



National School  
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# NCLB ActionAlert

TOOLS & TACTICS FOR MAKING THE LAW WORK

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## AYP—What School Boards Need to Know

*'Adequate yearly progress' and your governance role*

By Michael A. Resnick

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has quickly become a driving force in public education. It holds schools and school districts accountable for the academic performance of their students in language arts and math—including accountability for target populations whose achievement levels might otherwise be overlooked. This accountability system, which is the heart of the law, is based on a method of measuring achievement called Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

In order for school board members to meet their governance responsibilities under NCLB, it is vital that they understand three things:

- The principles behind AYP
- How to use AYP in their role as education policy makers
- How to communicate AYP to parents, the media, and the public, as well as to state leaders.

This issue of *Action Alert* is designed to address these points. It also identifies “hot spots” in the system that are causing a substantial number of schools to be officially identified as not making AYP—or “in need of improvement.”

Basically, NCLB provides states with a federal framework for implementing AYP. Each state has the responsibility to determine precisely how AYP will operate within its own accountability system—subject to a stringent approval process by the U.S. Department of Education (DOE).

For that reason, this issue will also provide you with insights into the operation of your state’s plan—including identifying approaches that were approved for some

states that could be attractive in your state.

### Why is understanding AYP so important?

Under NCLB, your school district and schools are now held accountable for yearly increases in the percentage of children who must score at the proficient level or above on your state’s language arts and math assessments. By the 2013-14 school year, 100 percent of your students must

progressive series of interventions if they fail to make AYP for two years or more. At the building level, these interventions start with allowing students to transfer to another school. Ultimately, they can lead to restaffing or closing the school or converting it to a charter school.

Similarly, over a period of years, school districts can be taken over or redesigned by the state if other interventions do not result in achieving AYP on a districtwide basis.

Federal officials like to emphasize that if a school doesn’t make AYP—or if it doesn’t do so for two years or more and



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reach proficiency. The exact percentage that must be reached in any given year is called Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

Districts and schools are held accountable for achieving AYP through the publication of annual report cards showing how well they did. Specifically, they must report the percentage of students scoring along a spectrum of achievement that includes at least four designations: below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced. If they fail to make AYP for two successive years, they will be identified as needing improvement.

In addition to this public scrutiny, those schools and districts that receive federal Title I funds are also subject to a

enters improvement status—those designations should not be equated with “failure.” But the local media and parents are likely to make the connection anyway and consider schools failing if they don’t make AYP—especially those schools that are also identified as needing improvement. Particularly in Title I schools where all parents will have the choice to send their children elsewhere, the message of failure for not making AYP is quite clear.

Given this level of accountability, attaining the proficient level for the requisite percentage of students will drive local achievement strategies and priorities for many school boards. By understanding how the AYP measurement system really

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## About NSBA

The National School Boards Association is the nationwide advocacy organization for public school governance. NSBA's mission is to foster excellence and equity in public elementary and secondary education in the United States through local school board leadership. Founded in 1940, NSBA is a not-for-profit federation of state associations of school boards across the United States and the school boards of the District of Columbia, Hawaii, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

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The National Affiliate Program extends NSBA's services directly to local school districts. School districts are eligible to join provided they are members in good standing of their state school boards associations.

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works, your school board can more effectively address weak areas in student performance, avoid negative consequences, and build public understanding about AYP—including some very serious flaws with the program.

## How does AYP work?

Using a federal formula, the AYP percentage that your state developed applies to the state as a whole, as well as to each school district and individual school. Specifically, NCLB required your state to establish a beginning percentage of students who had to make AYP for the 2002-03 school year, and then, for each subsequent year, raise that level by equal increments so that in the 2013-14 school year, 100 percent of all your students would be required to score at proficient or above in language arts and math.

By the 2005-06 school year, your state must have fully phased in testing for those subjects in grades three through eight and once at the high school level.

In designing their AYP programs, states have limited flexibility, subject to federal approval. For example, a state can raise the AYP percentage every three years instead of annually. However, in the third year it must be at the same level as though equal adjustments were made each year. In other words, states can hold the AYP percentage constant for two years and then take a big jump in the third.

One current benefit of this option is that school districts and schools would not have to immediately raise their annual AYP percentage while adjusting to the new system, which might include introducing new assessments or curriculum for the subjects and grade levels involved.

States also can provide school districts and schools with some flexibility to average their AYP scores across years and grade levels. Thus, a single bad year would not necessarily mean a school or district would not make AYP. For example, low scores caused by the impact of redrawing school boundary lines, the influx of a new language group, or weak performance at one grade level could be averaged against performance in other years or grades.

The following questions address specific aspects of AYP that school board members should understand.

## Are schools accountable for targeted groups?

In addition to determining whether students, as a whole, in a school district or

school are making AYP, the law also requires that AYP must be met by each of four academically targeted groups: (1) students from the state's major racial or ethnic groups, (2) students living in poverty, (3) students who have limited English proficiency, and (4) students with disabilities. Students in racial and ethnic groups can be further disaggregated into their individual subgroups.

If any one of these groups (or subgroups) of students in a school or district fails to make AYP, the entire school or district can ultimately be identified as needing improvement. This will be the case even if the school district or school as a whole—including all of the other targeted groups—makes AYP.

Some options are provided, however. Most prominently, the law provides a "safe harbor" provision in recognition that, for some groups, the percentage of students who can be expected to make AYP may be currently so low that it not reasonable to expect that the group will make AYP in the first year or progress quickly enough to close the gap in the early years as the AYP threshold rises.

In such cases, states can treat school districts and schools that don't make AYP for the four targeted groups as having reached the bar if the percentage of students who don't make AYP from each of those groups drops by at least 10 percent from the previous year.

## What about reliability of results?

If test scores are to be reliable for assessing the performance of a group of students, the group must be large enough so that if the test were given several times, the group as a whole would score the same. In other words, if some students are having a bad day or a lucky day, enough students should be tested so that those individual variations won't influence whether the group as a whole makes AYP.

The minimum number of students needed for test reliability will depend on the test and what the state asked for in its plan. Typically, this number, or N, is set at 30 or 40, but some states have set larger or smaller numbers.

What happens if the size of a targeted group (or subgroup) of students in a school is smaller than this "minimum N"? In those instances, the group is not identified as its own unit for determining AYP because the number of students is too small for the group results to be reliable. However, the students would still be counted in determining whether the next

larger sized group to which they belong made AYP.

For example, if a state's minimum N is 40 and a particular school enrolls only 25 Hispanic students, those students would not be counted as a subgroup. But if the total number of students in the school is 40 or more, the school would be held accountable for the performance of those Hispanic students as part of the AYP count of all the students.

Similarly, if the number of students in a group or subgroup in the district as a whole meets the state's minimum N, the district would be accountable. So while each school may wind up not being accountable for AYP for a specific group, the school district as a whole may.

Clearly, the minimum N can play a big role in determining whether a school or even a school district will be held accountable for making AYP.

#### **Which students are scored for AYP?**

If a student is enrolled in a school for less than a "full academic year," that student's test results will not be scored for calculating AYP. The number of school days constituting a "full academic year" for AYP purposes is determined by each state, subject to approval by the U.S. Department of Education.

While that number can be substantially fewer days than the typical 180 days in a school year, they can span more than an academic year. For example, in some states the period is defined as beginning with the date of the previous year's assessment. Hence, a full academic year in these states is counted from assessment period to assessment period. Clearly, this provision will influence AYP in some schools—especially those that have high family mobility from year to year.

Students who transfer from one school to another might not have their test scores counted for determining AYP at their new school. However, their scores would be counted in determining the school district's AYP if they transferred between schools within the district. Therefore, at the district level, high family mobility can pose additional challenges in achieving AYP.

But when students transfer into the district from another district, state, or country, their scores would not be counted in calculating the school district's AYP if they were enrolled for less than a full academic year. In other words, schools and school districts are being given an accountability grace period (as determined

by the state) in recognition of the challenge of adjusting new students to the curriculum and overcoming any deficiencies they may have experienced elsewhere.

For migrant students who spend most of the school year in another state, arrangements can be made to give them their previous state's assessment. However, their scores are not counted for AYP purposes if the students did not reside in that state or school district for a full academic year.

#### **How are participation rates figured?**

Regardless of whether the requisite percentage of students score at the proficient level, a school or school district will not make AYP if fewer than 95 percent of its students who should take the state assessment actually do so. The 95 percent participation rule applies to each targeted group of students as well as to students in general.

Students must be counted for participation rate purposes if they are enrolled on

the day of the test even if they were not enrolled in their school or school district long enough to have their score count for AYP purposes. However, if a student answers some questions, but not enough to provide a meaningful test score, generally that student will still be counted as having participated.

#### **Can AYP indicators be combined to determine need for improvement?**

Generally, if a school fails to make AYP for a specific group in one subject for just one year and then fails to make AYP in that subject for a different group the next year, it will be identified as needing improvement.

Under some state plans, if a school fails to make AYP on the basis of its participation rate in a subject in one year, and then fails to achieve AYP on the basis of its test scores for that subject in the next year, it can be designated as needing improvement. (Remember, for Title I schools, that designation will involve such interven-

### **THE ROLE OF TESTING**

Clearly, AYP is an important high-stakes measurement system that will determine whether a school or school district has succeeded or failed in educating students in language arts and math. But as important as the quality of that measurement system is, so is the quality of the actual state tests on which the calculation of AYP is based.

Because the area of testing and assessment is so specialized, there is a tendency to accept state tests as accurate and complete measures of student performance. School board members should recognize, however, that many aspects of testing are not technical. In discussions of AYP and their state tests, board members should ask such questions as these:

- Do our state's tests cover all of the specific content standards or only some of them?
- If only some of the standards are covered, do our teachers know which areas of content knowledge and skills will be tested?
- Are the specific content standards clear enough that teachers will know what is expected of students?
- Is information available on how students answered individual test questions so that our teachers can use

the results diagnostically to determine areas in which teaching and learning need to be strengthened?

- Is that information available schoolwide, for specific classes, or for specific students?
- Do our teachers have the means available to assess students before the state test is administered?
- What is the full range of indicators, both test scores and other factors, that we use to evaluate our schools?
- In subjects tested for AYP purposes, as well as other subjects, do we use local assessments to ensure that priority treatment will also be given to areas of curriculum, whole subjects, and rigor of student performance that are important to our community but not reflected on the state test?
- To what extent is the testing and accountability system supporting or hindering student achievement and the general learning environment for our students?

For a more thorough treatment of testing and the role of the school board, see NSBA's publication *The Educated Student: Defining and Advancing Student Achievement*, available through the Online Bookstore at [www.nsba.org](http://www.nsba.org).

tions as offering transfers to all students in the school.)

Other states will identify schools for improvement only if they miss AYP on the same indicator two years in a row.

Although they are not required to, states can use other combinations that can identify schools as needing improvement, such as alternatively failing to make AYP in different subjects—that is, failing in math one year and in reading the next. How some of these combinations are to be treated will be determined by future federal guidelines, in addition to what states asked for in their plans.

#### What about state plans?

Each state plan contains its own nuances regarding these and other AYP factors. All states have at least obtained the Department of Education's conditional approval for their AYP plans, leaving some aspects open to further development and negotiations.

Although this issue of *Action Alert* deals with the determination of AYP on the basis of test scores, it is important to recognize that schools and school districts also must make adequate yearly progress on their graduation rates and other academic indicators selected by the state, such as attendance rates. Here, too, there are statistical complexities and variations from state to state.

To fully understand the operation of AYP in your state, it would be helpful to obtain materials that summarize your state's plan, the problem areas, and oppor-

tunities for improvement. Consult your state school boards association for assistance in this area.

#### AYP 'hot spots'

Despite variations in state plans, many local school officials are concerned that AYP will be calculated in a manner that can unfairly identify schools, as well as specific groups of students, as not making the grade—which, in the case of Title I schools also puts specific interventions into place.

This section and the next identify the most common concerns that have been raised about AYP. By reviewing these items, school board members can gain a better practical understanding of how AYP operates—including how their own experience compares with that of school districts elsewhere.

The first set of concerns has to do with the general design of AYP.

#### The long run

By NCLB's 12th year, 100 percent of all students must make AYP. As laudable as that goal sounds, it is statistically and realistically impossible to achieve it.

Ultimately, all schools and school districts will be designated as needing improvement even if all students but one are performing substantially above a rigorous standard of proficiency.

#### Focus on proficiency

Under NCLB, accountability is focused on raising the achievement levels of lower-achieving students to the level of profi-

cient. Although that is an important objective, the law does not hold schools accountable for raising the achievement levels of students (or schools) who can easily perform at proficient or beyond. (Report cards will show the number of students at the advanced level, but that is not the emphasis of the program.)

#### Cut scores vs. progress

AYP is aimed at the singular determination of whether a student reaches a "cut" score that has been labeled proficient. This is an important measure since it reflects whether the student has command of math and language arts at each grade level.

However, in terms of determining whether a school or school district needs improvement, other equally or more relevant measures are being discounted—such as progress. For example, if a school closes the achievement gap for students who were 8 months behind to 1 month behind in the span of a year, does the school really need improvement?

#### Concerns in calculating AYP

In addition to these general concerns about the design of AYP, there are concerns about how it is calculated.

#### Participation rate

Despite test scores, if 95 percent or more of students don't participate in the assessment, the school or district will fail to make AYP—regardless of parent opt-out laws or student absenteeism beyond



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the school or district's control. The 95 percent requirement poses special problems for schools with smaller groups, where the absence of just two students from a group of 30 on test day can cause an otherwise high-performing school to be placed on a watch list or identified as needing improvement.

#### **Multiple counts of students**

A student who speaks limited English or none at all may also be identified as low-income, disabled, or as a member of an ethnic group. As such, that student could be counted as belonging to as many as four groups for AYP purposes. Students who belong to multiple groups are likely to have more challenges than students who fall into one group or no group at all. Therefore, by being counted several times, these students carry disproportionate weight in determining whether a school or school district is making AYP.

#### **Schools with multiple groups**

Schools and school districts with a relatively large number of groups will have more special challenges in making AYP than schools with homogeneous student populations or even those with just a few groups. Indeed, the failure of a single group or subgroup can cause the school or school district to be identified as not making AYP—even if the number of students involved is insignificant. As seen earlier, if different groups fail to make AYP in successive years, it's possible for the school to become subject to interventions—even if the specific group that started the chain the first year makes AYP in each subsequent year. In short, schools with multiple groups of students have more ways of not making AYP.

#### **Students with disabilities**

NCLB recognizes that some students with disabilities may be functionally unable to meet high academic standards. Specifically, it allows those students who meet the definition of "most significant cognitive disability" to be given alternative assessments, based on their individual performance expectations.

If such children attain proficient on their alternative assessment, it will be counted as making AYP. The number of students scored that way cannot exceed 1 percent of all students in the grade assessed. However, a special rule for the 2003-04 school year allows the 1 percent limit to be exceeded for students who were assessed against instructional levels rather than grade levels

in the 2002-03 school year.

Under a revised federal regulation, states can now define "most serious cognitive disability." Hence, a wider range of cognitively challenged students (such as the medically fragile or those with emotional disabilities) can have their alternative assessment counted under the 1 percent limit. Previously, an IQ of 75 might not have been considered functionally limited enough to meet the federal definition. Unfortunately, the practical impact of including more students within the definition might be offset by the 1 percent limit in calculating AYP.

#### **Limited English Proficient (LEP) students**

LEP students, who by definition are not able to achieve AYP on assessments given in English, are classified as a group for determining AYP. Although NCLB allows these students to be tested in their primary language, many states do not yet have assessments available to cover the full range of language groups involved or, in some cases, even for more common languages such as Spanish.

What's more, some students come to the United States with little or no education in their native language, making it especially challenging to achieve high standards—and even more so among older students. Additional challenges are presented when students migrate back and forth to their native country—or move from one state to another state with different standards and curriculum.

Meanwhile, when students attain proficiency in English, they are no longer included in calculating whether the language group in which they were being served achieved AYP. In other words, the school does not receive "group credit" for its success.

At the same time, new LEP students can enter that group each year. They may be just as limited in English (and educational achievement overall) as their predecessors originally were—except that the percentage who must make AYP will continue to rise to 100 percent by 2013-14 school year.

#### **Is Washington fixing the problems?**

Both Congress and the White House have opposed fixing the flaws in AYP through legislation, administrative regulation, or granting individual waivers to the states. In a less visible manner, however, individual states have been granted limited flexibility in their AYP plans, reducing the unintended negative impact for some.

This flexibility varies from state to state. In part this is because some states pushed hard for flexibility in areas where other states wanted a more rigorous approach to accountability. And some ideas that were submitted and rejected early in the process may have been rethought and approved for other states.

Following are the most significant areas in which some states were granted flexibility. You may wish to check your state's plan to see if any of these items were proposed and granted to your state—and if flexibility wasn't granted, why not.

**1. Stair-step approach.** Generally states were given approval to raise AYP in three-year blocks, with the AYP percentage staying level for two years and then increasing enough in the third year to reach the same level it would have reached if the percentages increased in equal steps over three years.

**2. Indexing.** Rather than tying AYP to a percentage of students who score at proficient or above, some states can use an indexing system that gives credit for students who progress from below basic to basic but still score below proficient.

**3. Minimum N.** Some states were allowed to set their minimum N at higher levels for subgroups than for students as a whole. In setting a higher minimum N for groups, Texas and California were allowed to set their N at 100 and 200 for subgroups that constitute below 15 percent or 10 percent, respectively, of their student body. In those states, if the subgroup exceeds those percentages, the minimum N is 50.

**4. Confidence intervals.** Some states were allowed to use confidence intervals. In testing, confidence intervals are like the plus-and-minus range that usually accompanies percentage scores in public opinion polls. As the group that is polled gets smaller, the plus-and-minus range expands because the results are less reliable.

In AYP, confidence intervals are particularly relevant to a group that, while large enough to meet the minimum N, is still so small that the percentage of students who score at a particular level would vary within a statistically acceptable range each time the test was given. In practical terms, this means such a group can still make AYP even if the percentage of students who score at proficient or above is smaller than the percentage otherwise required by the state but is still within that acceptable range. In other words, confidence intervals work to help schools make AYP.

**5. LEP students.** Some states were given approval to count students as hav-

ing limited English proficiency for an additional two or three years after they score at the proficient level because the testing is considered to be a continuing service for monitoring purposes.

**6. Students with disabilities.** States that previously provided alternative assessments for students who did not have a “most significant cognitive disability” were given leeway to do so for the 2003-04 school year. At least one state has been given approval to allow students who make AYP and leave their disability group to continue to be counted in determining the group’s AYP score as long as they receive monitoring or support services under IDEA.

**7. Small schools/small groups.** Rather than lowering the minimum N in small or rural schools where the enrollment is below the state’s minimum N, approvals have been given to allow these schools to average their subject scores across grades or across years in order to count enough students to make the minimum N.

Similar approvals have been given to enable states to include subgroups for AYP that otherwise would be too small to make N. State approvals also have been given to use confidence intervals in these situations.

**8. First assessment rule.** For states that test students more than once in a subject, the Department of Education has granted exceptions to the rule that the first test taken must be used in calculating AYP. For example, if the student is allowed to take a test before entering the grade level when the tested content standards are covered—such as a junior taking a high school exit exam—state plans have been approved so that the score won’t be counted if the student doesn’t make AYP.

Similarly, if students take multiple assessments for diagnostic purposes, states have been given the flexibility to designate which of those tests will be used for AYP purposes. And, if the student makes AYP on the diagnostic test, the score would count for AYP and the student does not have to take another test for AYP purposes.

**9. Alternative placements.** When schools place students in alternative settings to provide them with a particular program—as distinguished from student transfers from school to school—state approval has been given to count these students at the “sending” school for AYP purposes rather than the “receiving” school (which would be less likely to make AYP if it served large numbers of students with special needs).

For a more detail on these and other variations granted for state plans, please see “Statewide Education Accountability” under NCLB at [www.ccss.org](http://www.ccss.org) or NSBA’s summary at [www.nsba.org.nclb](http://www.nsba.org.nclb).

### Complex calculations

Decisions about AYP have been made largely on the basis of statistical concepts that are not readily understood by education policy makers or the general public. And as the AYP process has unfolded, its operational features have become increasingly more complex and detailed. Variations among the states have added to the mosaic.

With time, it is likely that the current program will undergo revisions that could raise yet additional questions, concerns, and variations as to how schools are being held accountable for achievement.

Meanwhile, states have ranged widely in reporting the number of schools that did not make AYP. But whatever the exact

numbers, drawing state comparisons won’t say much about the relative quality of education in specific states. As we have seen, some states may have more schools with multiple target groups, a higher minimum N, or other nuances in their state plan that can have a substantial impact on whether schools make AYP.

Likewise, some states received accommodations in calculating AYP that were not granted or sought by others. Moreover, some may have more rigorous standards or tests than others.

NCLB intends state comparisons to be drawn from scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) rather than through AYP. Given the exceptionally high standards on NAEP, however, fewer students are likely to score at the proficient and advanced level on the NAEP tests than on state tests—even in high-ranking states. (That would also be the case, according to some experts, if students in other advanced countries took the NAEP test.)

What does all this complexity mean for your school board? The following section discusses your crucial role in addressing AYP requirements.

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**NOTE: PREVIOUS ISSUES OF ACTION ALERT ARE AVAILABLE ONLINE ON THE MEMBERS ONLY PAGE OF NSBA’S NATIONAL AFFILIATE WEB SITE, [WWW.NSBA.ORG/NA](http://WWW.NSBA.ORG/NA).**

## Accountability and Governance

### *The local school board’s AYP role*

**H**ow can your school board incorporate these complex AYP accountability requirements into its governance responsibilities?

This section of *Action Alert* is designed to help you (1) make effective decisions for raising student achievement, (2) build public support and understanding about AYP and achievement in your community, and (3) advocate for improvements in the

system with state and federal policy makers.

### Governing for student achievement

Despite its limitations and flaws, AYP provides school boards with a powerful tool for addressing student achievement. For example, it requires that key data be collected that school boards can use in

their decision-making. Specifically, school boards will now know—and be held accountable for dealing with—the performance of individual schools, as well as the performance of students who are potentially academically vulnerable on the basis of race, poverty, disability, or limited English proficiency.

AYP data must also be collected on the basis of gender and migrant status, although the data will not be scored for accountability purposes.

Taken together, this information can provide school boards and administrators with a wealth of information about strong and weak spots in their math and lan-

guage arts programs that previously went undetected when only schoolwide or districtwide averages were reported. With this disaggregated data at hand, school boards can work more strategically with their superintendent and staff to develop student achievement plans.

In the fall issue of *Action Alert*, we showed how school boards can use AYP data as part of a year-round student achievement process that is designed to analyze specific needs, identify key programs and priorities, and align budget and policy decisions so that students and teachers have a better chance to achieve their AYP and other academic goals.

Software programs are available that can, for example, graphically display the percentage of students at a specific grade level or school or in the district as a whole who score at the below basic, basic, proficient, or advanced levels on the state assessment. These bar graph displays can be easily rearranged to draw comparisons of student performance on the basis of grade levels, AYP special population groups, subject matter, gender, schools, and years.

You may wish to ask your superintendent to conduct a workshop for the board to analyze your district's AYP results and to discuss the use of local data and data programs in decision making.

### Communicating with the public

The high-profile, bottom-line nature of AYP results requires communicating with the public about what the results really mean and what your school system intends to do to overcome any deficiencies in the program. But given the complexity of AYP, how should that communication be approached?

In the Summer 2003 *Action Alert*, we set forth a detailed plan for presenting NCLB to the public. Parents and community members will not be concerned with the technical intricacies of AYP, but they should have factual information about how their district's schools are doing. That information should include other measures of achievement in addition to AYP results and should identify any relevant shortcomings in the design of the AYP measurement system.

Beyond reporting and explaining data, AYP also gives school officials an opportunity to engage the district's various audiences in a dialogue about their understanding, expectations, and participation in their public schools.

In this regard, the school board has a

crucial responsibility to ensure that the district has a communication plan that is based on information and discussions with the public. Additionally, as elected community leaders, school board members should determine to what extent the board needs to be involved in a consistent manner to explain AYP (and achievement overall) and to hear the public's response to it.

The district's communication plan should include strategies for communicating with various audiences, including parents, the media, business leaders, and state and federal policy makers.

### Communicating with parents

Parents are your school system's crucial customers—and the people you and your

they can be explained in a clear and non-defensive manner), and what other measures of student achievement show.

One approach is to establish a proactive outreach program to explain AYP. The school board can use this program as an opportunity to establish a wider conversation about the schools and invite greater parent participation in their children's education—including in activities that support the school's student achievement goals.

### Communicating with local media

Working with your local media is essential, as news reports play an important role in shaping opinion—especially for the nearly 75 percent of households that do not have children in school. Your local



Despite its limitations and flaws, AYP provides school boards with a powerful tool for addressing student achievement.



school board colleagues are most likely to talk with in group settings or individually. Of all community members, parents are the most likely to discuss the schools with depth and frequency. Parents need to be well informed not only so they can make good decisions about their children's education and their own involvement in the schools, but also because they are a powerful source of information and opinion about the schools throughout the community.

Given the personal connection between school boards and parents, the boards should consider what its own role should be in explaining AYP and specific results—and the importance of delivering consistent messages about what AYP results mean.

If a school does not make AYP, parents will want to know why, and they should be given information about the extent of the problem. Certainly, parents whose children are in a group that did not make AYP will want to know what the school system is doing about it.

Many parents will want to know what AYP actually measures, what the relevant flaws in the measurement system are (if

reporters should be given a grounding in AYP, including how the requirement to raise performance for specific groups and grade levels can skew the overall picture of an otherwise well-performing school or district.

To date, the larger media outlets have generally not sensationalized negative AYP results and have been fairly even-handed in their coverage. It seems that once education reporters understand some of the flaws in the AYP system, become aware of other measures used by the state, and learn of the local improvement efforts that are underway, they are better able to present a more balanced picture.

Overall, school officials should view the release of AYP data as an opportunity to publicly demonstrate their success and what they are doing to raise student achievement. And they should capitalize on that opportunity repeatedly. Reporters are regularly assigned to new beats, so educating the local media in the basics of AYP will be an ongoing process.

### Communicating with business leaders

Beyond their role as parents and citi-

zens, your local business community has an interest in your schools as a means of attracting new businesses and better educated workers into the area, as well as producing a home-grown supply of competent workers.

Some business leaders might be critical of the schools, but most will recognize that they can't as successfully attract new businesses or homeowners if their neighborhood schools are designated as failures by the state. Constructive communication with this group will make business leaders



**Your state and federal policy makers should know how well or poorly the AYP system is serving the students in your school district.**



### AYP: CORE QUESTIONS FOR SCHOOL BOARDS

- What do our districtwide and individual school AYP results reveal?
- Do we know why whole schools or students in specific groups are not making AYP in any of the subjects or grades tested?
  - If we find that failure to make AYP results from a flaw in the measurement system or its application to our situation, how can we convincingly demonstrate that point?
  - What do our other measures of student achievement or student progress show?
  - Taking all our measures of student achievement together, what conclusions can be drawn about the academic success and shortcomings of our school district?
  - Do we have a process that ties our AYP and other achievement data into our strategic planning, budget, and policy review processes?

### LOCAL DATA: CORE QUESTIONS FOR SCHOOL BOARDS

- What kind of school and group profiles of AYP can our data system provide?
  - What other student achievement profiles does the school district have or need to have?
  - Which of these data profiles does the school board want to see?
  - Should school board members be able to independently access and arrange their own displays of districtwide, school, or group, AYP and other achievement data?
  - What are right and wrong ways of interpreting and comparing AYP and other data?

more likely to support their local school system, help overcome weak areas, and understand when AYP results unfairly or too narrowly identify schools as not achieving.

Here again, school board members can work with their superintendent to develop a communication plan that includes special presentations and discussions with business leaders.

#### Communicating with state and federal policy makers

As a student achievement tool, AYP can only be as effective as the measurement system on which it's based. To the extent it measures achievement in the right way, AYP will drive constructive action. To the extent it does not, it will force action that could waste time and resources, be ignored, or worse yet, preempt more effective school district efforts.

Because your state and federal policy makers are responsible in varying ways for the design of the AYP program, they will need to know the areas where the measurement system is working and where it is failing. At the state level, your legislators, governor, state board, and state superintendent not only have a role to play to improve your state's program, but also to join and support your effort to advocate for improvements or repeal of troublesome aspects of the federal framework that are not working properly.

Some of these policy makers may not have been closely involved, or even in office, when the details of the federal law or your state's AYP plan were being developed. Meanwhile, nuances in state plans, federal regulations, and practical experience may have combined to produce implications that were not envisioned even by those who were close to the process.

As a matter of good public policy, then, your state and federal policy makers should know how well or poorly the AYP

system is serving the students in your school district—and what kinds of financial and educational resources your district will need to meet the rising bar in student achievement. Given your perspective as local officials who represent the community and understand the big-picture impact of AYP, your participation in this intergovernmental effort will be vital.

Before communicating with state policy makers, however, it's a good idea to check with your state school boards association. That way, you will be able to present a case that is strengthened by its connection to statewide efforts and perspectives on improving AYP. Likewise, in communicating with members of Congress, NSBA may be able to assist you and bring you into a nationwide school board effort to work with the Department of Education and Congress on NCLB. For information, visit [www.nsba.org/advocacy](http://www.nsba.org/advocacy).

#### Challenge and opportunity

For local school boards, addressing the complexity and rigor of AYP testing within the intricacies of their state's accountability system will be challenging. Variations among state plans will shape the general principles discussed in this *Action Alert*. In addition, some states have had to make adjustments to their own accountability systems to conform with the broader federal framework, and some will still hold school districts accountable in ways not required by the federal AYP system.

Over time, how well AYP is adjusted to accommodate legitimate practical concerns may determine whether the program can be managed—and whether it can effectively drive student achievement and enjoy public support.

Meanwhile, local school boards can use their governance role to ensure that AYP is used, communicated, and improved in ways that will effectively serve the children in their community.—*Michael A. Resnick*