

REGION AT A GLANCE

AYP: Emphasizing Gaps, Not Overall Achievement *By Richard Greenough*

No Child Left Behind's school accountability provisions have brought an unprecedented focus to achievement gaps among student subgroups. This is an important and positive change. Much of the public dialogue around No Child Left Behind has missed this change, though, and uses the school adequate yearly progress (AYP) designation of "Met" or "Not Met" as if it were a straightforward measure of overall school performance, as if a school not meeting AYP is necessarily "lower-performing" overall than one that is meeting AYP.

One of the most important facts to know about the No Child Left Behind Act's adequate yearly progress requirement is its "starting point" on the way to the 12-year goal of having 100 percent of students meeting standards. No matter how difficult or how easy a state's standards, tests, and cut scores might be, by statutory definition 20 percent of each state's students were in schools below the starting point objective for AYP in 2002.

While the starting point was based on the percentage of all students in a school meeting state standards, NCLB—with its focus on achievement gaps—also holds schools accountable for the performance of demographic subgroups. In practice, schools are most likely to miss AYP based on a subgroup's performance rather than on all students in aggregate. Holding the subgroups to the same standards as all students in aggregate can result in more than 20 percent of a state's students being in schools not making AYP. On the other hand, a "safe harbor" provision for schools showing

strong progress has allowed some states to have fewer than 20 percent of students in schools designated as not meeting AYP.

The most common pattern across the Northwest states, at least in the first years under NCLB, is that the AYP requirements spotlight achievement gaps between student subgroups rather than overall performance. This may change as the AYP objectives are raised from the starting point for the first time this year. But now and in the future, large and demographically diverse schools are more likely to meet the minimum subgroup size needed to be held accountable for achievement gaps.

In 2004, the Oregon schools not meeting AYP were on average almost three times larger in enrollment than those meeting AYP (168 tested students versus 60). Of the 69 largest Oregon high schools (ones with more than 250 students tested in grade 10), only three made AYP. Among the other 66, the majority (36) did better than the statewide average for all students meeting state English/Language Arts standards. In fact, 17 beat the state average by 10 percentage points and three beat it by 30 percentage points. This example demonstrates that when we are looking at AYP designations, it is vital to look at the specific categories—including proficiency, test participation, attendance, and graduation by subgroup or in aggregate—that were missed rather than assuming a school marked "not meeting AYP" is a "low-performing school." ■

Number of Idaho schools not meeting AYP for the specified subgroup and subject

Of the 113 Idaho schools not meeting AYP goals in 2004, only 13 did not meet the reading proficiency objective for all students as a group and only eight did not meet the math proficiency objective for all students as a group

