia, for example, Thomas Jefferson included in the “objects of primary education” such qualities as morals, understanding duties to neighbors and country, knowledge of rights and intelligence and faithfulness in social relations. (p. 8-9)

Many of the survey respondents echoed the sentiments of Noddings, and Jefferson, in their comments. They expressed concern over the narrowing of the school improvement and staff development foci in their districts. A common theme was that “the only thing we do is mathematics and language arts.” Several expressed concern over the lack of attention being paid to other subject areas – particularly the arts. At the same time, some of the superintendents saw a silver lining in the NCLB cloud and were determined to make the best of the situation.

Finally, the morale issue cited by responding superintendents seems to be of growing importance. Students, staff, and administration alike suffer moral problems in lower-performing schools. Superintendents

frequently expressed concern for the feelings of their staff in the era of NCLB. Their fear is that, soon, their schools will be caught in a downward spiral of emotions previously mentioned by Nichols (2005).

While most of the administrators polled certainly would not label their schools as “inferior,” they are struggling with what must often seem like an uphill battle. Increasing numbers of districts are consistently failing to make AYP for multiple years. According to federal guidelines, after districts offer school choice and tutoring, they must next move into the uncharted area of school restructuring. While some responding administrators are optimistic that they can meet the challenge, many of the superintendents surveyed would echo the sentiments of Popham (2005) when he said:

Although I’ve never been a death-row inmate awaiting execution, I can imagine how such prisoners must feel, as they watch their attorneys exhaust, one by one, all eligible appeals. Even though public school educators in the United States may not realize it, they are now facing a similar end-of-the-line scenario with respect to adequate yearly progress (AYP), the accountability cornerstone of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). (p. 85)

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