



What New “AYP” Information Tells Us About Schools, States, and Public Education

By Daria Hall, Ross Wiener, and Kevin Carey

The Education Trust

This year, for the first time, every state is required to identify which schools have made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). There are now consistent goals for student achievement that apply to all schools and all students within each state. The message is clear: schools and districts will no longer be

considered successful unless they successfully teach all groups of students. Ask parents and voters, and they'll tell you that's just how they want it.¹

The Education Trust has collected and analyzed much of the initial AYP data that has been released so far. What does this new AYP data tell us? *It tells us that the AYP process that forms the heart of the accountability system is working.* It is providing more—and more accurate—information about school and student performance than we've ever had before. It is identifying shockingly large achievement gaps in schools that were previously designated by their states as “successful.” It is recognizing the good work of previously low-performing schools that have made significant progress in raising achievement for disadvantaged children. And it is demonstrating—once again—that demography is not destiny, that schools educating large numbers of low income and minority students are capable of not only meeting state standards for achievement, but of vastly exceeding them.

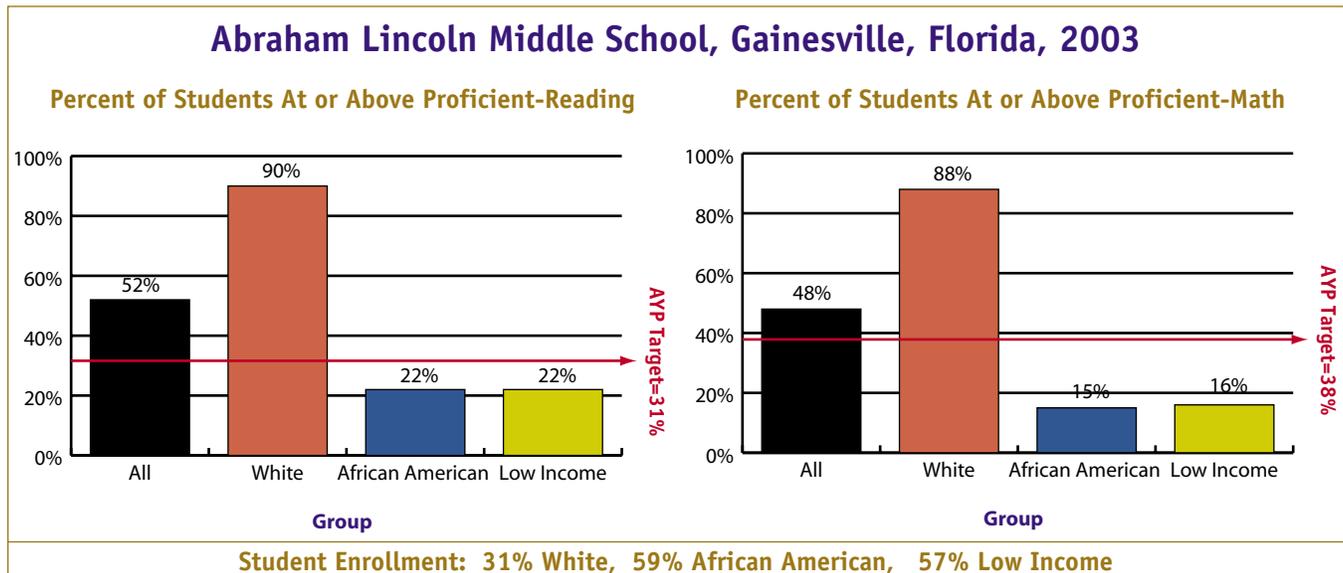
In short, the AYP system is doing what it was meant to do: shining a bright light on the state of achievement in America, identifying schools that need improvement, and allowing us to take important steps toward closing achievement gaps and having all students proficient in reading and math over the coming decade.

¹ According to a recent Business Roundtable public opinion poll, parents support this new definition of what it means to be a successful school. For example, when asked, “How concerned would you be about (the schools in your area/your child's school) [if] most of the students in the school(s) are meeting state standards but African American and Hispanic students are not?” 88% of voters and 93% of parents said they would be “Very” or “Somewhat” concerned. (source: Business Roundtable Survey, June 2003).

What Do the New AYP Results Tell Us About Local Schools?

For all the confusion about how the AYP system works in evaluating schools, it doesn't take long looking at the actual numbers to reach some undeniable conclusions:

1) The AYP system is identifying schools with massive achievement gaps. Many of these schools had been identified as "successful" by state accountability systems.



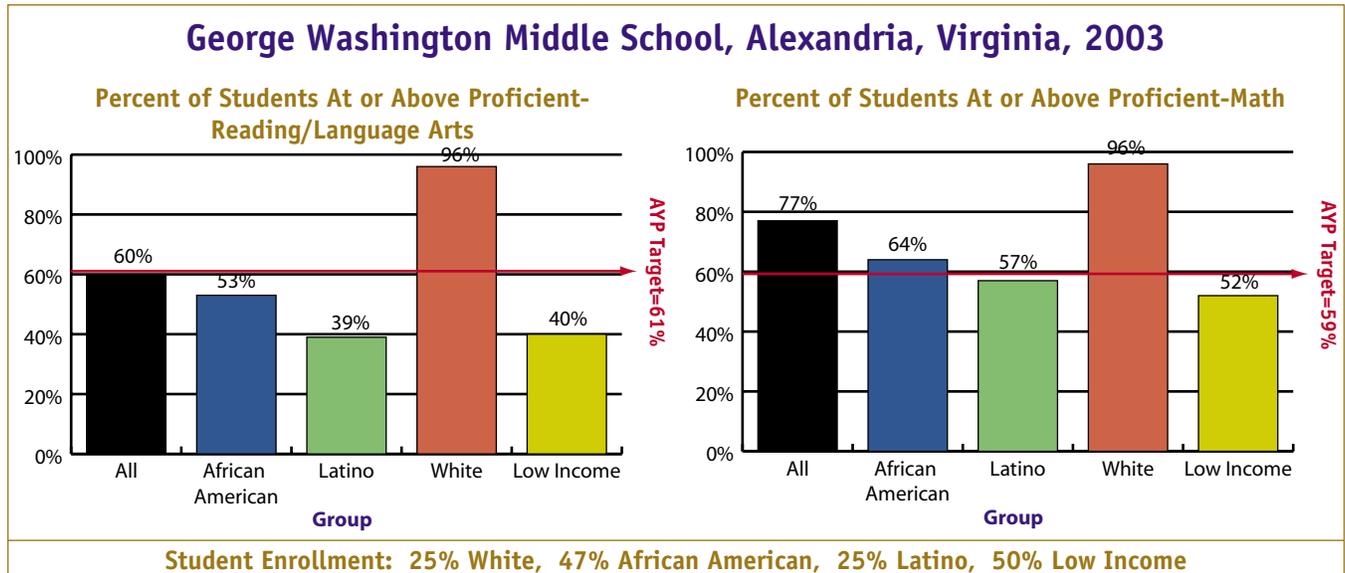
In looking at new AYP data from schools like Abraham Lincoln Middle School in Gainesville, Florida, we find dramatic evidence of how the new AYP definition is changing our perceptions of which public schools are truly successful.

Under Florida's state-specific school accountability system, established before the passage of NCLB, Lincoln is considered to be an "A" school. Why? Because Florida's system is based on average schoolwide test scores, and nearly half of Lincoln's students overall are proficient in both reading and math. But when achievement is broken down by race and income level, a glaring achievement gap is revealed. Lincoln's student body is 31% White, 59% African American and 57% low income. Nearly 90% of Lincoln's White students are proficient both in reading and math. But only 22% of its African American students are proficient in reading, and only 15% are proficient in math. There's a difference of **73 percentage points** between the math scores of White students and African American students. The numbers are equally low for Lincoln's low income students.²

On average, Lincoln's students score well above Florida's AYP targets. But looking at the disaggregated data required by the AYP system, we see that the scores of African American and low income students are far below

² All achievement data in this report is taken from school report cards available on state education agency web sites. Demographic data is taken from school report cards, school web sites, the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core of Data, and The Education Trust's Dispelling the Myth online data tool. Demographic data for all Florida schools reflect student enrollment in all tested grades. This may differ slightly from student enrollment in all grades.

these targets. It is because of this achievement gap that the school was identified as not making AYP. Under AYP, schools that are failing to help large numbers of low income, minority, and traditionally disadvantaged students become proficient are recognizing their need to improve.



George Washington Middle School in Alexandria, Virginia is another school that didn't make AYP because of achievement gaps, despite receiving "full accreditation" under Virginia's state accountability system. Overall, 60% of George Washington's students are proficient in reading/language arts and 77% are proficient in math. But a look beneath the averages tells a disturbing story.

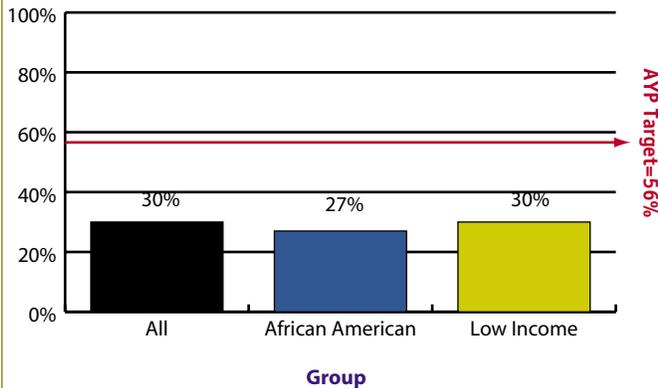
Nearly all of the school's White students are proficient in both subjects. But the proficiency rates drop as we examine the achievement of the school's African American, Latino, and low income students. There is a gap of 43 percentage points between the reading achievement of George Washington's White and African American students and a 57 point gap between the reading achievement of the school's White and Latino students. Again, we find AYP identifying a school with large achievement gaps, revealing shortfalls that state accountability systems had previously ignored.

2) The AYP system is recognizing the improvement of previously low-performing schools.

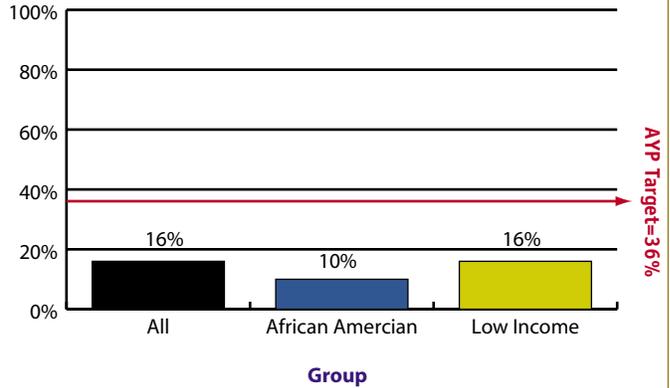
Setting the same high standard for all students and all schools is crucial for fairness and equity. You can't close achievement gaps by setting lower expectations for previously low-performing schools. But some critics have voiced concerns that schools that start out far below the targets will be unable to make the significant progress needed to reach that bar in just one year. But the "safe harbor" provision of the AYP formula accommodates exactly this situation: schools make AYP if they reduce the percent of students who are not proficient by 10% from the previous year, *even if the performance level is below the state target*. And sure enough, the initial results show that this provision is working.

T.T. Minor Elementary School, Seattle, Washington, 2003

Percent of Students At or Above Proficient-Reading



Percent of Students At or Above Proficient-Math

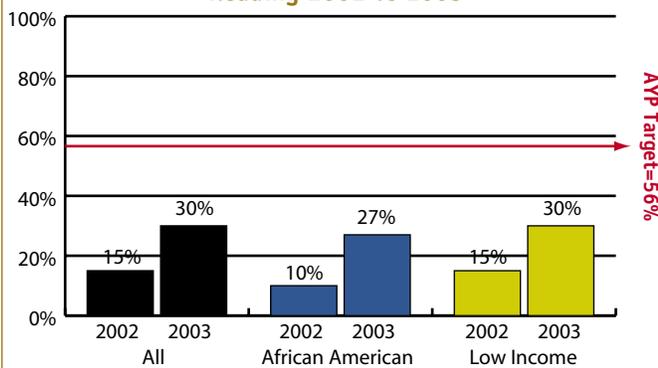


Student Enrollment: 80% African American, 85% Low Income

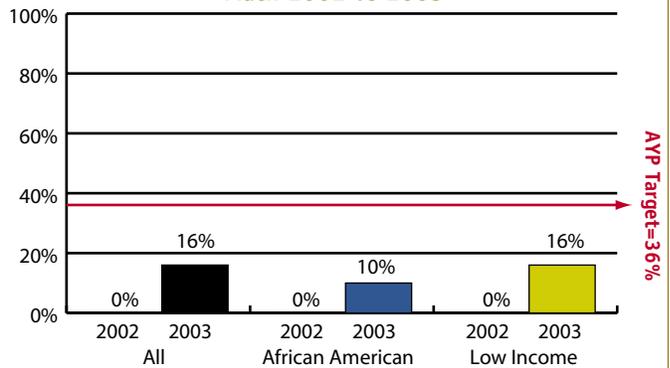
T.T. Minor Elementary School in Seattle is a high-poverty, high-minority school that isn't yet meeting state performance targets. Only 30% of all T.T. Minor students, 27% of its African American students, and 30% of its low income students were proficient in reading in 2002-03, well below Washington's AYP target of 56%. In math, only 16% of all students, 10% of African American students, and 16% of low income students were proficient, again, far below the AYP target of 36%. Nonetheless, T.T. Minor made AYP this year. Why? Because as the charts below show, the school made significant improvement from 2001-02, when only 15% of students were proficient in reading and no students were proficient in math.

T.T. Minor Elementary School, Seattle, Washington

Percent of Students At or Above Proficient-Reading 2002 vs 2003



Percent of Students At or Above Proficient-Math 2002 vs 2003



Student Enrollment: 80% African American, 85% Low Income

“Safe harbor” acknowledges that schools are making progress when they reduce the proportion of students who perform below the proficient level. In 2002-03, 70% of students at T.T. Minor were not yet proficient in

reading, compared to 85% the year before. Likewise, the percentage of students below proficient in math was 84% in 2002-03 — a significant improvement over the year before when no students demonstrated proficiency. This is real progress, an 18% reduction in the percent of students below the proficient level in reading and a 16% reduction in math. This movement was enough for the school to make “safe harbor” and thus, AYP. The AYP system is recognizing the progress of previously low-performing schools that have made great strides in helping their students.

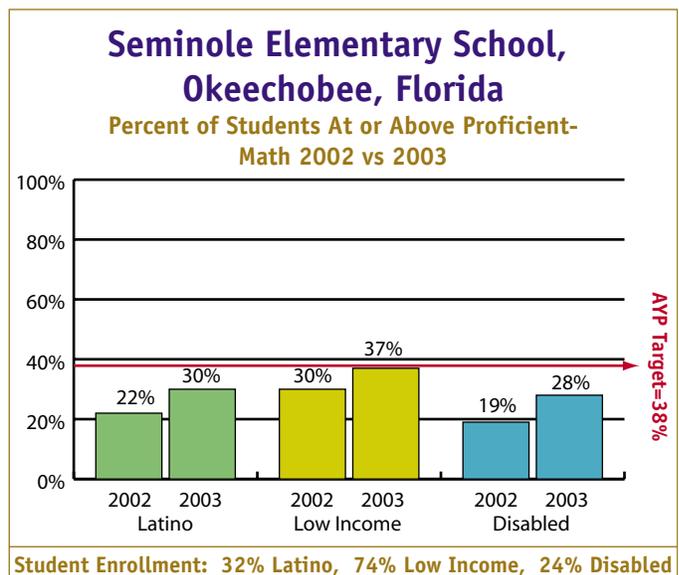
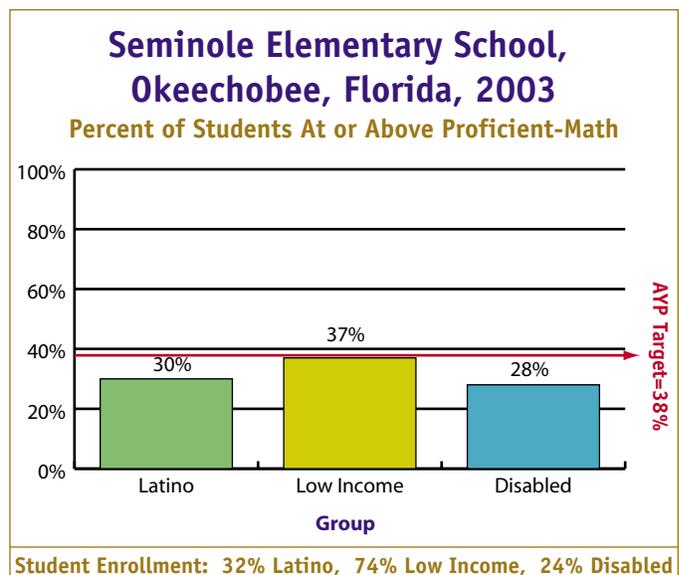
It is important to note that the schools in the previous section did not make this amount of progress with the groups of students performing below state targets. Had they done so they, too, would have made AYP.

Seminole Elementary School in Okeechobee, Florida is another school that made AYP through the “safe harbor” provision. Seminole’s student body is 32% Latino and 74% low income, with 24% of students enrolled in special education. None of these groups met the state target for reading proficiency in 2002-03: only 30% of Latino students, 37% of low income students, and 28% of students with disabilities were proficient. But despite missing the AYP target, each of these groups improved significantly from 2001-02. Latino students went from 22% proficient to 30%. Low income students went from 30% to 37%, and students with disabilities from 19% to 28%.

Because of the gains in each group, Seminole Elementary School made AYP. While this means that 70% of Latino students did not meet the proficient level in 2002-03, this was down compared to the 78% from the year before, or a 10% improvement. Similar improvements were seen with low income students and students with disabilities. Each of these groups demonstrated enough improvement to make AYP.

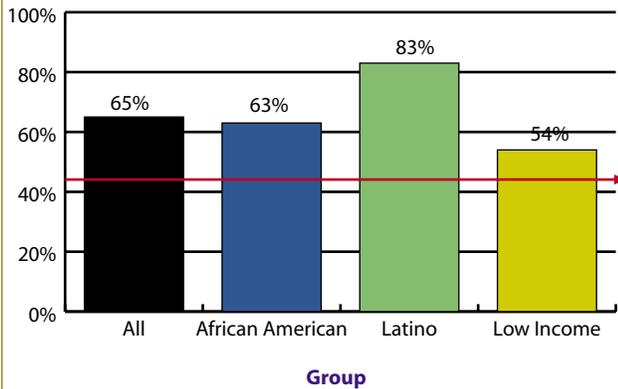
3) The AYP results show that schools previously designated as needing improvement can improve and move off the list.

While this is the first year that every state must assess every school and district through the AYP process, some states are already well along in similar processes developed under the previous version of Title I. Identification in previous years has prompted schools to develop and implement targeted improvement strategies to help their low-performing students. As these strategies have been successful, schools have met their AYP targets and moved off the list of schools needing improvement.

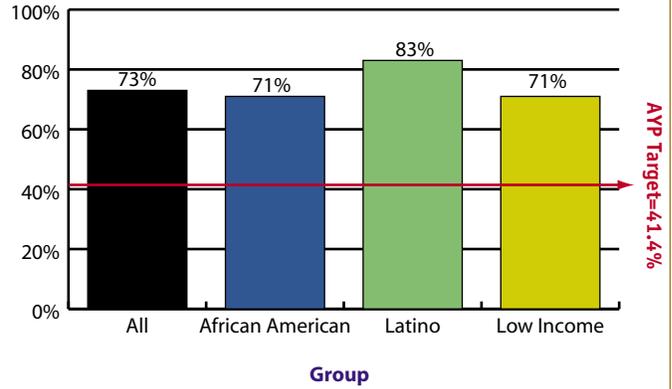


Seabrook Elementary School, Seabrook, Maryland, 2003

Percent of Students At or Above Proficient-Reading



Percent of Students At or Above Proficient-Math



Student Enrollment: 82% African American, 9% Latino, 54% Low Income

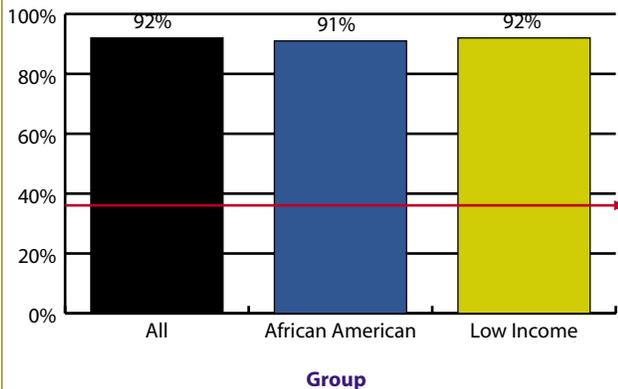
Seabrook Elementary, in Seabrook, Maryland, was placed on the state “watch list” in 1998 for failing to meet state proficiency standards. Since then, Seabrook has shown real improvement, bringing its mostly African American and low income students up to standards for 2 years in a row. Seabrook was taken off the “watch list” this year. This kind of improvement has taken place in schools across the country. In Indiana alone, for example, 52 schools were taken off the needs improvement list this year. In New Jersey, 9 schools were taken off the list this year. These schools show that educators who use the information created by accountability systems as a catalyst for improvement and change can make real, immediate progress on behalf of their students.

4) The AYP system is recognizing schools that are successfully teaching *all* groups of students.

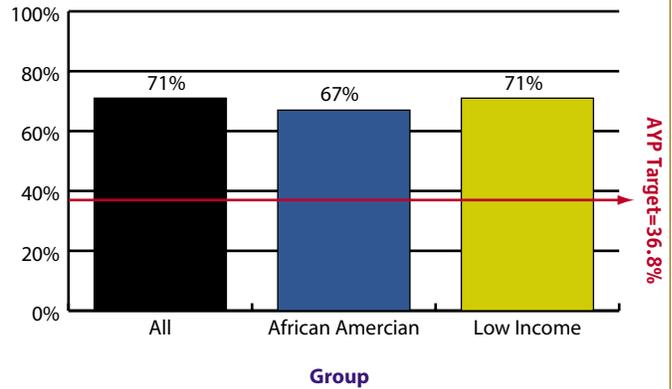
As we’ve seen from some of our previous examples, large, persistent achievement gaps for low income and minority students continue to be a problem in many schools. This is why NCLB was specifically designed to break down the numbers and hold schools accountable for the performance of *all* students. But it’s important to remember that low achievement for these students is not inevitable. AYP data shows that schools educating large numbers of low income and minority students are perfectly capable of reaching high levels of achievement.

Whitney Young Middle School, Cleveland, Ohio, 2003

Percent of Students At or Above Proficient-Reading

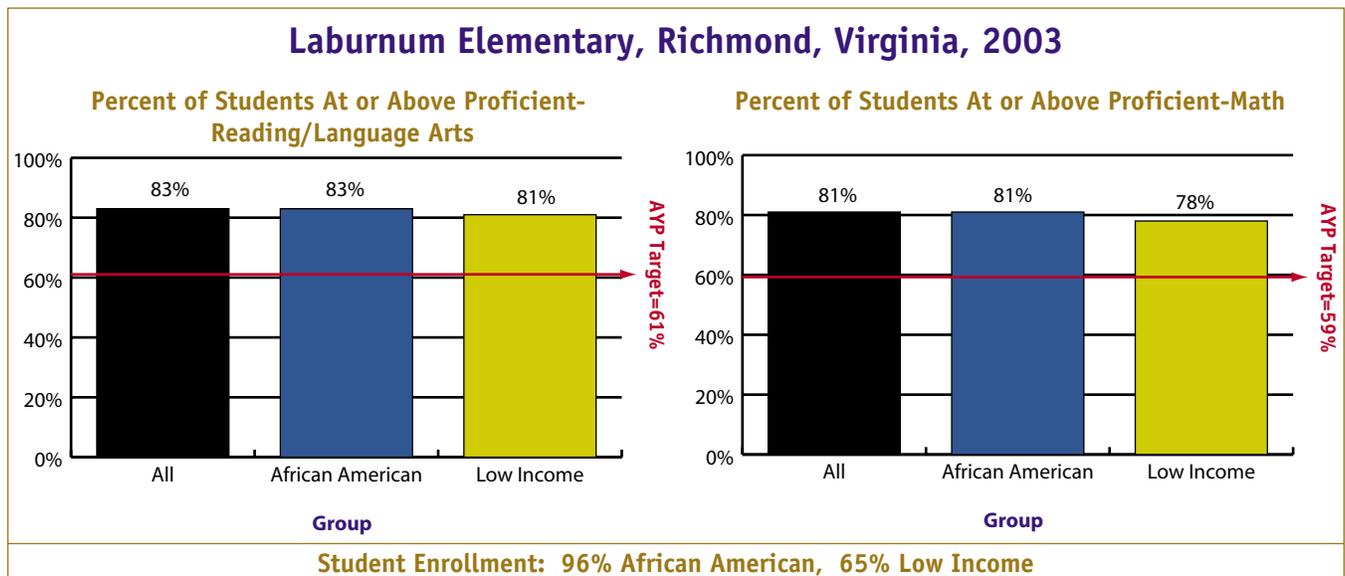


Percent of Students At or Above Proficient-Math

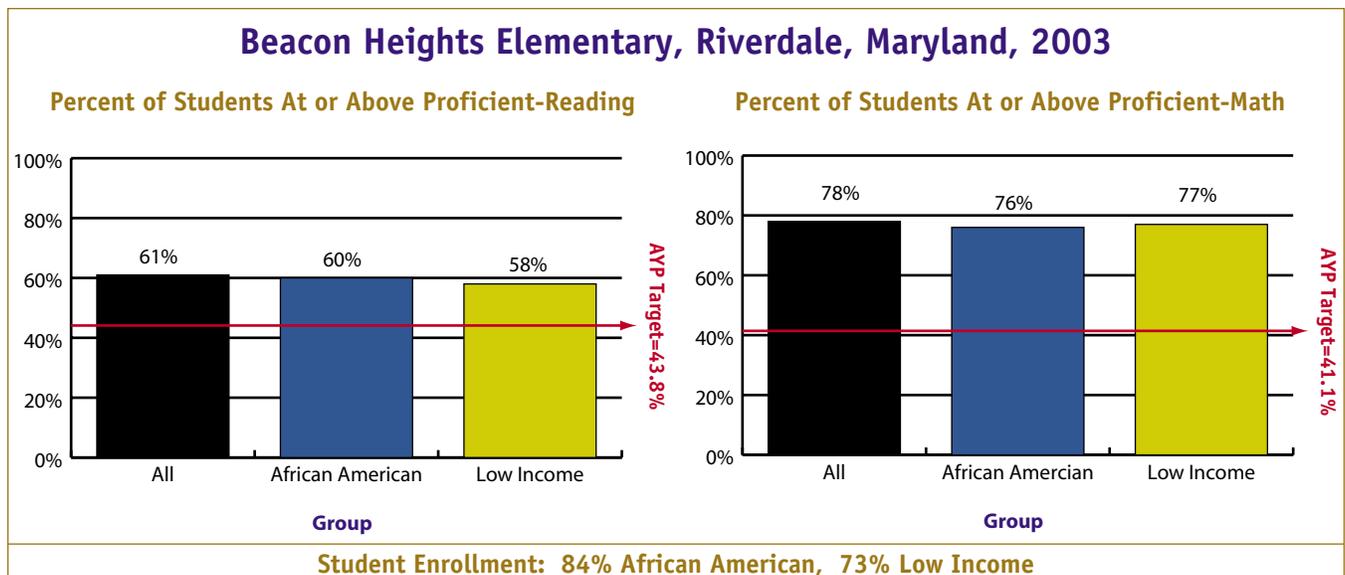


Student Enrollment: 84% African American, 100% Low Income

Cleveland's Whitney Young Middle School is 84% African American and 100% low income. As the chart on the previous page shows, it not only met its AYP targets, it far exceeded them. Now, 92% of Whitney Young students are proficient in reading and 71% are proficient in math. For Whitney Young, high achievement for low income students and students of color is simply par for the course.



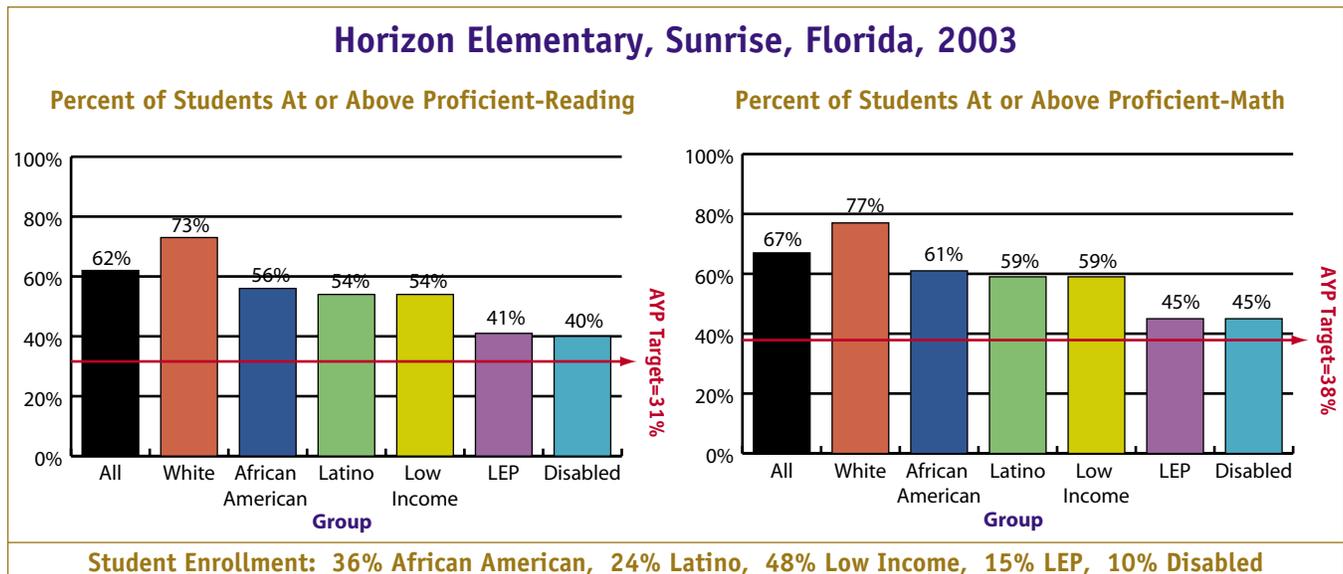
Laburnum Elementary in Richmond, Virginia is another high-poverty, high-minority school in which all students are exceeding AYP targets. Over 80% of Laburnum's mostly African American and low income students are proficient in reading and math.



Beacon Heights Elementary in Riverdale, Maryland is another high-poverty, high-minority school that is far exceeding its AYP targets. African American students, low income students, and the student population overall—the achievement level for each is well above the state goals for performance.

AYP targets also apply to students with limited English proficiency and students with disabilities. These students have been largely excluded from state assessment and accountability systems. NCLB is moving many schools to

examine the performance of these students for the first time. The assessment of LEP students and students with disabilities presents unique challenges, and many schools have struggled to bring these students to proficiency. Nonetheless, AYP data shows that some schools are successfully serving them.



Horizon Elementary in Sunrise, Florida has a diverse student body, one that is nearly two-thirds minority, half low income, and includes significant numbers of LEP students and students with disabilities. Horizon has been successful in bringing its students, including over 40% of its LEP students and students with disabilities, to state proficiency targets.

So what do we see from these new AYP results? We see some schools where students are in desperate need of additional attention. We see that AYP is sufficiently flexible to recognize both overall achievement and year-to-year improvement. We see that schools identified in prior years are quite capable of responding and moving off the list. And we see that, without a doubt, all students can meet and exceed high standards for achievement.

What Do the New AYP Results Tell Us About States?

As individual states have released their AYP data, we've seen much attention paid to the overall number or percentage of schools in the state identified as not making AYP or as "needing improvement."³ Those numbers have varied a lot—some states have found less than 10% of schools not making AYP, in others it's almost 80%, while most are somewhere in between. Some observers have suggested that such large differences might indicate that some states are holding their children to much more rigorous standards than others, or that the whole AYP system itself is fundamentally flawed.

In reality, neither of these things is true. It turns out that there are many factors contributing to the number of schools identified as not making AYP in an individual state. They include:

³ It's important to remember that they're not the same thing. It takes two consecutive years of not making AYP for schools to be identified for improvement, so the only schools that will be in improvement status this year are schools that failed to make AYP last year under their state's old (pre-NCLB) accountability system *and* this year's first ever application of the NCLB-AYP formula. Schools that don't make AYP for the first time this year can use that information to adjust instructional strategies, *but there are no consequences under the law.*

- *The size of achievement gaps*: States that have larger achievement gaps—i.e., states where low income and minority students are far behind other students—will likely identify more schools as not making AYP than states with smaller achievement gaps.
- *The distribution of low-performing students*: States where most students who aren't proficient in reading and/or math are concentrated in a few larger districts—or in large schools—will likely identify fewer schools and/or districts than those where low-performing students are more evenly distributed throughout the state.
- *Participation rates*: Under NCLB, schools can't make AYP unless 95% of all students and all groups of students participate in annual reading and math assessments. In many states, special education students and limited-English proficient students have been routinely excluded from testing in the past, providing an incomplete picture of achievement. Since many states have never had a participation requirement before, it's not surprising that in this baseline year, schools in several states did not make AYP for failing to meet the participation rate requirement. But it's also something that is easily remedied. States, districts and schools can put into place very common-sense measures—such as make-up test days—to ensure that this doesn't happen in the future.
- *“N size”*: Each state sets its own minimum number of students that need to be tested before the group counts as a separate category for accountability purposes (commonly referred to as the state's “N size”). Many states have chosen 30 as their N size. In these states, if fewer than 30 students from a particular group in a school participate in the statewide testing, then that group is not counted separately for accountability purposes. These students are, of course, still included in the school's overall average. The larger the N size required by the state, the fewer schools will be held accountable for the performance of groups of students. As more grades are included in testing, N sizes will play a less significant role.
- *The number of grades tested*: Testing all of the students in a school, as opposed to only one or two grades, increases the likelihood that a school will record enough test scores to be held accountable for all groups of students (student groups must exceed a state-established minimum number—or “N size”—to count for AYP purposes). By 2005-06, all schools will test all students in grades 3-8 and once in grades 10-12 in at least reading and math.
- *Tests of statistical significance and confidence intervals*: Most states have augmented AYP calculations with tests of statistical significance. However, because very little information has been made available about the specifics of these systems, it is hard to know what their effect will be in practice.

So we see how many factors in combination affect the overall number of schools identified as not making AYP. States differ by how well they educate disadvantaged students, and how those students are distributed among different geographic areas. Some states have taken advantage of every ounce of flexibility in the law or otherwise granted by the U.S. Department of Education, other states may have foregone some potential flexibility, either because they weren't aware of its availability or because it didn't fit with their accountability system.

One factor that will not affect the number of schools on this year's AYP lists is the rigor of state standards.

Every state's performance target is based on the previous year's 20th percentile school within that state.⁴ However

⁴ This is determined by ranking all the schools in the state from top to bottom in terms of the percent of students meeting the state proficiency standard, and then finding the percent proficient in the school at the 20th percentile of student enrollment—that is, only 20% of students statewide were enrolled in schools where the overall percent proficient was lower in 2001-02. Therefore, schools that don't make AYP based on achievement this year either have overall student performance in the bottom 20% of the state, or have a significant group of students below that starting point. So the initial performance goals aren't that high—4 out of 5 students statewide are in schools that are, on average, already meeting them. See “*The ABCs of AYP*” for more detailed information on the formula used by states to determine their AYP starting point. See at www.edtrust.org.

rigorous their standards, each state should have had approximately 20% of its students in schools where the overall percent proficient was below the starting point in 2001-2002. Some states have few students currently meeting their state standards, so the state's initial starting point is low; other states have many students meeting their standards, so the initial starting point is much higher. Whatever their starting point, every state will have low-performing schools and groups of students to focus on. But since every state is benchmarked against its own prior performance on its own state test, relative differences in how tough state tests are won't affect this year's numbers.

In the end, we should resist the urge to compare states based on the number of schools that failed to make AYP this year. It's not a contest among states; it's a process for identifying individual schools and districts that need improvement. NCLB was specifically designed to let states make their own decisions about what their children need to learn and how to assess that learning. Because of the central state and local role in education, AYP results don't allow apples-to-apples comparisons of student achievement from one state to another.

Conclusion

In the end, the success of this system is going to depend on patience and level heads from all involved. As the new accountability systems get up and running, there are bound to be miscues and misunderstandings. But we can already see how the law is having positive effects by focusing attention on the goal of holding all schools within a state to the same standards of student achievement and bringing urgent attention to achievement gaps between different groups of students. In many states the public is being confronted with both the existence and the magnitude of achievement gaps in their state—perhaps even in their own child's school—for the very first time.

The challenge is to turn this focus and new awareness into action, to do those things that we know can improve student achievement in the schools that haven't made AYP. In the past few months, we've heard from principals, instructional specialists and teachers who are using the data and the very real pressure to close gaps, to change instructional practices to better meet the needs of all students. This is a good start, but this move from awareness to action must take place on a large scale if we're to meet the challenge of providing a truly high-quality education to all students.

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About The Education Trust



The Education Trust, Inc. was created to promote high academic achievement for all students, at all levels—kindergarten through college. While we know that all schools and colleges could better serve their students, our work focuses on the schools and colleges most often left behind in education improvement effort: those serving African American, Latino, Native American, and low income students.

The Education Trust works side-by-side with policy makers, parents, education professionals, community and business leaders—in cities and towns across the country—who are trying to transform their schools and colleges into institutions that genuinely serve all students. We also share lessons learned in these schools, colleges and communities with policy makers.

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