



Published: 10.13.2008

Many schools feeling heat of No Child goals

THE NEW YORK TIMES

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — Prairie Elementary School had not missed a testing target since the federal No Child Left Behind law took effect in 2002. Until now.

The school, perched on a tidy, oak-shaded campus in a working-class neighborhood here, has moved each of its student groups — Hispanics, blacks, Asians, whites, American Indians, Filipinos, Pacific Islanders, English learners, the disabled — toward higher proficiency in recent years.

Overall, the number of its students passing tough statewide tests had increased by more than 3 percentage points annually, a solid record.

But this year, California schools were required to make what experts call a gigantic leap, increasing the students proficient in every group by 11 percentage points. For the first time, Prairie, and hundreds of other California schools, fell short, a failure that results in probation and, unless reversed, federal sanctions within a year.

"And they're asking for another 11 percent increase next year and the next, and that's where I'm saying I just don't know how," Fawzia Keval, the school's principal, said. "I'm spending sleepless nights."

Across the nation, far more schools failed to meet the federal law's testing targets than in any previous year, according to new state-by-state data. And in California and some other states, the problem traces in part to the fact that officials chose to require only minimal gains in the first years after the law passed and then very rapid annual gains later. One researcher likens it to the balloon payments that can sink home buyers.

Part of the reason for the troubles was that the states gambled the law would be softened when it came up for reauthorization in 2007, but efforts to change it stalled. This year Congress made no organized attempt to reconsider the law. With the nation facing urgent challenges, including two wars and economic turmoil, it could be a year or more before the new president can work with Congress to rewrite the law.

The law requires every American school to bring all students to proficiency in reading and math by 2014. When it was first implemented six years ago, it required states to outline the statistical path they would follow on their way to 100 percent proficiency, and about half set low rates of achievement growth for the first few years and steeper rates thereafter.

In California, which in 2002 had only 13.6 percent of students proficient in reading, officials promised to raise that percentage on average by 2.2 points annually from 2002 to 2007, but starting this year to greatly accelerate the progress, raising the percentage of proficient students by 11 points per year through 2014.

Now that the time has come for that accelerated improvement, California schools are not keeping up. This year, about half the state's 9,800 schools fell short.

"We're hitting a balloon-payment scenario, to use a housing analogy, where the expectations set forth in the

Local angle

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In 2006, 12 local schools were short of the standards set by Arizona Learns, the state's accountability system. This year there are 31, according to the Arizona Department of Education.

Twenty schools across the state are failing, including three in the Tucson area — Baboquivari Middle School, Naylor Middle School and Hohokam Middle School.

Of the state's 1,875 schools, 516 didn't make Adequate Yearly Progress under No Child Left Behind, the state reported Oct. 1.

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federal law are far higher than recent performance levels," said Richard Cardullo, a professor at the University of California, Riverside, who led an analysis of the performance of state elementary schools.

His study, published Sept. 26 in the journal *Science*, found that the proportion of students scoring at or above proficiency increased, on average, less than 4 percentage points annually from 2003 to 2007, far short of the 11 percentage points of annual growth required starting this year.

"Lots of schools are no longer going to be able to meet the law's requirements," Cardullo said. His study predicted that virtually every elementary school in California would fall short of the federal law's expectations before 2014.

Why did California decide on six years of relatively slow achievement growth, followed by six years of extraordinary gains? Officials from many states told the Bush administration in 2002 that they needed time to write new tests and accustom teachers to them.

But the California state school superintendent, Jack O'Connell, said he also bet that Congress might change the law in 2007, perhaps by removing its 100 percent proficiency goal. "It's true that was in the back of my mind when we negotiated our plan with the feds," O'Connell said.

A state-by-state analysis by *The New York Times* found that few schools missed targets in states with easy exams, like Wisconsin and Mississippi, but states with tough tests had a harder time. In Hawaii, Massachusetts and New Mexico, which have stringent exams, 60 percent to 70 percent of schools missed testing goals.

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