



National School Boards Association

# NCLB. Action Alert

## TOOLS & TACTICS FOR MAKING THE LAW WORK

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### How to Present NCLB Results to the Media and the Public

#### *A communication plan for the No Child Left Behind Act*

By Michael A. Resnick

The spotlight of community scrutiny is about to be turned on public schools more brightly than ever before. This summer, state departments of education are identifying schools that “need improvement” under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Then, by the opening of school, local districts will need to announce which of their Title I schools must offer parents the choice to transfer their child to another school or to receive supplemental services.

Your state and school district might have identified weak schools and issued report cards in the past, but chances are those report cards have not involved the level of detail and accountability required by NCLB.

In addition to identifying schools in need of improvement, states must issue reports detailing how well their school districts are doing in reaching their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goal as defined by the law and providing other comparative data relating to local achievement. Also, during the course of the school year, school districts must issue their own report cards providing individual school and school district data on AYP and other pertinent information, such as plans for improvement and teacher qualifications.

The publication of these reports, if properly planned for, can give local school boards a tremendous opportunity to cele-

brate their successes, build public understanding for their weaknesses, and rally community support for improvement. Without a proactive plan for creating a public dialogue around the reports, however, school boards could miss a valuable opportunity to build support for their schools.

Worse yet, they could face a public relations nightmare. For example, will the local media focus only on problem areas, draw inaccurate conclusions about the quality of your schools, or understate the progress

announcements and other NCLB related reports that will be issued this summer or after the beginning of the next school year.

Because this is a transition year for NCLB, fewer schools are expected to be identified as needing improvement than might be identified next year. But wherever schools are said to need improvement, the community impact will be real. The public will need and demand information—and that means developing a communication plan now.

By adopting an NCLB communication plan immediately, your school district will be in a much better position to address the issuance of report cards later in the year—and you will have valuable experi-

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your school system is making? What will parents think when told their child may transfer to another school because their neighborhood Title I school has been identified as needing improvement?

This publication is designed to help you develop a comprehensive communication plan that will take you through the key reporting events during the coming school year.

Every state will be different in terms of its timelines, the exact way it measures achievement, and what it will require local reports to show. Moreover, every local situation will be different. Accordingly, this is not a “one size fits all” communication plan. Rather, we are providing ideas for building communications that proactively anticipate and address the

ence to go on next summer, when increasing numbers of schools may be identified as needing improvement.

#### Know the Issues

The first step in your communication plan is for the school board and superintendent to develop a common understanding of the basic requirements of NCLB, AYP, and schools needing improvement. NSBA recommends convening a school board workshop to discuss the following:

- The state’s basis for determining whether a school or school district needs improvement.
- The general operation of No Child Left Behind and state accountability requirements.

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*NCLB Action Alert* is an occasional publication of the National School Boards Association and the National School Boards Foundation, in conjunction with the Office of Advocacy and Issues Management. Written exclusively for NSBA National Affiliates, it is designed to provide ideas and insights on NCLB compliance. Copyright 2003, NSBA.

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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.

## About the National Affiliate Program

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.

## About the Office of Advocacy and Issues Management

The Office of Advocacy and Issues Management implements NSBA's Action/Advocacy Agenda and carries out NSBA's lobbying efforts at the national level. By lobbying the Congress, the White House, and federal agencies, the office helps increase federal funding for local school districts and reduces costly federal mandates; helps improve federal education programs by making legislative and regulatory changes local board members support; protects the governance role of school boards from congressional attack; and promotes the role of school boards as a key democratic institution in our country's education system.

• The relationship between Adequate Yearly Progress and your state and local assessment systems.

• The possibility that any of your schools will not make AYP and, if any are Title I schools, whether choice and supplemental services will need to be offered as a result of being identified as needing improvement.

• What special programming or initiatives are under way to raise achievement in specific schools.

For resources summarizing pertinent provisions of NCLB, see [www.nsba.org/advocacy](http://www.nsba.org/advocacy) and click on the No Child Left Behind Act Online Resource Guide. Also consult resources from your state school boards association.

## Develop a Communication Plan

At your workshop, based on the recommendations of the superintendent and staff, establish a plan that includes the following steps:

• *Identify target audiences.* Identify groups in the community who should be informed about what it means to be in "school improvement" or to not make AYP. These groups might include parents, the media, business leaders, civic associations, and elected leaders.

• *Determine methods of communication.* Decide the best ways of communicating to various sectors of the public. Take into account the effectiveness of the method, the time of the year, the communication outlets available to you, the frequency with which you want to deliver your message, and the numbers of people who need to be contacted.

For example, your communications can include conducting face-to-face meetings at local schools, speaking at lunches held by the Chamber of Commerce and Kiwanis Clubs, participating in radio talk shows, submitting op-ed articles, developing brochures and fact sheets, and putting information on the district Web site.

• *Identify spokespersons.* Decide who will serve as spokespersons at the school building and school district level. Determine what the role of the school board will be and what the board will say as a unified voice. Identify community leaders outside the school system who can be recruited to speak on the school district's behalf, including opinion leaders in the community.

• *Prepare the public.* Before releasing school improvement and AYP data, determine what you want the public to understand about NCLB. In developing that

information, consider how well you expect individual schools and your district as a whole to do in achieving AYP on the state assessment. Consider what the community needs to know about choice and supplemental services if you expect Title I schools to be identified as needing improvement.

• *Develop a year-round program.* Identify times throughout the year when school improvement and report card information will be released from which the superintendent and staff can develop an implementation schedule to address key reporting milestones. (See "Develop Key Timelines.")

• *Deliver the message.* If one of your schools "needs improvement" or doesn't make AYP or falls short on any other report card data point, determine what your key message is, the best timing for your response, and the best forum for delivering it. (See "Focus on Key Message Points.")

• *Engage the public.* As part of your year-round program, consider engaging the public around the broader goals of the school system as well as on the elements of NCLB. (For resources on community engagement, see [www.nsba.org](http://www.nsba.org) and consult your state school boards association.)

• *Communicate with staff members.* Before the public rollout of your plan, communicate with teachers, teacher aides, support staff, principals, and others who have informal day-to-day contact with the public. Let them know what the reports mean and what the message is, which may include any action that is being taken.

Your state school boards association might be able to assist you in developing a communication plan, crafting messages, and training spokespersons.

## Develop Key Timelines

Timing counts. Prepare the public in advance about NCLB and its limitations, and then respond immediately to the release of school improvement and AYP data. This approach will produce better results than waiting to develop a strategy until after the public has received the official report—especially if the report plants a negative message in people's minds.

• Determine when the state intends to release its list of schools needing improvement.

• Determine when the state intends to report AYP data and your requirement to report locally.

• Determine when written materials, PowerPoint presentations, and so on need

to be completed in order to roll out an information plan both in advance of and upon the release of state data and local report cards.

- Develop a schedule to meet with key community groups.
- Develop a schedule to meet with, and provide text information to, local reporters and editors, recognizing that some print media, such as weekly newspapers, will need time to publish stories.

### Focus on Key Message Points

It's important to think carefully not only about the message you want to deliver but also about the tone and wording you use to convey it. Schools that are officially identified as needing improvement or not making AYP are often viewed as failures in the public eye. To have an impact, your explanations must rise above education jargon and be crisp, clear, and to the point.

Messages should be crafted to best fit your situation. If you have time to explain NCLB and the various designations (and their limitations) to the community before the actual release of data, it is less likely that you will be, or appear to be, defensive.

Depending on the situation, some aspects of these announcements might allow you to celebrate local success. For example, unfavorable findings might be legitimately explained by providing a larger context by which to measure student achievement, focusing on solutions, or identifying flaws in the way AYP is measured.

### Put the Results into Context

Here are some sample points that you can use to help put the reports in context:

- NCLB is one of several ways in which our school district measures, student achievement and overall success. While NCLB tells us how well students are doing in language arts and math in specific grade levels, other measures, such as college enrollments, AP placements, and other tests, provide a more complete picture.

(Note: A recent national poll by NSBA found that approximately 80 percent of Americans look at factors other than test scores when judging the success of their local schools. These factors include expectations that students will go to college or get good jobs, personal experience with the schools, and perceptions of school safety. These findings suggest that it is wise to lay out a broad assessment of how your schools are doing based on other factors the public considers

important, not just test scores.)

- We anticipate that our school district and most of our schools will make AYP. We already know that we want to improve test scores with specific groups of students in specific schools. We have plans in place to do that in our summer programs and when schools open this fall. (Include a few examples of such plans.)

- We welcome improved ways of judging achievement in our school system. NCLB is a promising addition to our arsenal of measures for gauging success, but there are some limits to the program that could give a distorted view of some of our schools. For example:

1. The results tell only about student performance in language and math in specific grade levels. They do not provide a complete picture of our school program. (Provide other indicators of success.)

2. Any time new tests are put into place or a new measurement system is used, performance can be artificially lowered. It takes a couple of years for teachers, students, and the system as a whole to adjust to a new test that may require changes in what is taught on a day to day basis.

### Celebrate Success

Your communication plan is an opportunity to highlight school and district successes. Here are some sample messages:

- NCLB rightfully places a spotlight on identifying schools that need improvement or that don't make AYP. In our school district, all (or most) of our schools are meeting the rigorous standard of achievement

required by the federal law.

- We welcome the AYP measurement system as yet another way to demonstrate the success of our schools.

- We are pleased that several of our schools are no longer identified as needing improvement (or not making AYP). Here are several of the programs and initiatives we put into place to achieve that success. (Include examples.)

- Although we have a diverse student population with special challenges, we expect most of them to make AYP.

- Our students are succeeding. Here are examples of awards, high scores, individual student work on projects, and the kinds of challenging test questions students are successfully answering. (Include examples.)

### Commit to the Future

This portion of your communication plan might include messages such as these:

- This is the first time we have been able to collect data and profile specific groups of children whose achievement and needs as a group have gone undetected in reports of general school and school district averages.

By collecting data this way, we can now do a better job of identifying needs and learning from those teachers and schools that are having greater success with special-needs students.

- We anticipate that some students in a particular group are not making AYP. Although not enough of these students have reached the cut-off score, we have

## A MEDIA CHECKLIST

In dealing with the media, you can incorporate this checklist of activities into your communication plan:

- Prepare members of the media before the reports are released by building their understanding of the meaning of "needs improvement" and adequate yearly progress, the operation of choice, and issues relating to specific groups.
- Prepare background materials that will help explain your points and select examples of relevant stories to include in your message.
- Decide the range of media outlets you will contact and who will speak on behalf of the school district.
- Develop clear, jargon-free mes-

sage points and stay on message.

- Be prepared to engage the media on release of actual reports to help clarify any misunderstanding or lack of balance that could go into the initial news report.

- Assess reaction to the media coverage and follow up with reporters to clarify points and to build their long-term interest in future stories that can showcase successes and improvements.

- Contact your state school boards association for technical assistance. The state association can also provide a statewide perspective that can strengthen the impact of your media campaign.—*M.A.R.*

data showing that progress is accelerating. (Include data.)

- We are putting new programming in place this fall that should produce the gains needed to make AYP. (Include examples of new programming.)

### Point to Flaws in the AYP System

Among the flaws you can point to are these:

- AYP tells us whether enough of our most academically challenged students are meeting the state's cut-off scores in specific grades for the two subjects tested. However, it does not adequately show how much progress we made with those students over the course of the year—or the progress we made with the majority of our students who are achieving above state standards.

- The federal law requires the performance of students who belong to any of four groups of students needing improvement to be separately measured for AYP. The failure of the required percentage of students in just one of these groups to make the cut-off score can result in the entire school or school district being identified as not making AYP and subsequently identified as needing improvement. This will occur even if every other student and every other group makes AYP. The four targeted categories are:

1. Children with disabilities (physical or mental);

2. Children for whom English is not their native language;

3. Children living in poverty (and the special challenges brought by it); and

4. Children comprising racial or ethnic minority groups identified by the state.

- Our schools attract students with disabilities because of the high quality services we provide. That very success may be the basis for our schools being labeled as lacking or failing. It's not fair or reasonable to judge and then label those students or their schools in that way.

- Our schools enroll large numbers of students from other countries who don't speak English and were poorly educated before they arrived in this country. Yet many of the most recent arrivals will be measured to determine whether our schools are making AYP. And once they make the cut score, they leave the group. In other words, we can't even get credit for our success. This kind of measurement is unfair and illogical.

- The most racially and linguistically diverse schools and school districts will have the greatest number of groups—each

with its own unique challenges. The failure of just one of those groups can cause the school or school district to be identified.

- In this first year, the state anticipates that (X number) or (Y percent) of our schools won't make AYP. We know our schools are better than that. This over-identification of schools strongly suggests that there are serious flaws in the measurement system that need to be corrected. These flaws will become more pronounced each year because the percentage of children who must make the score—regardless of the challenges involved—must rise to 100 percent over 12 years. This is a great goal but a statistical and practical impossibility—especially if we want rigorous state standards.

For resources analyzing other situations in which the AYP measurement system can bias AYP results against schools or school districts, see [www.nsba.org/advocacy](http://www.nsba.org/advocacy) and click on NSBA's No Child Left Behind Online Resource Guide for the article entitled, "Adequate Yearly Progress: A School Board Member's Guide."

A word of caution: While the flaws may have a significant impact on your schools, it is important that your efforts to build public understanding about them do not appear to be defensive or covering up a problem. Consider whether the flaws can be presented as part of an open and complete response to the reports.

### Address the Release of State Data

Issue a statement or call a press conference to proactively address the AYP results. Here are some steps you might take to prepare for those activities:

- Find out when the state's "needs improvement" list and AYP results will be announced. See if you can receive advance information about your school district—and the state as a whole.

- Determine whether the state is going to have a press event and what the state's message will be. Consider how the state's characterization may influence your own statement.

- Decide which context will best describe the application of AYP to your school district, as well as:

1. Other indicators of school progress that will provide a more complete picture of your school district and specific schools;

2. How best to present the performance of groups that don't make AYP—including their relationship to overall school and school district performance;

3. Program initiatives that are in place to improve performance in weak areas; and

4. How the school administration and school board intend to monitor progress during the year.

- Determine whether you will need to identify any Title I schools where students must be offered choice and supplemental services. Decide how you will handle the announcement of the student choice plan—including what to tell parents who don't get their first choice or parents who are concerned over lower-achieving students who are transferring into their neighborhood school.

### Use Polling Data

In crafting your message to the public, you might wish to keep the following polling results in mind:

- People tend to think their neighborhood school (the one they know) is better than other schools (the schools they don't know).

- Although the public believes the schools' most important function is to teach basic academic subjects, it does not believe test scores are the best indicators of success, nor does it think test scores should be used as the sole indicator of success or failure.

- The public reacts well to knowing that students have choices in their schools and programs.

- The public is concerned that public schools are not providing a high-quality education and that standards are not high enough. The public is likely to be reassured by the high standards that do exist in its school system.

- The public recognizes that adequate funding and parent involvement are critical elements to a successful education. Those factors should be considered in identifying concerns and discussing plans to address them.

Finally, remember that the public wants to see its public schools succeed because it understands the critical link between strong public schools and strong communities. This connection extends to economic benefits such as property values and having an educated workforce that attracts businesses.

The public also recognizes the important role of the school board in ensuring that tax dollars are allocated to education programs where they are most needed, and in helping the schools provide a high-quality education to all students.

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