

## SUGGESTED ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ABOUT AYP

*These are some suggested answers to questions that you may have to field when discussing school accountability and Adequate Yearly Progress.*

**Q. The state's rules say that all schools need to have at least 40% of ALL their students performing at grade-level in reading this year. That seems impossible, given that only 25% of low-income kids were proficient last year. Are you saying these students need to gain 15 points this year?**

Not necessarily. Although there are absolute targets for performance in reading and math, schools can make AYP as long as they can show each group of students is making some solid gains each year.

**Q. Lots of teachers I know are complaining that it's not fair to judge kids on the basis of a single test. Don't you agree?**

First, it's important to recognize that the adequate yearly progress system is judging schools and school districts, not individual students. We're using this measurement to hold schools and districts accountable for doing their job — which is to provide a decent education to all students.

That said, it's true that the adequate yearly progress numbers are based largely on the test scores of all the students in the school. We don't always have to like tests, but most people agree that they are one useful way to measure academic achievement.

Also, the school and district accountability rating is based on other indicators as well, such as graduation rates and attendance rates.

**Q. Are you saying that even special needs students can pass these tests?**

First of all, we need to make sure that the students who are in our special education programs truly are special education students. Some may be students who need better reading instruction rather than special education.

But the answer is yes, our goal is for handicapped students to pass some version of the test.

The law provides some leeway. The new federal rules say that schools and districts need to test up to 95% of their students in each group. That means they can automatically exempt up to 5% of their students.

Also, districts can exempt up to 1% of their students from the regular tests. These kids must be provided with alternative assessments.

For other students in special education programs, schools must accommodate their special needs. They have to take the same tests as their schoolmates, but they may get more time to finish, or they may have the questions read to them.

**Q. Parents and teachers say that there's too much fluctuation in test scores from year to year to make the adequate yearly progress designation meaningful. A school could have all student groups score well ABOVE proficient in one year, then well BELOW proficient the next year. It seems unfair to judge schools based on these kinds of drastic swings.**

True. The state says districts can base their ratings on either year-to-year changes for each group...or on rolling averages over two or three years. That should take care of the kinds of volatility you suggest.

Also, scores count only if a minimum number of students are in a group. We don't want to hold schools accountable on the basis of the performance of just a handful of students.

Another protection is that only the scores of students who have been in their school for a full year count.

**Q. There's a school in my community that was on the blue-ribbon list as one of the state's best schools last year...and this year it's on the needs improvement list. But more than 80% of its students go on to college –and overall, 90% of their students score proficient or above on the state's test. Can you explain this?**

A. The problem must be that this school is leaving one group of students behind. That's not acceptable under the new law. Our obligation is to provide a decent education to ALL groups of students...not just to SOME groups of students or to MANY groups of students. All groups. This is a new challenge for many districts, especially for some suburban districts where average scores tend to be high. That's why the law gives us 12 years to get there. The challenge is to make steady progress for all groups of students every year in every school...even in schools where most students have always done well. And when we don't make that progress, we must provide additional assistance to our high-priority schools and additional choices for parents and students in these schools.

**Q. Why should a school get a low-performing label even if huge majorities of the parents, teachers and students are satisfied?**

A. Satisfaction is one way to measure how well schools are doing. But there's a strong agreement in this state that satisfaction isn't enough. We also need to look at performance on these basic subjects—reading and math. I was visiting a school last week where overwhelming majorities of parents think their school is successful. But when you look at their test scores, less than 10% of their students are reading on grade level. To me, this doesn't make any sense. How can a parent be happy if his child doesn't know how to read?

**Q. If I'm a parent in a low-performing school, how long should I have to wait before it gets turned around? Surely, you're not expecting parents to wait 11 years before there's some solid progress, are you?**

A. A lot depends on the school. Some schools that need improvement are very close to demonstrating that they are providing a decent education for all groups of students. They should get off the list quickly. Other schools have a much longer way to go... and it could take more than a decade to totally turn them around.

But in the lowest-performing schools, parents won't have to wait that long. After a school has failed to make adequate yearly progress for all students for two years, parents of low-achieving students may have a chance to transfer their child to another school. If a school fails to make progress for a third year, low-income parents can ask for tutoring and other supplemental services. For schools that continue not meeting the needs of all students, the state will ratchet up the interventions each year. If necessary, the state will close down the worst schools and reopen them with totally new staffs.

**Q. Isn't labeling these schools as "needs improvement schools" just a word game to save face? Why don't you call a failure a failure?**

A. Absolutely not. Think of it this way: If two people go on a diet and set out to lose 10 pounds, is it fair to say they've both "failed" if one lost 9 pounds while the other didn't lose an ounce? We believe it's important to make those same distinctions on our list of schools.

**Q. Will you pledge that the number of schools on the list will go down each year?**

No, in fact the list may increase as we gradually raise the bar to get all students proficient in reading and math. It will be a bumpy road and the numbers on the list may go up and down as we fully implement the law.

**Q. Lots of superintendents and state legislators are complaining that these new requirements are an unfunded mandate from Washington. How are you going to pay for all this additional assistance to schools, given the economic recession?**

First of all, we all need to acknowledge that the requirements in this law are exactly what we should expect from our schools. It's the fundamental mission of education to assure that all kids learn.

Second, we will squeeze every dollar from our budget for this purpose. And as the economy improves, we will look to both federal and state sources for additional revenue. But even within current budget constraints, we can move forward.