



**NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND  
IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

**EXAMINING QUESTIONS ABOUT  
ACCOUNTABILITY AND REPORTING**

September 2002

*“Never before has the Congress of the United States said that regardless of any excuses we will educate all the children – it’s historic, we can’t lose sight of that.”*

Burnell Holland, Director of Categorical Programs  
DC Public Schools (June 25, 2002)

## **Introduction**

The reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001 – No Child Left Behind – places significant emphasis on standards-based assessment and accountability for results related to student achievement. One of the major requirements is that each state and the District of Columbia must develop a single statewide accountability system that applies to all public schools, charter schools, and students in other types of schools receiving Title I funds.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) builds on the 1994 Improving America’s Schools Act to create an environment in which policymakers, parents, and educators all have an important role to play in providing, examining, and using data for improvement. Further, it raises important questions for states and communities about what it means for schools and school districts to be accountable for student achievement. Beyond that, the law is forcing many states to grapple with the array of resources that may be required to change outcomes for groups of children who often have been excluded from traditional assessments and related standards, such as second-language learners, students with disabilities, and students identified as persistently low-achieving.

On Tuesday, June 25, 2002, the State Education Office hosted its first “public conversation” with two dozen policymakers, policy analysts, educators and elected leaders about No Child Left Behind. Accountability was a recurring theme of that discussion. To explore this critical topic in more depth, the State Education Office is hosting a follow-up conversation this fall. A diverse group of local and national experts – including policy analysts, community-based and elected leaders, and educators will discuss four major questions related to accountability:

1. Based on the No Child Left Behind Act and the interests of key education stakeholders, what should schools be held accountable for, and to whom?
2. How can we, as a city, approach discussing and defining “adequate yearly progress” between now and January 2003, when a plan is submitted to the U.S. Department of Education?
3. Based on the law and on the interests of key education stakeholders, what will the content, format, and distribution of annual progress reports look like?
4. What should happen when schools fail to meet benchmarks for annual progress?

## **What Does The Law Say?**

The accountability provisions of No Child Left Behind have received significant attention from policy analysts, policymakers, school administrators and educators. (For more information, see the resource section at the end of this document.) In an Issue Brief published February 2001, the National Governor’s Association Center for Best Practices states: “Accountability drives educators to examine their responsibility for student achievement. It forces schools to review their curriculum and instructional and support programs and ask what they can do to improve them. At the same time, accountability creates pressure for improvement. Individuals may not

like the demands accountability systems place on them, but without this pressure they might put off improvements for another day. The need for successful schools is acute, and students cannot wait.”<sup>1</sup> No Child Left Behind echoes the urgency of this statement, yet emphasizes the role that states and districts must play in ensuring students’ progress toward a common performance standard.

Many of these provisions require states to make changes in their systems of assessment, report data in new ways and to new audiences, and implement consequences for local districts and individuals schools when data shows that students’ performance is not improving. For example:

- ◆ All states must implement standards-based assessments for math and reading in grades 3 through 8 by 2005, and at 3 grade levels in science by 2007. In addition to conducting these annual assessments, states must track at least one additional academic indicator for elementary schools and one for secondary schools. Graduation rates must be the indicator at the secondary level; states may choose their own indicator for the elementary level.
- ◆ All states must participate in the National Assessment of Educational Progress for grades 4 and 8 in reading and math every two years.
- ◆ By January 2003, states must submit to the U.S. Department of Education their recommended benchmarks for “Adequate Yearly Progress,” which will define how all students will reach proficient levels in reading and math by school year 2013-2014. The Department of Education states that Adequate Yearly Progress is “the minimum level of improvement school districts and schools must achieve every year. It is the bar of improvement set by each state for each school to ensure that every child is achieving” (see [www.nclb.gov](http://www.nclb.gov)).
- ◆ Failure to meet the Adequate Yearly Progress benchmarks set by the state results in specific consequences for schools. These include expanded school choice options (e.g. the opportunity to transfer to a higher-performing school), access to public funding for supplemental services such as tutoring, and replacement/restructuring of school staff.
- ◆ Beginning with the 2002-2003 school year, states and school districts must prepare annual “report cards” on school performance that include information about (1) comparison of students at basic, proficient, and advanced levels of academic achievement; (2) graduation rates, (3) professional qualifications of teachers, (4) percentages of students not tested by the state assessment; and (5) which schools have been identified as needing improvement. Data about student achievement must be disaggregated by categories such as socioeconomic status, race, gender, English language proficiency and students with disabilities. These report cards must be “disseminated widely by public means.”

Each of these provisions raises technical questions about implementation as well as resource issues for states, districts, and schools. Beyond those considerations, however, the law invites educators and other community members to explore deeper questions about how to demonstrate that all students are meeting a common standard of proficiency in core academic areas. How states set that common standard and the annual benchmarks for progress toward it are urgent matters for education stakeholders in 2002.

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<sup>1</sup> “State Strategies for Turning Around Low-Performing Schools,” by Dane Linn, Bob Rothman, and Kerry White. NGA Center for Best Practices, February 2001.

In fact, the consequences of the new law are already being felt in many states. As a result of the way that No Child Left Behind builds on the standards and assessment provisions of the 1994 law, some schools have already been identified as “low performing” or “needing improvement,” and therefore were required to design systems that allowed eligible students to transfer to a higher-performing school this fall. The District of Columbia as well as Montgomery and Howard Counties were among the school systems affected. Other states – including California, Colorado, Georgia, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, and Texas – have begun compiling lists of approved providers for “supplemental services” that must be provided to low-income students when they attend a school that has been identified as needing improvement two years in a row.

### **What Does this Mean for the District of Columbia?**

The District of Columbia is a unique entity, serving as the nation’s capital and as the home of nearly 600,000 urban residents. We have rich resources across our city, including a population diverse in race, language, and culture. Yet we also struggle with intergenerational poverty, low test scores, low adult literacy, and too few services to meet all the needs of our children and youth. The District of Columbia also faces the complexity of carrying out state-level education responsibilities without the support of traditional state structures. In this environment, we must ensure that our system of public schools – now comprising nearly 40 separate local education agencies (LEAs), including public charters – provides a high-quality education to all 70,000 of its students. Further, to truly understand student performance and progress, we must consider our city’s high level of mobility among traditional public, public charter, parochial, and independent schools. No Child Left Behind challenges us to invest, as a city, in our children; to create systems of public education that are supported by the entire community and of which we can all be proud. Defining how we will hold ourselves accountable for student achievement in every public school, for every child, is a critical component of this investment.

The Adequate Yearly Progress benchmarks that the District of Columbia and the states must set by January 2003 will define, for more than a decade, a key aspect of success for our schools. Decisions about these benchmarks, therefore, should be informed not only by guidance from school administrators and the U.S. Department of Education, but also by thoughtful dialogue among parents, classroom teachers, community-based education advocates, and researchers.

Among the issues we must consider about the local impact of No Child Left Behind is where we are in relation to where we need to be. How, for example, do the timelines in the current Title 1 compliance agreement affect decisions about Adequate Yearly Progress? Do our current standards, assessment, and curriculum in key subject areas meet the requirements of the new law? Do we have the technology and other infrastructure, across all types of schools, to collect and report data in new ways? If not – what resources are needed to move forward?

Considering systems of standards, assessment, and accountability as investments shifts our thinking away from short-term compliance to the long-term outcomes we are seeking not only for students, but for our city overall. If we imagine the District of Columbia in 2014, with 100% of public school students proficient in reading and math – we can imagine changes in areas such

as education, economic development, and civic engagement. This has significant implications for how schools might work together with other agencies and resources to plan for the future.

### **What Questions Do We Want to Ask Ourselves and Each Other?**

Each of the four major questions in the introduction to this paper raises a set of issues that will affect planning and implementation of a local accountability system under No Child Left Behind. While not all of these questions can be explored in a single public forum, they can help frame an ongoing dialogue. Among the questions to consider are:

- (1) Based on the No Child Left Behind Act and the interests of key education stakeholders, what should schools be held accountable for, and to whom?*
  - ◆ Beyond what is required by the law, what information do we need to have in order to know how well our schools are doing? What information, in particular, is being requested by parents?
  - ◆ Is this information available/accessible from all schools in the city? If not, how does it differ from school to school?
  - ◆ Are we collecting the right information now? How is the current information made accessible to those making decisions about schools, teachers, and students?
  - ◆ What information do we need that is not being collected or made available?
  - ◆ What are the challenges to and incentives for working together to design a citywide strategy for getting needed information about our schools?
  
- (2) How will we, as a city, discuss and define “adequate yearly progress”?*
  - ◆ What kinds of measures best reflect and communicate the progress being made by schools?
  - ◆ What standards should the District of Columbia use to establish AYP measures: one that all schools can easily attain (as Arkansas has done), high standards that provide a tough challenge for every school, or challenging but attainable standards?
  - ◆ How will we ensure a vibrant instructional environment in which students are well prepared academically and socially – not just “teaching to the test”?
  
- (3) How will progress be reported?*
  - ◆ What might public report cards look like this year? Who will be involved in making decisions about the content and format?
  - ◆ What “public means” will we use in disseminating the report cards? What role might web sites, local advocacy organizations, and/or the media play in dissemination?
  - ◆ What hopes and fears do we have about the disaggregated data that will be made available through public report cards?
  - ◆ What are other states and cities doing?
  - ◆ What will it take to ensure that information reported is comparable across schools and types of schools?
  
- (4) What should happen when schools fail to meet annual progress benchmarks?*

- ◆ What systems are in place or need to be designed to support and apply consequences to schools that do not meet the adequate yearly progress benchmarks?
- ◆ In what ways can a combination of sanctions, incentives, and parental choice best be used to help failing schools improve the quality of their education programs and the level of their students' achievement?
- ◆ What does it mean to implement expanded options for parents – e.g. more structured school choice strategies – as a consequence for failure in a system that already has both high student mobility across all types of schools, and a variety of choices presented by public charter and magnet schools?
- ◆ What resources exist to help schools “in need of improvement”? What actions can all of us take to make every school a good school?

### **Are There Any Best Practices We Can Examine to Help Us?**

States have taken a variety of approaches to designing systems of standards, assessment, and accountability. Policy analysts, in turn, have used a variety of measures to “grade” these systems. Education Week’s *Quality Counts* report, for example, gave a grade of A or A-minus to standards and accountability systems in five states in 2001: Kentucky, Maryland, New Mexico, and New York.<sup>2</sup> However, some of these same states received low or failing grades on measures such as teacher quality. The Education Trust has identified “frontier states”: those in which poor and minority students scored highest on the 1998 NAEP test, or in which the narrowest scoring gaps exist between white students and students of color. For 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading, for example, Connecticut is the “frontier” (highest scoring) state for African-Americans; the state with the smallest scoring gap between African-Americans and Whites is Hawaii. Virginia had both the highest score and the smallest gap for Latino students in 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing.<sup>3</sup>

Several states, including Maryland, are already using public report cards in various formats. Many of these are available electronically as well as in hard-copy versions. A few organizations have also analyzed the quality of existing report cards (see, for example, the state-by-state listing on the Heritage Foundation’s web site at [www.heritage.org/Research/Education/ReportCards](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Education/ReportCards)) or proposed “ideal” frameworks for designing new report cards (see, for example, the one designed by A-Plus Communications and highlighted in *Education Week*’s 1999 Quality Counts report).

As we look at promising practices across the nation, we can also consider our own local success stories. What the “T9” and “T6” schools are learning in the District of Columbia is important for us to examine further, as are the local schools that are performing well on the SAT-9, made significant gains over the last two years, or appear to be successfully serving special-needs students.

Finally, in looking at the District of Columbia’s unique circumstances as well as our desire to create citywide systems that support high student achievement – we can examine promising

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<sup>2</sup> *A Better Balance: Standards, Tests, and The Tools to Succeed*. Quality Counts 2001, *Education Week*, Volume XX, Number 16. Editorial Projects in Education: January 11, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> “New Frontiers for a New Century,” In The Education Trust’s *Thinking K-16*, Spring 2001.

approaches to accountability models outside education. One example, recently highlighted in The Harvard Family Research Project's "Evaluation Exchange"<sup>4</sup> is the Caring Communities Initiative in Missouri. The process of this initiative included agreement on shared responsibilities for performance results among state agencies, community partnerships, and a key state-level intermediary organization.

### Where Can I Go to Learn More?

The following web sites provide additional information about No Child Left Behind and related accountability issues.

- The **U.S. Department of Education** highlights information about No Child Left Behind on its main web site, [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov), as well as a new web site specifically for parents and the public at [www.nclb.gov](http://www.nclb.gov).
- **Education Commission of the States** has a number of ESEA-specific publications, including policy briefs, issue briefs, and a technical paper on accountability systems. This is one of the best places to visit for in-depth analysis of how specific provisions of the new law may affect states. Click on the "No Child Left Behind" button on their home page at [www.ecs.org](http://www.ecs.org).
- **Education Week**, at [www.edweek.org](http://www.edweek.org), provides quick, non-technical background information on topics like the progress of states toward compliance with the 1994 ESEA. No Child Left Behind is one of the "hot topics" on their home page. Another resource available through this site is the *Quality Counts 2001* report, which compares various aspects of accountability systems across the 50 states. The District of Columbia, however, is not included.
- The **Education Trust**, [www.edtrust.org](http://www.edtrust.org), is a great source for education data about high-poverty/high-minority schools, and how districts are using data to help make positive change for students. Of particular interest are their *Dispelling the Myths* reports (the latest of which was published in May 2002) and the article "New Frontiers for a New Century," (in *Thinking K-16, Spring 2001*) which identifies the top-performing states for poor and minority students based on the 1998 NAEP results.
- The Education Policy Studies Division of the Center for Best Practices at the **National Governor's Association** ([www.nga.org](http://www.nga.org)) has published several articles, interviews, and analyses of specific provisions of No Child Left Behind. See, for example, "State Strategies for Turning Around Low-Performing Schools," dated February 2001.
- **New American Schools** presented a paper entitled "No Child Left Behind: Who Is Included in New Federal Accountability Requirements?" at a 2001 conference sponsored by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. See [www.naschools.org](http://www.naschools.org).

**To contact the State Education Office, call (202) 727-6436 or  
visit their web site at [www.seo.dc.gov](http://www.seo.dc.gov).**

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<sup>4</sup> The Evaluation Exchange, Harvard Family Research Project, Volume VII, No. 2, Fall 2002. See [www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp) for a copy of the article, or [www.nccic.org/ccpartnerships/profiles/missouri.htm](http://www.nccic.org/ccpartnerships/profiles/missouri.htm) for a description of Missouri Caring Communities.