

EDITOR'S NOTE



For school districts around the nation, the rubber is really hitting the road these days. Five years after President Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act into law and put in place requirements for adequate yearly progress (AYP), more schools are winding up in the

pipeline for corrective action and more districts have been thrown into improvement status. According to a count by *Education Week*, 1,624 districts around the nation were listed as in need of improvement in 2005 for failing to meet AYP targets for at least two years in a row.

Under NCLB requirements, a district must provide support to a school in the first year after it misses its AYP goal. If the school fails to achieve progress for two consecutive years, the school is identified as in need of improvement and the district must provide technical assistance. After a school has been labeled as needing improvement for four years, districts must take strong corrective action to bring about meaningful change. The law states that such actions must include at least one of the following: “replacing school staff, implementing a new curriculum, decreasing management authority at the school level, appointing an outside expert to advise the school, extending the school day or year, or reorganizing the school internally.”

Just as for schools, districts are held to stiff accountability standards and also can be identified as in need of improvement. Districts in improvement status face sanctions that range from being put into state receivership to being abolished, if that option is allowed by the state. NCLB also mandates state assistance to low-performing districts, which can range from providing on-site coaches to assisting with planning to endorsing specific school improvement models.

Here in the Northwest, the number of districts in each state designated as needing improvement varies widely (see chart), but it would be a mistake to conclude that students in one state are superior to those of another. Rather, it’s a matter of substantially different accountability systems. Differences also exist among the Northwest states in the AYP categories that are creating challenges; for example, while reading proficiency of students with disabilities is the number one issue for Idaho districts not meeting AYP, in Washington it’s the math proficiency of economically disadvantaged students.

In the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory’s needs assessment survey—and again in state forums held last summer—district improvement was a hot topic. Four general themes bubbled to the surface: finding time for teacher collaboration in improvement teams; assessing school readiness to engage in improvement activities; ensuring necessary district resources and support for school improvement; and identifying methods for continuing improvement efforts.

This issue of *Northwest Education* offers examples of districts confronting and finding innovative ways to deal with those concerns. In South Lane (Oregon) School District, book clubs engage teachers in collaborative research on school improvement. Washington’s Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction marshals resources to help districts like South Kitsap get out of improvement status. Lake Washington School District follows rigorous benchmarks, developed by a consortium of high-performing Western districts with similar demographics. Idaho’s Joint School District #2 relies on a highly individualized assessment system to yield the kind of data needed for continuous student progress.

We hope these stories both inform and encourage educators grappling with the same thorny issues in their own districts across the region.

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DISTRICTS DESIGNATED AS IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT FOR 2006–2007

State (total # of districts)	Alaska (54)	Idaho (114)	Montana (430)*	Oregon (196)	Washington (296)
Year 1 Improvement	8	25	2	7	19 (Step 1)
Year 2 Improvement	10	12	16	4	11 (Step 2)
Corrective Action	11	21	26	4	Not applicable
Total in Improvement	29	58	44	15	30

Based on determinations released in August 2006 to January 2007.

* In addition to traditional K–12 districts, Montana also maintains combined elementary districts, combined high school districts, single districts, state-funded districts, and nonoperating and annexed districts.