

Measuring academic proficiency under the nclb.

Education



The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was designed to close the achievement gap between high and low performing children, especially the achievement gap between minority and non-minority students and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers (NCLB, 2001). The key components of the act are the adequate yearly programs (AYP), and the annual measurable objectives (AMO). The AYP is the working principle of the act and it is seen as the mechanism for which all schools and all students meet the same academic standards in reading and mathematics by school year 2013-2014.

The AMO indicates the performance of the school in terms of proficiency in reading and mathematics tests. Moreover, the law identifies student subgroups like economically disadvantaged students, students from major racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency. The law also specifically requires that 95% of the total number of students in a school and 95% of each subgroup to take the reading and math standardized tests, while the state is tasked to determine its own AMO targets and the minimum number of students in each subgroup who are required to meet or surpass the AMO targets (NCLB, 2001).

The AYP requirements apply to Title 1 and non-title 1 school that receive federal funding. Schools that do not reach AYP for two or more years will be labeled as in need of improvement and are sanctioned. The NCLB employs a conjunctive accountability system wherein each subgroup of students are required to reach the minimum levels of proficiency in math and reading regardless of their previous proficiency levels, thus within 12 years, all students should reach 100% proficiency.

NCLB is based on the idea that high expectations for achievement would result to higher actual achievement levels. By requiring each school to reach a uniform level of proficiency would mean that in a given period, all schools and all students would have mastered the same skills and learned the same knowledge in reading and mathematics. The NCLB measures progress through a single mean proficiency score across levels and subgroup. However, this frame of mind does not consider the diversity of American students and their backgrounds.

For example, requiring each subgroup to meet the minimum mean proficiency score would ensure that the school would not reach the AYP. Using a single mean proficiency score to measure performance is not a true measure of school improvement nor student performance. Although, NCLB have positive visions, its method of attaining its objectives undermines what it is supposed to do.

The law treats each school and each student as a single and uniform entity when our society is composed of different races and backgrounds, not even taking into account the difference between the rich and the poor. Even if the law identified the subgroup of students, it still however assess each group in terms of the single mean proficiency score which is the same as implementing a one size fits all policy.

The problem with NCLB is that it asks schools to be assessed against a single mean proficiency score, wherein if a school fails to reach this score, would indicate that the school is not performing as it should be in accordance with federal and state rules. The use of a single mean proficiency score says that

each school is treated as equals, however the reality is differences in each school is present.

For example, different districts cater to different students and since education have been the purview of the state; they have also different standards on accountability and accreditation. The schools seek to attain the level of performance required by the state and in cases where measures of school performance differ from the NCLB would say that schools are making progress in the state level but is not up to standard in the national level.

Students also would be burdened by being pitted against a single score that may or may not be realistically attainable, and if they fail to reach the mark they would have caused the failure of the entire school. Another problem with the NCLB is that by identifying subgroup of students and requiring them to achieve the mean proficiency score puts them in a bind.

The subgroups identified by the law in some cases could be an unnecessary repetition of the groups, for example most Blacks and Latinos are economically disadvantaged, and that most of these groups also have lower mean proficiency scores. Thus if a school is composed of many poor students, of different racial groups, of students with limited English proficiency, then this school will surely not reach that mean proficiency score.

The NCLB is not friendly to racial groups, economically disadvantaged children, children with disabilities and children with limited English proficiency. It is common knowledge and even supported by statistics that those who are identified as economically disadvantaged are those who

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belong to a minority racial group. In which case they will be asked to reach the same proficiency score twice, then they will be labeled as under performing and the school as needing improvement.

It will compromise what the students have accomplished in a school year, because failing to reach the mark is not equal to no improvement or no learning. As for the parents, they would probably think that NCLB is good for their children as it ensures equality between groups in terms of academic achievement. However, if their state certifies that their children are performing to expectations like in Virginia and California, but the federal government says otherwise would saw confusion and distraught among parents.

Schools and districts complain that using a single mean proficiency score to measure performance is not realistic and appropriate. It does not take into consideration that high-poverty schools have students with less academic preparation than those with low-poverty schools. Moreover, by using a system of conjunctive accountability dooms schools from reaching AYP.

The short term effects of NCLB on low-income students and of color is that they will be subjected to more requirements in school or additional interventions that would enable them to reach the desired improvement of scores as well as being pressured to make that mark. The long-term effect is that when they fail to reach AYP and cause the school to lose out on the AYP race, then they will be blamed for it and probably will be faced with angry members of the community.

When schools still fail to make the mark and is identified as needs improvement and probably would be given less funding the more the low-income and racial groups become more disadvantaged, instead of closing the academic achievement gap, the NCLB does not even consider what academic achievement is.

I think that NCLB was born out of the sincere desire to make sure that our students have the same level of academic proficiency even for math and English only. Whoever drafted the bill however did not have a clear understanding of achievement, intelligence and environmental factors that are part and parcel of learning and education.

It is also funny to think that as diverse a population as we have we want to be pitted against a single score when what is more important than the grade or score is actual learning and the evidence of improvement across the years. Thus, as a law that seeks to close the achievement gap between groups of students, the NCLB divides and places the minority groups in a more difficult situation and at a more disadvantaged position.