



A Union of Professionals

## Eight Misconceptions about the No Child Left Behind Act's (NCLB) Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Provisions

**Misconception 1:** AYP measures the performance of a whole school. The AYP formula measures a whole school's performance based on assessment results in only a few academic subjects and, in most cases, only from students in a few grades. Currently, only 20 states test students in both math and English/language arts in grades 3-8 and once in high school.<sup>1</sup> In the remaining states, AYP determinations for an entire school are made based only on the performance of the grade or grades tested, which may amount to only one or two grades per school.

**Misconception 2:** AYP measures the progress of students. The AYP formula does *not* track the *same group of students* over time—that is, from one grade to the next or at the beginning and then at the end of the school year; therefore, it's not a measurement of progress or growth. Instead, AYP determines “progress” by comparing different groups of children from year-to-year—for example, by comparing today's 4th graders to last year's 4th graders. It's akin to requiring that every track-and-field record be broken every two years. But as the testing continues, just like in track, there will be strong cohorts of students in some years, which will set levels that following classes cannot surpass despite their best efforts.

**Misconception 3:** Making AYP means that students in the school are progressing at a rate you'd expect and desire—that is, that their progress is “adequate.” First, the AYP formula doesn't track the same group of students over time, let alone an individual student over time. Second, it requires schools to hit predetermined achievement targets regardless of whether a school is starting far above or far below these targets. With neither the ability to track student progress over time nor consideration of a school's initial starting point, the AYP formula can say little about school, and nothing about individual progress, over time. Instead, this formula provides a snapshot of annual school-wide averages compared to pre-set achievement targets. The “adequacy” of school progress is about hitting or missing predetermined targets. It reveals nothing about the rate at which individual students are advancing throughout their years in school.

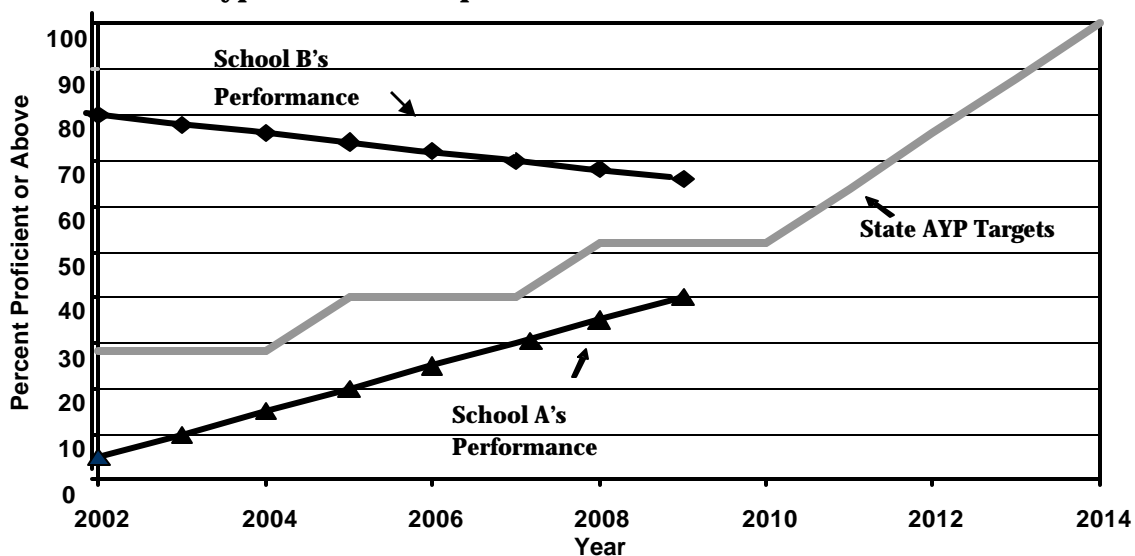
**Misconception 4:** Making AYP and achieving at grade level mean the same thing. The AYP formula and performing at grade level aren't necessarily linked. They are two different types of measurements. Grade level is a band of acceptable performance, whereas AYP is a specific target that may be set above, below, or within that range. Therefore, if all students in a school were at grade level, the school could still fail to make AYP. Likewise, a school with most of its students not achieving at grade level could still make AYP.

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<sup>1</sup> *What's Proficient? The No Child Left Behind Act and the Many Meanings of Proficiency*, May 2004, AFT. (Available online at: [www.aft.org/pubs-reports/](http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/))

Misconception 5: Failing to make AYP means that the school isn't making progress and is ineffective. The word "progress" in "adequate yearly progress" is as much a misnomer as the word "adequate." AYP is about meeting fixed achievement targets, not judging whether a school has made *progress* with its students. Schools that may have started far behind, but that have made great gains, will not be given credit for this improvement unless they hit statistically predetermined targets. Experts have identified schools that didn't make AYP but have made *more* progress than schools that achieved AYP. Conversely, they've found schools where student achievement is *declining*, yet they've still made AYP. So, it's inaccurate to say that a school not making AYP isn't progressing and is ineffective with its students. Like School A in Figure 1, a school may make great progress in a year—let's say student achievement rises by 6 points—but if the predetermined target is 7 points, the school won't get credit because it still falls short of the state target line. Instead, it will be named a school in need of improvement and subject to sanctions. And even if a school starts above the target, as in School B, its performance can still go down and the school will still be judged to have made AYP.

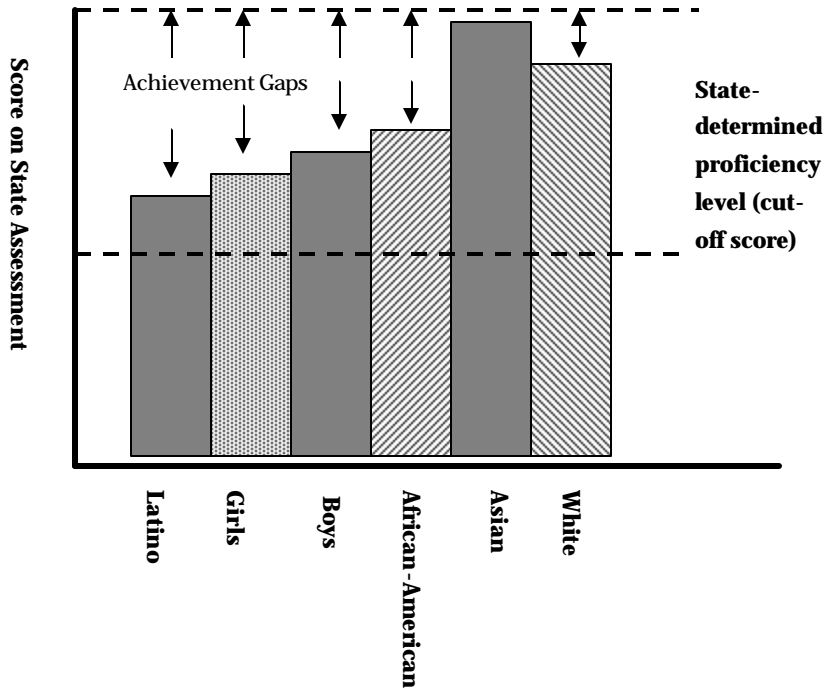
**Figure 1:**  
**Hypothetical Example of AYP and School Performance**



Source: Robert Linn, University of Colorado at Boulder, National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST), presentation made at the ETS 2003 Invitational Conference, New York City, Oct. 3, 2003.

Misconception 6: AYP is about closing achievement gaps. The AYP formula is about 100 percent of students tested hitting or exceeding fixed targets, for the school as a whole and for each subgroup of students it serves. Data analyses have found that large achievement gaps still remain, even in schools that make AYP. In a school where every single student is performing at or above a given academic target, as shown in Figure 2, achievement gaps may still exist. The AYP formula and the NCLB legislation do nothing to address these gaps directly.

**Figure 2:  
Hypothetical Example of How “All Students” in School X  
Are “Proficient,” but Achievement Gaps Remain**



Misconception 7: AYP is about getting all students in the country proficient in reading and math. Comparisons across states using AYP results are meaningless because AYP is calculated according to each state’s own standards and definitions of “proficiency.” Proficiency definitions differ widely from state to state. If a student were to take a reading or math test in one state and make that state’s cut-off score for proficiency, there is no guarantee that the same student would be declared proficient by another state’s cut-off score on a different reading or math assessment. Accordingly, differences in “percent proficient” among states reveal nothing about relative achievement of states. That South Dakota in 2003 identified only 4 percent of its schools as “in need of improvement” using the AYP formula, and Florida identified 78 percent of its schools *does not mean* that the schools are worse in Florida or that the standards are lower in South Dakota. So, AYP results can’t be used to say that one state is doing a better or a worse job educating students than another.

Moreover, AYP determinations don’t correlate with scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a national test of academic achievement. For instance, comparing NAEP scores with AYP determinations reveals some states with few schools labeled as not making AYP have low to average NAEP scores (e.g., Arizona, Georgia, Louisiana, West Virginia), while states with many schools labeled as not making AYP have higher NAEP scores (e.g., Florida, Idaho, South Carolina).

**Misconception 8: AYP is about educational attainment. AYP is about statistics, not education.** Rightfully so, NCLB requires states to make accurate and statistically reliable accountability decisions. Therefore, specific statistical safeguards regarding cut-scores, school size, how many subgroups get counted, grades tested, and a host of other statistical parameters play an intricate part in AYP calculations. Thus, AYP decisions are more subject to the laws of statistics than to education.

The bottom line: AYP is touted and used as a measure of school effectiveness. Yet it fails to accurately measure the progress schools make. Measuring progress fairly and accurately over time is what accountability should be about. The current AYP formula is neither valid nor reliable and must be changed.