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ABSTRACT

This brief examines issues raised by the No Child Left Behind Act critical to long-term success of states' reforms. These issues include building a coherent testing program (lead with standards, not tests, and ensure the quality of all tests, particularly their alignment with state standards); managing trade-offs between high expectations and high numbers of low-performing schools (e.g., establish an anchor for proficiency at the end of high school based on preparedness for college and high growth careers, then map backward to set expectations for earlier grades); targeting responses to help more low-performing schools succeed (e.g., establish categories of poor performance that distinguish the most academically needy schools, then target the most substantial assistance or interventions at those schools); building more useful data systems (e.g., create a secure, consistent system to assign unique student identifier numbers, and safeguard data to minimize errors or misrepresentation); balancing accountability with capacity-building (e.g., provide access to a rich, challenging curriculum aligned with standards, and make available to all teachers high-quality, sustained standards-based professional development); and sustaining public support amid expanded testing and accountability (e.g., make state testing and accountability systems as transparent as possible, and foster a third-party organization to mount a sustained public engagement campaign). (SM)

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NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

Meeting Challenges
Seizing Opportunities
Improving Achievement

THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT HAS ADDED MOMENTUM TO LONGSTANDING EFFORTS UNDERWAY IN STATES TO RAISE ACADEMIC STANDARDS, MEASURE RESULTS, AND HOLD SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS ACCOUNTABLE FOR IMPROVING ACHIEVEMENT. FOR SOME STATES, THE NEW LAW IS PUSHING THEM TO GO FARTHER AND FASTER IN IMPLEMENTING THESE REFORMS. FOR OTHER STATES, THE LAW PRESENTS CHALLENGES IN MAINTAINING THE DIRECTION AND COHERENCE OF THE REFORMS THEY ALREADY HAVE PUT IN PLACE. ACHIEVE HAS PINPOINTED A SET OF IMPORTANT CHOICES THAT THE LAW PRESENTS FOR EVERY STATE.

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Meeting Challenges, Seizing Opportunities, Improving Achievement

Governors and corporate leaders created Achieve to help states reach the highest quality when it comes to their standards, tests and accountability systems. Achieve is committed to working with states to ensure that their responses to No Child Left Behind significantly advance what has clearly been their aim — to raise the achievement of all students.

Since the passage of the new law, Achieve has heard state leaders describe a similar set of concerns. These concerns include the scope of the work that must be accomplished, the costs that may be involved and, most importantly, the capacity of states to do what is required without sacrificing the quality or coherence of their reforms. This policy brief focuses on the issues raised by the new law that Achieve considers the most critical to the long-term success of states' reforms and offers some important considerations that states should weigh when responding to them.

BUILDING A COHERENT TESTING PROGRAM

States must have twin objectives in mind when it comes to testing: expanding their assessment systems quickly enough to satisfy the requirements of the federal law while ensuring high-quality tests that align closely to states' standards. To fill gaps in grade-by-grade testing in reading and math, the 50 states collectively need to develop and administer more than 300 additional tests. If they are high quality, the tests could add a new dimension of coherence to states' school improvement initiatives and offer more regular checks of students' progress.

However, given the law's three-year window to put tests in place and the national economic downturn, states face time and budget pressures in creating new assessments. It is essential that states fill their test gaps to meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind without sacrificing the quality of the tests, their alignment to state standards or comparability of results across school districts. Policymakers, educators, parents and the public must have the greatest possible confidence in the tests given the important educational decisions that will be made based on them. Achieve urges states to:

- *Lead with standards, not tests.* With new tests being added, educators may be inclined to focus more on the tests and less on the standards the tests are designed to measure. The standards must continue to serve as the roadmap to which districts, schools and parents refer as they improve teaching and learning. To serve this role well, standards need to be rigorous, unambiguous, broadly accessible and translated into classroom tools.

Some states should take this opportunity to strengthen their standards by making them clearer, more coherent from grade to grade, and appropriately challenging. States that have not set grade-by-grade standards in English and math must define expectations for each grade. Their goal should be a clear articulation and progression of knowledge and skills from grade to grade, rather than simply repeating the same concepts or only altering them slightly. We know this is

As states fill in the gaps in their testing systems, it is critical that the new tests are well aligned to the state standards and to the tests that already exist at key grade levels.

how top-achieving nations structure their standards: They develop foundational skills well and build on them to teach more advanced content each year.

○ *Ensure the quality of any test that is given, in particular its alignment with the state's standards.* The tests that states administer must align very closely with their standards. This provides educators and students the confidence that if they work toward reaching the standards, they will see better results on the tests. Nonetheless, the alignment of tests with standards has been difficult for some states to achieve, even though it was a provision in the 1994 predecessor to No Child Left Behind.

Key No Child Left Behind Provisions

- *Challenging, coherent content standards in reading and math set immediately, with science standards by 2005–06*
- *Grade-by-grade reading and math tests in grades 3 through 8 by 2005–06, with science tests in elementary, middle and high school by 2007–08*
- *Detailed reporting to schools and the public using results disaggregated by race, ethnicity, economic status, migrant status, English proficiency, gender and disability by 2002–03*
- *Targets for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) based on 2001–02 test results set by January 2003*
- *Assistance to schools missing AYP for two consecutive years in 2004–05*
- *Corrective action in schools missing AYP for four consecutive years in 2006–07*

As states add new tests, this challenge will only intensify. Given the higher stakes, states will want greater confidence in the quality of the tests they are adding. At the same time, they will be under pressure to build these tests quickly, and they will all be drawing on the same handful of companies to develop them.

The governors and business leaders who created Achieve believed it was critical for states to have access to an independent, unbiased source to evaluate the quality of their standards and tests; relying solely on those who create the tests to vouch for their quality is not the soundest course. As states add new tests, they should insist on rigorous quality control and seek an independent review of tests being developed to ensure their quality, including their alignment with standards. This process should involve educators from within the state and experts from outside the state. The protocol for reviewing the tests should be based on the best available examples from other states and organizations. This is important for both quality and credibility. Achieve has used this sort of protocol in its work with more than a dozen states.

○ *Pay careful attention to vertical alignment of tests from grade to grade as new tests are added.* One advantage of grade-by-grade testing over tests given only in a set of key grades is that testing in each grade can permit educators and parents to track student progress more closely each year and target curricular and instructional supports accordingly.

This ability to track student progress is significantly compromised, however, if the tests given in each grade do not align well with the tests given in

Achieve's work has shown that a mix of multiple-choice and open-ended test questions make for the most robust assessments.

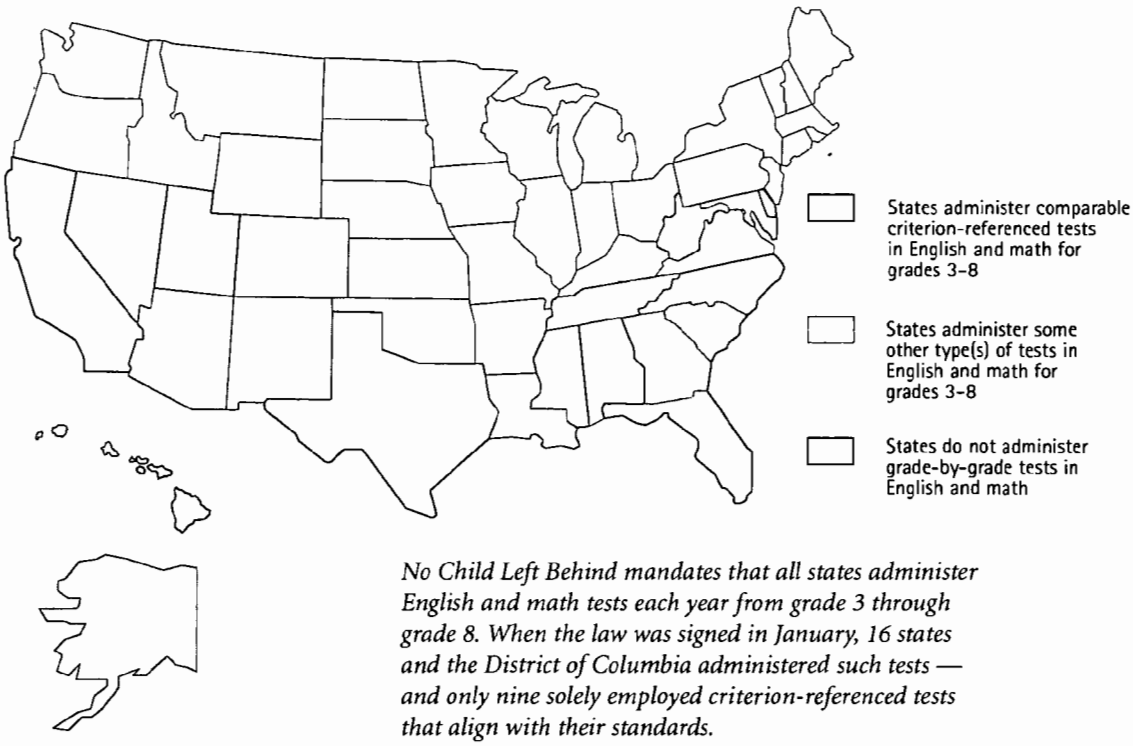
the grades above and below. If a state uses different tests in successive grades — its own standards-based test in one grade followed by an off-the-shelf test or assessments selected by each district — the results will not be consistent from grade to grade and may confound attempts to improve teaching and learning.

As states fill in the gaps in their testing systems, it is critical that the new tests are well aligned to the state standards *and* to the tests that already exist at key grade levels. The tests should measure a logical progression of skills from grade level to grade level. Achieve recommends incorporating this into the review process suggested above.

- *Maintain the sophistication of tests while delivering timely results.* While the new law makes an educationally sound demand that schools receive test results in time for them to be useful in guiding teaching and learning, the specific requirement of returning test results by the start of the following school year may stretch states' existing schedules. In addition, the need to grade nearly double the number of tests given will create more work in scoring and reporting.

States should not respond by eliminating open-ended test items, which take longer to score. Our work has shown that a mix of multiple-choice and open-ended test questions make for the most

Measuring Student Progress, Grades 3–8



No Child Left Behind mandates that all states administer English and math tests each year from grade 3 through grade 8. When the law was signed in January, 16 states and the District of Columbia administered such tests — and only nine solely employed criterion-referenced tests that align with their standards.

Source: "Quality Counts 2002" and Education Week, *January 9, 2002*

robust assessments. The open-ended items also can be powerful levers to drive instruction in desirable directions.

Instead, states should take steps to speed scoring. **New York**, for example, involves teachers in scoring. Their participation reduces turnaround time for results and provides a meaningful professional development opportunity for the participating teachers. Other states have pushed testing companies to reduce the time needed to score tests by doing the work in the state or region. This cuts the time in which the tests are in transit.

○ *Avoid off-the-shelf tests as the principal measure of achievement.* States may see national norm-referenced tests as the solution to two problems: the limited capacity to develop whole new tests and the cost in time and dollars to build state-specific tests. These advantages, however, are far outweighed by the shortcomings inherent in using off-the-shelf tests. First, these tests are a poor match with most states' standards; Achieve has consistently found that they do not adequately measure the higher-level skills that most states expect students to learn. Second, because they do not measure each student's performance against standards and instead report results in comparison to the performance of a national sample, the tests can confuse teachers, parents and students seeking clear academic targets from state standards.

If a state is compelled to use an off-the-shelf test, its goal should be to do so only as an interim fix and to work diligently to develop tests that are fully aligned with its standards. A vital step for a state using an off-the-shelf test is to augment or customize the test so that it better reflects that state's standards.

As part of its selection process, a state should undertake a formal, in-depth review of all the tests it is considering to determine any gaps between its standards and each of the tests available. This gap analysis should then be the roadmap for revising the test selected; ideally, a state's contract with the testing vendor would describe in detail the gaps to be filled and the process for filling them. The state — not the testing company — should control the augmentation or customization process, and seek an independent review to verify this work.

Maryland has followed this path in rebuilding its testing program to comply more closely with No Child Left Behind. Educators from the state reviewed all the tests offered by testing companies for their fit with the state's standards. In the end, the state selected a mix of commercially available tests, rather than a single testmaker's offering, to reach the closest fit. The state then asked Achieve to define the tests' gaps in measuring Maryland's standards so that it could negotiate specific contract provisions for closing them.

The timeline and process for the improvement of an off-the-shelf test should be transparent to educators, parents and students. This will decrease the chance that schools will focus on the unaligned test rather than the state's standards.

○ *Form partnerships with other states to pool resources and work together to develop new tests.* One way for states to address well-founded concerns about development time, costs, quality and resources would be to move forward as groups. By pooling resources and working together, groups of states could develop new tests in grades and subjects where they need them. States also could share existing tests with one another. For example, if a state had a strong test in place in a particular grade, partner states could adopt or adapt that test for their own use and avoid development costs at that grade.

If it were desirable, consortia of states could use common tests to compare performance across state lines against a common standard. These partnerships or consortia could be based on similarities between states' standards or on groupings — such as a regional clustering — that would provide meaningful comparisons for parents and the public.

MANAGING THE TRADE-OFF BETWEEN HIGH EXPECTATIONS AND HIGH NUMBERS OF LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

Congress and the President left entirely to each state the vital decision of setting the threshold for proficiency that all students must cross in the next 12 years. Based on their current tests and their current expectations for proficiency, states have projected many schools being pegged as "low performing" because their students are not making uniform, incremental progress. The 12-year schedule could create an unintended incentive for states to adjust proficiency expectations downward to raise the percentage of students meeting them. On the other hand, state officials who have made a significant commitment to *raising* standards over the last decade are reluctant to reverse course, given the potential educational and political risks. Achieve urges states to:

- *Establish an "anchor" for proficiency at the end of high school based on preparedness for college and high-growth careers, then map backward to set expectations for earlier grades.* The most educationally sound and publicly defensible way to define "proficiency" is to start with the high school standards and assessments and set the "proficient" level so that it is aligned with the literacy and math skills needed to do credit-bearing work in postsecondary institutions or to succeed in a high-skills job. From this starting point, states can map backward to ensure that the content and proficiency standards in the elementary and middle grades create a progression to the high school standards. In this way, the content and proficiency standards in each grade would be benchmarked to an understandable external anchor, one that parents and the public will accept and support.

Few states have accomplished this, in part because there is no shared definition of college and career readiness that they can use to anchor their standards with real confidence. Some states have involved higher education or business representatives in their standard-setting process, but that has not resulted in a careful articulation of the academic knowledge and skills needed for success in first-year college courses or high skills careers. As a result, many high school graduates continue to need extensive remediation in college and the workplace.

The American Diploma Project

Achieve, the Education Trust, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, the National Alliance of Business and five states — Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Nevada and Texas — have launched a joint project to help close gaps between high school graduation expectations and the academic demands of college and high-skills workplaces. The American Diploma Project plans to make public next year a set of high school graduation benchmarks built from a careful analysis of the academic expectations in higher education and business that states can use in setting and refining their own standards.

The provision of No Child Left Behind that calls on schools to raise the performance of all groups of students presents a substantial new hurdle for most states and schools.

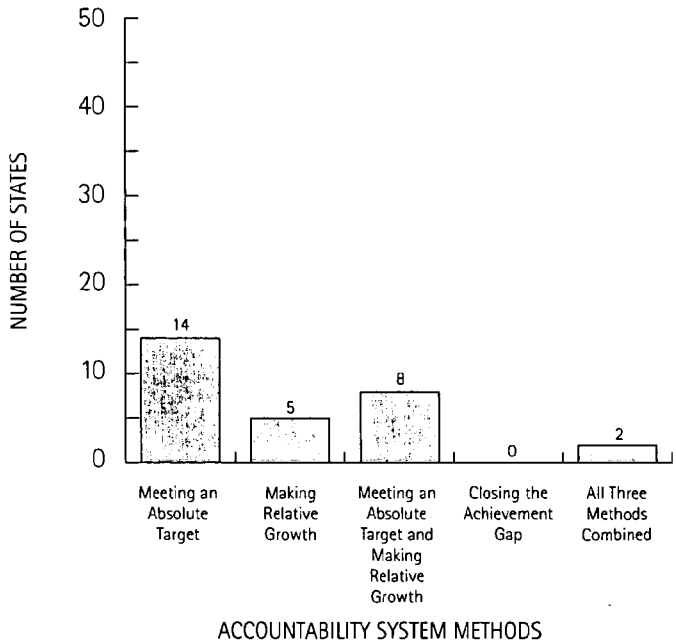
○ *Use innovative approaches to move students toward meaningful proficiency targets over time.* While the college/career readiness benchmark is unquestionably the right target to set and all states should reach for that expectation unquestionably, it may be a difficult one for students in some states to achieve in the short term.

As a result, some states may opt to start with a more reasonable expectation that pushes students but meets them closer to their current level of proficiency. No Child Left Behind calls on states to set three proficiency levels: basic, proficient and advanced. To leverage this provision, states could set their proficient levels at a point that raises rigor, but also recognizes reality. They could use the advanced level to signal college/career preparedness. Programs that reward schools for high performance and scholarships for high-achieving students could be pegged to this standard rather than the proficient level. In this way, states could use a higher expectation to "stretch" all students and schools and make clear the skills and knowledge students need to succeed after high school.

States that use this approach must move steadily and quickly to make their proficient levels match college/career readiness. The trajectory from the initial proficiency target to one aligned with college/career preparedness must be clear and unwavering. To follow that trajectory, states must have sophisticated assessments that can measure a wide range of achievement, particularly at the higher end. They must make a sustained effort to build public awareness of end-of-high school expectations. The alternative is to set standards lower than what we know students need to succeed. But that will simply push failure into the future by sending students to college or careers ill equipped for the academic demands they will face.

States Using Each of Three Methods To Define School Progress

No Child Left Behind requires states to hold schools accountable based on annual targets for achievement growth ("Making Relative Growth"), with all students proficient within 12 years. To date, few states have such systems in place.



Source: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 2001

TARGETING RESPONSES TO HELP MORE LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS SUCCEED

The provision of No Child Left Behind that calls on schools to raise the performance of *all* groups of students presents a substantial new hurdle for most states and schools. This is likely to be the source of whatever rise states experience in their numbers of low-performing schools. Many schools may drop to a low-performing rating because a single group of students fails to make adequate progress against the 12-year schedule. This is a far cry from a school in which results for all students are stagnant or falling. States should have different educational remedies for diagnoses of differing severity. Schools in which all students are failing to achieve need different scrutiny and support than schools in which one group of students is making progress that falls slightly below the annual target. More important than how they classify school performance, states must boost their capacity and that of school districts to assist schools effectively. Few states and districts can claim a long and strong record of intervention. Achieve urges states to:

- *Establish categories of poor performance that distinguish the most academically needy schools, then target the most substantial assistance or interventions at those schools.* No Child Left Behind rightly puts the onus on all schools to raise the performance of all students in reading and math. Because every group in every grade must make progress in every subject under the law, there are many permutations of results that could lead schools — particularly elementary schools — to miss AYP. States must establish strategies for responding that cut through this potential clutter.

While the law requires states to provide technical assistance for all schools failing to reach AYP in two consecutive years, the U.S. Department of Education has indicated states have some leeway in the level of that assistance depending on the nature of the performance by a school. This is important because there is no one-size-fits-all strategy for turning around low-performing schools, nor do states have unlimited resources with which to assist them.

The assistance provided a school should vary based on the nature and severity of the challenges it faces. A school in which *all* students fail to make AYP year after year will require more significant intervention than a school in which one subgroup of students makes some progress but falls short of the AYP target. The first school may require extensive assistance from an outside team of experts. The second may need only limited support to help it translate its success with other students to its work with its lowest-performing students.

North Carolina and **Kentucky** have performed what amounts to academic triage for several years, providing more direct assistance to the lowest of the low-performing schools. **Virginia** has a new support program that takes a similar approach. In terms of financial assistance, the relatively small percentage of federal aid set aside specifically for "school improvement" can be targeted at the schools most in need.

Critical to states' strategies for assisting the lowest-performing schools will be an effective way to diagnose each school's condition, probably requiring on-site visits to confirm what achievement results indicate. In some schools, states should leverage requirements both in No Child Left Behind and in their own laws that demand

If projections of the numbers of low-performing schools identified under the law's provision hold true, the need to build capacity to help such schools would be unmistakable.

low-performing schools develop school improvement plans by reviewing these plans carefully, pushing schools to adopt effective data-driven responses and monitoring the implementation of the plans routinely. Successful states require such plans and send in teams of trained and experienced educators and subject specialists to help schools and local districts with this task.

If the state diagnosis determines that a school lacks the capacity to change itself, states may be well served to move more rapidly than No Child Left Behind requires to carry out more significant interventions that alter the teaching and learning environment. This may particularly be the case for the relatively small number of high schools likely to be subject to the new law's provisions.

- *Distribute the responsibility for helping low-performing schools with local school districts in a way that clearly divides labor and prevents wasteful duplication of effort.* States should find a way to share the load of helping schools identified as low performing. Given projections in some states of 50 percent or more of schools expected to miss AYP targets, such a division of labor will be a practical necessity to address the political imperative to reduce those numbers. This division should be done in a way that makes accountability for academic outcomes clear. For example, districts could focus on schools in which one or two groups are failing, which may only require more focused use of resources and relatively modest changes in practice to meet progress goals. States then could focus intensive support on the worst-performing schools. In the end, the division should serve a state's twin needs to demonstrate chronically low-performing schools can be turned around and to reduce quickly an unpalatable number of schools missing AYP by raising those closest to the benchmark over it.
- *Match all federal aid to state and local efforts to assist low-performing schools.* The amount states must set aside specifically to pay for school improvement efforts is very small when compared to the range of federal aid available through No Child Left Behind. States should closely monitor low-performing schools' use of comprehensive school reform, teaching quality, Reading First and other sources of federal funding to ensure they are aligned with school improvement plans and practices. These practices, such as sustained professional development, must have been proven effective in improving teaching practices. States should have a clear idea of how this larger pool of money will further a school's work to make AYP.
- *Use the pressure of No Child Left Behind to convince legislators and other policymakers to invest in building the capacity of the state education agency or other entities capable of assisting low-performing schools.* For many states, the new federal law may place a heavier burden than the state has placed on itself to assist low-performing schools. If projections of the numbers of low-performing schools identified under the law's provision hold true, the need to build capacity to help such schools would be unmistakable. State education agencies should delineate this role for themselves explicitly, then seek the resources needed to carry out that mission.

Alternatively, there may be other entities that are well positioned to help schools — for example, regional education centers that operate quasi-independently, university-based programs and non-profit organizations. States should seek ways to utilize these resources; the guiding principle should be to maximize resources wherever they may exist and prove effective to assist low-performing schools.

Most states will need a combination of approaches, and businesses and foundations should be encouraged to support external partners that can help schools improve — without expanding state bureaucracy.

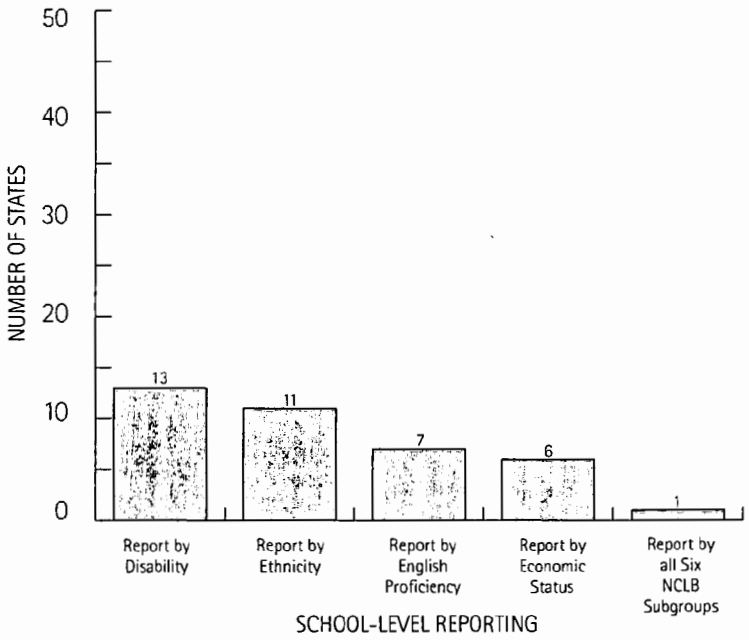
BUILDING MORE USEFUL DATA SYSTEMS

Measuring academic results and using those results to push for improvement are at the heart of No Child Left Behind. The system envisioned by the law requires that data be gathered and parsed accurately and that results be delivered in a way that can help educators and parents respond to the needs of each student. Achieve urges states to:

- *Create a secure and consistent system to assign unique student identifier numbers.* The ability to track a student's performance over time is essential to determine what skills and knowledge need more attention and whether earlier assistance has paid off. Having an identifier that permits test and enrollment information to be compared is vital as well. While the use of such identifying numbers raises privacy concerns for some, a number of states have demonstrated that the need for information can be balanced successfully with concerns about individual liberty.
- *Safeguard the data system to minimize errors or misrepresentation.* Several steps can be taken to accomplish this, according to the National Center for Educational Accountability. One is for the state to take the primary role in collecting demographic information about students that is fed into the testing system to allow for disaggregation of results. By collecting the information in the fall as per-pupil funding counts are being taken and then transferring it to each student's test answer sheet, states can

States Reporting Disaggregated Data for Schools

No Child Left Behind requires states to use results disaggregated by race, ethnicity, economic status, immigrant status, English proficiency, gender and disability for accountability and public reporting. While many states have demographic breakdowns of their student enrollments, far fewer report results this way. Of the states that do, more disaggregate at the state level than the school level.



Source: Education Commission of the States, March 2002

raise the accuracy beyond the commonly used method of allowing students to report their own ethnic and socio-economic status. Another step would be to create a means to audit whatever information is left to schools and school districts to collect.

- *Make as much data as possible as widely accessible as possible.* Ideally, states would mix the paper reports they will generate under No Child Left Behind with online access for educators and the public so that they can analyze data sets themselves. At minimum, principals should be able to manipulate their school's data, and teachers should be able to analyze class data sets. With unique student identifier numbers, states should be able to amass results over time for students, allowing teachers to see what progress has been made. States should strive to provide this sort of long-term data at various levels from standards down to particular types of test items.

In addition, schools and the public should have access to comparative data that will help identify top-performing schools with similar enrollments. These schools should be viewed as resources, particularly to schools that are struggling. **Florida** has tried to match low-performing schools and comparable schools with better performance.

- *Use the reporting of results as a starting point rather than a finish line.* If the fundamental purpose of the results being reported is to guide improvement, then the reports should immediately connect educators and parents with resources to help address any academic weaknesses indicated. This also is best addressed by harnessing technology to link helpful articles, sample lessons, classroom tools and other information to specific conditions observed through the test results. The more targeted these connections are, the more useful they are likely to be.

BALANCING ACCOUNTABILITY WITH CAPACITY-BUILDING

While the challenges raised by the testing and accountability provisions in No Child Left Behind are among the most pressing, it is certain that other issues will quickly emerge as critical to reaching the worthy intentions of the law. States will need to balance accountability with capacity, providing teachers and schools the tools they need to achieve. While the work they must do to respond to the most immediate requirements of the new law is expansive, states cannot afford to neglect issues directly related to teaching and learning. Achieve urges states to:

- *Provide access for all teachers and schools to a rich and challenging curriculum aligned with standards.* As states have begun holding schools accountable for results, teachers, in particular new teachers, increasingly are asking for greater guidance on what should be taught. The provision of No Child Left Behind calling for grade-by-grade expectations will help states move closer to answering this need, but standards are not a substitute for a challenging curriculum.

Guided by their own histories and political circumstances, states will need to craft suitable responses. There are a number of options that would push states farther than most have gone to date, including development of voluntary model curricula, support for local districts to build and share curricula and lesson plans, or a requirement for local districts to create curricula aligned to standards and a process through which the state could assure that alignment.

It must be crystal clear to parents and educators what the new rules of the game will be.

- *Make available to all teachers high-quality, sustained standards-based professional development.* As with curriculum, teachers want to improve their knowledge and skills in a way that helps more students reach standards. However, the professional development teachers traditionally have received is not well connected to the standards or to the broader goals of raising student achievement.

While most of the decisions regarding professional development are made at the local level, states should consider some options to exert greater influence over professional development. Such efforts should track how professional development funds are being spent, monitor the effectiveness of the training being offered particularly in relation to students' results and fund only those local efforts that are demonstrably linked to standards.

In addition, states can launch their own professional development programs in high-priority subjects (as **California** and **Texas** have done with their reading and math initiatives) or in the highest-need schools. A focus of professional development should be on helping teachers use the information created by expanded testing programs to target instruction.

- *Complement annual tests used for accountability with diagnostic assessments throughout the school year.* If states succeed in creating high-quality tests that yield informative data, districts should be less inclined to use their dollars to buy duplicative summative assessments. They should be encouraged to use their money to invest in diagnostic tests. States should work collaboratively with them to develop and make widely available item banks for such diagnostic tests — or the tests themselves. In addition, states should continue to experiment with online assessments, which could be particularly well suited to providing diagnostic information.

While the testing provisions in the new law have been interpreted as calling for additional large-scale, summative tests, another option may be for states to invest in high-quality, well-aligned diagnostic assessments that could be given at several points during a school year. Such assessments could provide educators and parents with rapid appraisals of students' learning needs, particularly if the assessments are given online. While there are significant technical hurdles, some testing experts believe results from such assessments could be aggregated over the school year to give a meaningful proficiency measure that could figure into annual progress targets.

SUSTAINING PUBLIC SUPPORT AMID EXPANDED TESTING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Surveys indicate that a majority of Americans favor the push toward higher standards, using tests to gauge school performance and holding schools accountable. But the best polls to date were taken in a different context, prior to the tests and accountability measures that are coming. As a result, that public support cannot be taken for granted. It must be crystal clear to parents and educators what the new rules of the game will be.

Very few people even know there is a new game; only 12 percent of the public, 32 percent of educators and 63 percent of education policymakers are even aware of the new federal law, according to a Hart/Teeter poll conducted for Educational Testing Service in May 2002. Achieve urges states to:

- *Make the state's testing and accountability systems as transparent as is practicable.* A few states, including **Texas,** which has the full complement of grade-by-grade tests required by No Child Left Behind, make their tests public soon after they are given. This prevents the tests from being viewed as state secrets, allows educators and parents to see firsthand how expectations are being measured, and builds support for the testing system through easy and timely access to results. While most states release at least some test items each year or complete tests after several years, the states that offer full disclosure show that most states can do more to open their tests to scrutiny.

Similarly, the accountability system should be clear and consistent. If, for example, a state uses an academic index approach to reporting results and holding schools accountable, the components of the index should be well understood; states should consider reporting them publicly in addition to the ultimate index number they yield.

- *Move sooner rather than later to explain the changes that are coming.* Given the magnitude and scope of the changes most states need to make to respond to No Child Left Behind, they should be communicating with educators and the public early and often. This will give them the longest possible period to adjust to the new demands. States should involve education, parent and business groups in their planning of strategies to roll out the new programs.

- *Foster a third-party organization to mount a sustained public engagement campaign.* Voices from the private sector and higher education can offer the most credible arguments for higher standards. In **Massachusetts, Texas** and **Washington,** such groups have been vital to the success the states have had in creating their standards-based reforms and in maintaining them. Often organized by concerned business and education leaders, these organizations have launched major public awareness campaigns, helped guide educators in leveraging their state's standards and tests, studied best practices in high-performing schools, and conducted other research to help build awareness and support.

The framers of No Child Left Behind left many of the most important decisions in the proper hands — those of state policymakers who have been driving standards-based reform. Clearly, the progress states have made has varied widely. The new federal law gives every state the opportunity to attend to critical elements of school improvement — alignment of standards and tests, meaningful proficiency expectations, useful reporting of results, and targeted support for low-performing schools. How states choose to respond to this opportunity will, in the end, determine if the law satisfies the admirable goal for which it is named.

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Achieve's principal purposes are to:

- help states **benchmark** their standards, assessments and accountability systems against the best in the country and the world;
- provide sustained **public leadership** and advocacy for the movement to raise standards and improve student performance;
- build **partnerships** that allow states to work together to improve teaching and learning and raise student achievement; and
- serve as a **national clearinghouse** on education standards and school reform.

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