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Study predicts high Mass. failure rate under NCLB *Education groups call for major reforms of “flawed” law*

Three-quarters of all schools in Massachusetts will fail to meet federal educational performance standards by 2014, according to an analysis of student test score data by Ed Moscovitch of Cape Ann Economics. Many of these schools will face increasingly harsh sanctions under the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, also known as the No Child Left Behind Act.

Despite the high failure rate that will occur under NCLB, Massachusetts schools rank at or near the top on the National Assessment of Educational Progress tests, the SATs, college attendance rates and other measures of achievement.

A report based on Moscovitch’s findings was released at a State House press conference today by MassPartners for Public Schools, a coalition of the leading statewide educator and parent associations. The report is entitled *Facing Reality: What happens when good schools are labeled “failures”?* MassPartners commissioned the study with funding from Communities for Quality Education and the Civil Society Institute.

With the release of this report, Massachusetts educators and parents are joining their counterparts across the country in calling for major revisions in the federal education law.

“MassPartners supports the overarching goals of NCLB, which are to provide all children with a quality education and to close the achievement gaps,” said Joan Connolly, president-elect of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents and superintendent of the Malden Public Schools.

“Unfortunately, this law does not help us accomplish those goals. NCLB’s inflexible formulas lead to some misleading results and require sanctions that are often unnecessary or counter-productive.”

Catherine Boudreau, co-chair of MassPartners and president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association, added, “When too many schools are labeled failures – including schools with proven track records of success – attention and resources are diverted from the much smaller number of schools that really do need help.”

Nadya Aswad Higgins, executive director of the Massachusetts Elementary School Principals’ Association and MassPartners Board member, said, “We support collecting performance data and breaking it out by different groups of students because it is important to shine a spotlight on performance gaps. However, the consequences under the law often bear little relation to what struggling students need.”

MassPartners is calling for significant changes in NCLB and its implementation:

- NCLB should be amended to require states to evaluate schools based on multiple criteria, not on test scores alone.
- NCLB should be amended so that schools failing to meet educational standards receive technical assistance and support, not just penalties, and funding should be available to make that support possible.
- The state Department of Education should work closely with education and parent groups to implement effective school improvement strategies.
- The DOE should adjust the Adequate Yearly Progress formula to reduce the need for rapid test-score growth as 2014 nears. This will not solve the fundamental problems with NCLB, but will somewhat reduce mislabeling of schools.

The Moscovitch findings

Moscovitch examined student MCAS scores over the past three years to project how many schools are likely to meet NCLB’s AYP standards in the future. He said that his is an “optimistic” projection since it presumes that MCAS scores will continue to rise for the next decade, although historically achievement test scores rise more rapidly in the early years after a new test is administered before reaching a plateau.

In 2004, 22 percent of all Massachusetts schools (384) had failed to make AYP for two years or more. By 2014, Moscovitch found:

- 3 out of 4 schools (1,286 out of 1,731 schools for which AYP reports are produced, or 74 percent) will fail to make AYP for two or more years.

- Of schools failing to make AYP, 8 out of 10 (79 percent) will fall short based on aggregate school scores, not just for subgroups.
- 59 percent of the schools serving the most affluent students, and 86 percent of those serving the poorest students, will fail to reach the AYP standards.

Mislabeling leads to confusion and excessive sanctions

Ann Walsh of the Massachusetts Parent Teacher Association said that the list of schools already failing to make AYP “confuses parents who want solid information about school quality.” (The list is available on the DOE Web site at www.doe.mass.edu/sda/ayp/.) Many currently on the list are schools that serve low-income students who historically have struggled to meet academic standards, while others are schools that do well by other measures.

One example of the latter is the Ephraim Curtis Middle School in Sudbury, whose grade 7 students were in the top two percent on the ELA test and grade 8 students were in the top nine percent on the mathematics test. The school failed to make AYP because the special needs subgroup did not meet test-score requirements in math. As a result, the whole school faces sanctions. Those sanctions will expand in scope and severity if rising AYP standards aren’t met in the future. According to the law, after seven years this popular school will face some form of “restructuring.”

As 2014 approaches, more and more otherwise successful schools will fail to make AYP because there are so many ways to fail. For example, schools could fail to make AYP if 100 percent of the students reach the “proficient” level on MCAS by 2012 but only 99.5 percent of them reach that target in 2014, or if three students from a subgroup of 40 are absent for the test.

MassPartners for Public Schools organizations
 Massachusetts Association of School Committees
 Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents
 Massachusetts Elementary School Principals’ Association
 Massachusetts Federation of Teachers
 Massachusetts Parent Teacher Association
 Massachusetts Secondary School Administrators’ Association
 Massachusetts Teachers Association

Copies of the report are available on the member organizations’ Web sites.

NCLB's AYP Requirements Explained

Under NCLB, all students in grades 3-8 and in one grade in high school must be tested once a year in reading and mathematics. Students are expected to score at the “proficient” level or above on state-administered tests by 2014 and to make “Adequate Yearly Progress” toward that goal until then.

Subgroups of students, including low-income, black, Hispanic, special needs students and English language learners, also must meet AYP standards. If they do not, the entire school is deemed to have failed.

In addition to test-score requirements, schools and subgroups must meet MCAS participation requirements, as well as attendance or competency determination requirements. Under these rules, 95 percent of students must take the test; average daily attendance in a K-8 school must be 92 percent; and 70 percent of high school students must pass the Grade 10 MCAS tests – a requirement to qualify for graduation.

A school that fails to make AYP for two consecutive years is labeled “in need of improvement.” Those that receive federal Title I funds – funds allocated to schools that serve a requisite number of low-income students – face sanctions that increase over time.

After two years, sanctioned schools must give parents the choice of sending their children to another school in the district, with transportation costs paid out of Title I dollars. After five years, a school faces “corrective action.” After seven years, a school must be “restructured,” with options including state take-over, conversion to a charter school, management by a private company, or other unspecified “major restructuring.”

A Title I school faces sanctions whether the failure to meet AYP is based on aggregate scores or scores from one of the seven subgroups.

Massachusetts has developed a complicated formula for determining whether schools are making AYP. This formula is one of the most flexible in the country and is considered a model by the U.S. Department of Education. Even so, it will lead to three-quarters of all schools in a high-performing state failing to make the grade.

Six other states (California, Connecticut, Illinois, Louisiana, Florida and Minnesota) have conducted studies similar to the Massachusetts study and have projected school failure rates ranging from 75 to 99 percent. The differences are largely attributable to different state testing systems, cut scores and AYP formulas. Because of those inconsistencies, AYP results are not useful for comparing one state's test scores or AYP failure rates to another's.