

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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MAKING VALID AND RELIABLE DECISIONS IN DETERMINING ADEQUATE YEARLY PROGRESS

December 2002

ASR-CAS Joint Study Group on Adequate Yearly Progress

SCOTT MARION, Co-Chair
CAROLE WHITE, Co-Chair
DALE CARLSON
WILLIAM J. ERPENBACH
STANLEY RABINOWITZ
JAN SHEINKER

Accountability Systems and Reporting
Comprehensive Assessment Systems for ESEA Title I
State Collaborative on Assessment and Student Standards

COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS



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Jan Sheinker, Coordinator
Comprehensive Assessment Systems for ESEA Title I SCASS
and

Rolf Blank, Director of Education Indicators Programs and Coordinator
Accountability Systems and Reporting SCASS

COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS
ONE MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE, NW, SUITE 700
WASHINGTON, DC 20001-1431

(202) 408-5505
FAX (202) 408-8072
www.ccsso.org



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FOR
MAKING VALID AND RELIABLE DECISIONS
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PROGRESS

*A Paper In The Series: Implementing The State Accountability System
Requirements Under The No Child Left Behind Act Of 2001*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Making Valid and Reliable Decisions in Determining AYP

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Jan Barth, West Virginia
Dale Carlson, Consultant
William J. Erpenbach, Consultant
Paul M. LaMarca, Nevada
Scott Marion, Wyoming
Bernadette Morris, Louisiana
Stanley Rabinowitz, West Ed
Alan Sheinker, CTB

Christine Steele, Wyoming
Charlene Tucker, Connecticut
Cathy Wagner, Minnesota
Charles Wayne, Pennsylvania
Carole White, Delaware
Grace Ross, ED, Ex-Officio
Rolf Blank, CCSSO, ASR Coordinator
Jan Sheinker, CAS Coordinator

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Louis Fabrizio, North Carolina
Robin Taylor, Delaware

H. Gary Cook, Wisconsin
J.P. Beaudoin, Louisiana.

In the final stages of writing, the Study Group also gained insight and ideas from discussions conducted by the AYP “brain trust meeting” of state and national experts convened by CCSSO in October 2002.

Many of the ideas presented in the paper can be traced to discussions among members of the National Assessment and Accountability Work Group—a small study group sponsored by West Ed, whose members include: (Chair) Stanley Rabinowitz, West Ed; J.Reginald Allen, Minnesota; Sri Ananda, West Ed; Dale Carlson, Consultant, Brian Gong, Center for Assessment; Edward Haertel, Stanford University; Joan Herman, CRESST/UCLA; Richard Hill, Center for Assessment; Paul M. LaMarca, Nevada; Scott Marion, Wyoming; Scott Norton, Louisiana; and William Schafer, University of Maryland.

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Executive Summary

Making Valid and Reliable Decisions in Determining Adequate Yearly Progress

This *Executive Summary* provides an important overview of key issues, decision points, decision consequences, and policy implications related to making valid and reliable decisions in the calculation of adequate yearly progress. The full paper addresses those topics in greater depth including a full exploration of the related technical aspects of validity and reliability in AYP determinations by States. The full paper is intended primarily for Chief State School Officers and their immediate staff members, especially State assessment directors, Title I directors, and others involved in statewide educational accountability policy development and implementation. It also explores unique issues that arise in designing accountability systems under the NCLB Act and critical variables related to decisions that States must make in finalizing these systems. This *Executive Summary* and the full paper are intended to be viewed as complimentary, companion pieces.

Finally, it is anticipated that, in addition to State Educational Agency personnel, Peer Reviewers of State Accountability Systems will also find the complete paper instructive as they begin reviewing plans for statewide accountability systems in early 2003.

Key Accountability Issues for States

Many unique issues arise for States in refining their statewide accountability systems due to the prescriptive, conjunctive nature of the AYP requirements under the NCLB Act. The essential components of the AYP requirements include

- An aligned system of academic content standards, academic student achievement standards, and assessments of student performance;
- Annual assessments of student progress in attaining the student academic achievement standards;
- School, district, and State accountability decisions based on the performance of specific subgroups of students designed to ensure that **all** students are proficient in reading or language arts and mathematics by 2013-14; and
- A system of rewards and required, progressive sanctions to encourage and support high- and low-performing schools.

There are also a number of interrelated variables that impact the decisions States must make to refine or revise existing accountability systems to meet the prescriptive nature of the NCLB Act:

- Whether some States will modify their academic content and student academic achievement standards in light of statewide accountability system requirement changes between the 1994 and 2001 ESEA reauthorizations
- Minimum “n” determinations that balance validity and reliability issues with the high stakes sanctions now attached to identification for failing to meet AYP
- How to include small schools and small subgroups in a valid and reliable school accountability system that meets the letter of the NCLB Act
- What assessments to include in the statewide accountability system in light of the NCLB Act requirements for AYP
- Aligning State and Federal definitions related to student academic achievement standards
- Differentiated responses (sanctions) based on the extent to which schools or districts do not make AYP requirements
- Renewed debate regarding (1) the use of Standard Error of Measurement in connection with interpreting cut scores related to student academic achievement standards and (2) the decisions States might need to make regarding the use of uniform averaging in AYP calculations

Building a Case for the Validity of the System

This paper emphasizes, as the law does, the importance of building an accountability system that provides confidence in the validity of decisions made about districts and schools in determining AYP. To maximize the reliability of the components and the validity of the decisions that emerge from a State accountability system, the primary construct validity questions that States must consider are:

- Is the system focusing on the “right” goals?
- Does the accountability system identify the schools that truly need to improve?
- Is the accountability system theoretically and logically related to improved student learning?

When designing and evaluating their accountability systems, States must consider consequential questions such as:

- Is the system having the desired impact?
- Is the system leading to more or less equality of educational opportunity for all students?

Is the accountability system leading to unintended negative consequences such as teachers leaving the profession early or has the curriculum become unacceptably narrowed?

An accountability system can be said to have validity when the evidence is judged to be strong enough to support the inferences that:

- The components of the system are aligned to its purposes and are working in harmony to help the system accomplish those purposes; and
- The system is accomplishing what was intended (and did not accomplish what was not intended).

Components of the system may be categorized as those related to:

- Setting purpose and focus or goals, i.e., standards, target for improvement, and theory of action for reform;
- Selecting indicators, i.e., assessments aligned to standards, graduation rates, attendance rates;
- Determining results, i.e., data collection, scoring, and analysis;
- Drawing inferences and making decision indicators, i.e., rules for determining AYP status;
- Implementing the decisions, i.e., determination of AYP; and
- Evaluating the effects of the decisions, i.e., the impact of the accountability system.

There are at least three key facets that need to be addressed when designing the system:

1. The overall goals (of the accountability system, not the educational system):
What is expected to happen—what are the intended outcomes? To what degree is it improving student achievement, per se, versus other goals?
2. The focus or target:
What kind of schools should be identified for improvement? Upon what types of students does the program focus, and what does success look like for them?
3. The logic or theory of action:
What is the theory of action underlying the reform strategy? How are the levers of accountability to accomplish the goals?

Once the accountability system has been implemented, the following steps are involved in building an argument supporting its validity:

1. Examine closely the intended outcomes, the first of which are the assessment results. Determine if a school, or what proportion of schools, met their AYP requirements. Then determine the number of subgroups in the school or district that failed to meet the AYP targets.
2. Corroborate the “official” findings through a disciplined search for additional information such as other assessment data, process measures about the quantity of writing assignments, attitudes and opinion information about parent and client satisfaction, and teaching and learning information about the level of emphasis and time teachers devote to instruction of key academic content standards.
3. Check the design and implementation of each component in the system for any evidence of lack of reliability or other problems. Each component has to be defined and implemented in harmony with the functions of the other components in light of the system’s purposes.
4. Examine the level and quality of the implementation of the reforms from the actual classifications of the schools to the fidelity of the selected school reform efforts.
5. Conduct these analyses on several levels—at least statewide and for particular types of schools, perhaps selected on the basis of size, geographic area, and student population.

Examining, reporting, and making a case for the validity of the system are important elements of meeting the NCLB Act requirements as well as building public confidence in the decisions made as a consequence of that system.

Key Decisions for State AYP Plan

The decision framework and a series of steps proposed here for developing systems for calculating AYP address the *nature of data sources, sample size issues, number of starting points, aggregation issues, and setting intermediate goals*. Two factors drive the discussion for each issue: (1) adherence to the NCLB Act provisions and expectations and (2) technical defensibility.

In considering the nature of data sources, student variability across years may have very real implications for the validity of accountability decisions. Differences in groups of students from one class to the next, that is, from one year to the next, may result in a school meeting AYP one year, not the next and meeting AYP the third even though the school's instructional program has not changed and students are learning better each year they are in the school. If the State has a data system that allows for tracking individuals, a longitudinal or quasi-longitudinal approach will yield more consistent results than a successive group approach. However, in most states, a longitudinal design is likely to exclude too many students, thereby violating the spirit of the NCLB Act. A quasi-longitudinal design does not lose as many students from the system and produces more consistent results than a simple successive group model, but the nature of data sources in the State may preclude this model as well.

Following are some of the key decisions that must be addressed together with an examination of likely consequences of these decisions and the resulting policy implications.

Minimum “n”

Minimum “n” is incorporated in the NCLB Act provisions to ensure that State accountability decisions meet a certain threshold with respect to the validity and reliability of their decisions such that they will not be undermined by a sample size too small to be reliable. States must explain to ED the minimum “n” they will use in their accountability system and justify the related decisions they have made. States also need to distinguish between minimum “n” used for reporting in consideration of confidentiality and the minimum “n” States might use for school and district AYP decisions.

- **Decision:** What minimum “n” yields the most reliable decisions but also does not lead to negative consequences by under-identifying schools that should be identified for improvement and over-identifying those that should not be so identified?
 - While a minimum “n” of 200 to 1,000 might be needed to make highly reliable decisions, those decisions would have little validity for making AYP decisions about a school under the NCLB Act.
 - While a minimum “n” of 25 to 30 might strike a reasonable balance between decision consistency and practicality, this may still result in many potentially unreliable decisions.
- **Consequences:** Assuming the NCLB Act had been in effect earlier, several States examined student performance data from past years to conduct data analyses to estimate the impact of the law's new accountability requirements on their districts and schools. The following likely consequences of setting various minimum “n's” were found:

- ▶ Increasing or decreasing the minimum number of students required to make performance determinations has an impact on both the number of schools identified for improvement and the timing of that identification.
- ▶ Some schools with small numbers of low-performing students in subgroups will not be identified that should be, because the number of students in the subgroup is insufficient to make a reliable judgment about AYP status.
- ▶ Raising the minimum “n” to levels high enough to have a noticeable effect on reliability would require samples so large that it would be impractical for many States to set such high thresholds.
- ▶ Regardless of minimum “n” used, virtually all schools would be identified for improvement at given points in time, with high proportions failing to meet AYP within two to three years ranging from 49% to 88% according to State simulations and analysis of existing data.
- **Policy Implications:** Based on an examination of results from the simulation studies described above, the following conclusions about the likely consequences of setting various minimum “n’s” were drawn:
 - ▶ Minimum sample sizes that could yield somewhat reliable results (e.g., 25 to 30 students) also avoid identifying as many of the “right” schools that perhaps should be identified. Small schools and small student subgroups may still be judged to have met AYP due to falling below the minimum “n” threshold even if all of the students in the group fall well below the target. In such instances, States will need to develop other means to annually assess a school’s performance and make AYP decisions.
 - ▶ With minimum “n” sizes large enough to make more reliable decisions (e.g., 200 students or more), many schools would “meet” AYP, but school districts might not. The small schools are still judged to have met AYP due to falling below the minimum “n” for reliability. The district, on the other hand, is responsible for all students in all the schools, resulting in a number above the large minimum “n” and, therefore, may be identified for failing to meet AYP even though the schools those students attend were deemed to have met AYP.
 - ▶ Excluding rural and small schools due to a high minimum “n” shifts the accountability burden to large schools.
 - ▶ Allowing schools to avoid serving their subgroups simply because those they are relatively small is inconsistent with the intent and goals of the NCLB Act.

Statistically-Based Approaches

Using statistically-based approaches, such as confidence intervals, is based on the idea that modeling and considering sampling error can help us understand the reliability and certainty of decisions made in the accountability system. Confidence intervals or z-tests recognize that the observed proportion of students scoring proficient in any one year is an estimate of that schools’ performance. Therefore, the confidence intervals describe the probability that the “true” score occurs within a range of scores rather than a precise number.

- **Decision:**
 - ▶ Should a State use a fixed minimum “n” or a statistically-based approach to maximize the reliability and minimize the negative consequences associated with making AYP decisions?
- **Consequences:**
 - ▶ If the State chooses to use a statistically-based approach, it will have to explain this to stakeholders in ways that they understand and find credible.
 - ▶ Two schools with the same proportion of students scoring proficient may have different AYP results due to larger (for a small school) or smaller (for a large school) confidence intervals.
 - ▶ States that rely on a fixed minimum “n” may under-identify for improvement small versus large schools.
- **Policy Implications:**
 - ▶ Use of confidence interval allows a State to hold all schools, large and small, accountable.
 - ▶ The use of statistically-based procedures allows State policy-makers to understand the certainty with which they are classifying/identifying schools for improvement.
 - ▶ Publicly identifying one school for improvement, while not identifying another school with similar results but a different confidence interval, will present a challenge for AYP reporting.
 - ▶ Strategies for communicating the impact of confidence intervals on AYP decisions to the public and schools will need to be developed.
 - ▶ District and State officials may find the calculation of confidence intervals time consuming and complex.

Starting Points

Starting points must be set by States either by ranking schools (by grade spans) and selecting the percent proficient in a content area for the school that falls at the 20th percentile for enrollment or by using the score of the lowest performing subgroup statewide to set the starting point if it results in a higher percent proficient than the first option. (According to current data, the second option rarely occurs.)

1. Select data to be used in selecting starting points
 - **Decision:** How many years should be used as the basis for calculating a starting point?
 - ▶ States may choose a single year of data from 2001-2002 as the basis for setting starting points.
 - ▶ States may use a simple or weighted average of up to three consecutive years ending with 2001-2002 to set starting points.
 - **Consequences:**
 - ▶ States that have excluded significant proportions of any subgroup in the past but are now including all students will find that using a single year to set starting points provides a more accurate picture of where schools are starting.

- ▶ States that have a consistent data collection system that includes all students in the system every year may find that averaging across two or three years increases the reliability of the data and stabilizes information about where schools are starting.
 - **Policy Implications:**
 - ▶ Schools performing well below the starting point may find that whatever starting point is set, it is so high that the targets seem unattainable, and they will become discouraged and give up.
 - ▶ Schools well above the starting point may become apathetic, believing they have nothing to worry about and no improvement is needed.
2. Calculate starting points for all schools (by grade span)
- **Decision:** How are starting points calculated for the entire school and all schools as the basis for making valid AYP decisions about a school?
 - ▶ States may use the “20th percentile method” or lowest performing subgroup to set a starting point.
 - ▶ Using the “20th percentile method” school yields the higher starting point as required by law.
 - **Consequences:**
 - ▶ Some higher achieving schools will not have to show any positive change in status for several years.
 - ▶ The lowest performing student subgroups will have to show dramatic positive changes in status the first few years.
 - **Policy Implications:**
 - ▶ States need to guard against the temptation for schools to move students out of programs or fail to put students in programs based on their educational needs to avoid the greater impact of the student’s scores on a particular student subgroup than on the total group results.
3. Calculation of starting points for content areas
- **Decision:** How should the starting point be calculated for academic content areas as the basis for making valid AYP decisions?
 - ▶ Single starting point for each academic content area.
 - ▶ Different starting points for each academic content area at each grade span (3-5, 6-9, 10-12).
 - **Consequences:**
 - ▶ One student may be a member of up to five different subgroups, in effect, weighting the results and attendant decisions based on a small group of students.
 - ▶ Several States have predicted, based on data simulations using previous years’ student performance results, that nearly all schools in their State will be identified for improvement within 3 to 5 years, because only one student subgroup below its respective target in any one year is defined as the school failing to make AYP.

- **Policy Implications** for setting school-wide starting points:
 - ▶ A common starting point may force more appropriate attention on the performance of student subgroups.
 - ▶ It is possible the targets may be so far out of reach that educators will get discouraged.
 - ▶ If schools fail to make AYP based on different academic content areas each year, long-term improvements cannot be planned and implemented due to annual changes in the subgroups that should be targeted for additional assistance.
 - ▶ If nearly all schools are identified for improvement, it seems inevitable that the public will question the reliability of the accountability system and lose confidence in it.
 - ▶ If nearly all schools are identified for improvement, even those perceived by the public and educators as successful, the public and educators may become indifferent/apathetic to the fact that any school has been identified for improvement.

Aggregating Data

Aggregating data can be used by States to increase the sample size upon which accountability decisions about a school are based, thus increasing the reliability of those decisions. There are several methods of aggregating data that might be used:

1. Multi-year averaging
 - **Decisions:** How can multi-year averages (weighted or simple), using multiple years of data, be useful in establishing starting points and establishing annual status measurements?
 - ▶ Simply average the percent proficient from each unit across the two or three years, if the State believes that each year is an unbiased estimate of a school's performance.
 - ▶ Weight the average by the number of students enrolled in the given school, if the State is considering aggregate performance across two years as a "single" estimate of a school's performance.
 - **Consequences:**
 - ▶ Using multiple years of data to establish baseline allows the use of larger samples, thus reducing sampling error and, therefore, improving the reliability of status estimates.
 - **Policy Implications:**
 - ▶ More schools and subgroups will meet a minimum "n" threshold and be accountable for the progress of their own schools and student subgroups.
2. Rolling averages
 - **Decision:** How can rolling averages be used to determine AYP using an improvement-based approach ("safe harbor") for each school or district each year?
 - ▶ Compare, for example, the average scores of 2000, 2001, and 2002 with the averages of 2001, 2002, and 2003.

- **Consequences:**
 - ▶ Rolling averages of 3 years simply serves to compare the first year to the last year and, in spite of the intuitive appeal of rolling averages, do little to truly improve the reliability of the comparison.
 - **Policy Implications:** Apparent year-to-year change, or lack of change, in a school's performance is an appearance only, giving inaccurate impressions to the public about the school.
3. Successive multi-year comparisons
- **Decision:** How can successive multi-year comparisons be used by those who want to evaluate trends and also want/need to aggregate data?
 - ▶ Compare, for example, the average of 2000 and 2001 with the average of 2002 and 2003.
 - **Consequences:**
 - ▶ This would provide a State the real benefit of stabilizing the comparisons without the problems associated with simple rolling averages.
 - **Policy Implications:**
 - ▶ States will need sufficient data in the early years of the 2001 ESEA Reauthorization to use this approach so they can meet the requirements of making AYP decisions about schools each year.

Intermediate Goals

1. Raising the status bar every year on a trajectory to reach all students (100%) proficient by 2013-2014
 - **Decision:** How can intermediate goals be set?
 - ▶ Divide the difference between the starting point and 100% by 12 years to arrive at the increase in the status bar required each year.
 - **Consequences:**
 - ▶ This approach assumes that school improvement is a perfectly linear process, while research has clearly documented that it is not.
 - **Policy Implications:**
 - ▶ Raising the bar annually will help keep the focus on regular yearly goals.
2. Holding the status bar steady for up to three years at a time before raising it to a new level on a trajectory to reach 100% proficient by 2013-2014
 - **Decision:** How can intermediate goals be set?
 - ▶ Raise the bar intermittently in equal increments but at least once every three years with the first increase required by the 2003-2004 school year.
 - **Consequences:**
 - ▶ For States choosing to focus on an improvement approach, maintaining a steady target for three years would allow the State to “feature” improvement rather than focusing on status.

- ▶ Knowing that a substantial status increase is looming in the third year of the intermediate goal could cause school and district personnel to focus on the status bar, rather than on improvement.
- ▶ By chance alone, several schools will “bounce” over the bar in one of the two or three years.
- **Policy Implications:**
 - ▶ It may be easier to communicate periodic (not less than four) changes in the bar over twelve years by keeping the bar steady for up to three years at a time.

Conclusions

Most State educational agencies face several dilemmas in attempting to implement the new NCLB Act accountability requirements without losing public confidence in educational accountability. This public confidence has been gained over the last several years at substantial financial and political expense. Ensuring the validity of accountability decisions requires an extended analysis of comparable evidence and consideration to competing interpretations of the meaning of the results. Misidentifying schools or districts for improvement leads to a diffusion of limited resources, confusion over what programs are working, and a loss of public confidence in the public schools and in our ability to hold them properly accountable for student learning. It is of utmost importance that States carefully and deliberately approach the decisions necessary to ensure that, in the final analysis, they develop a valid and reliable accountability system—one that will engender confidence in the decisions whenever schools or districts are identified for improvement under the NCLB Act.



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