FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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AYP Crucial for California

Education Trust—West Director Russlynn Ali today released a statement discussing why California needs AYP to help it raise the overall achievement in its schools and to close achievement gaps faster.

(Oakland) – “California’s efforts to replace the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) system in No Child Left Behind with our Academic Performance Index (API) system or another “growth” model would take us in the wrong direction. The API was a crucial step in the right direction. But it was only that – a first step. It got us looking at disaggregated data and focusing on some annual growth for all students. But NCLB and AYP provide a much-needed push. Now, there is an expectation that all groups of students will be taught to read and do math proficiently within a dozen years; this is not the case under the API.

In fact, large achievement gaps between groups of students can grow under API, even as schools are meeting their API targets. Because API targets are set exclusively based on the overall school’s performance, API does not set ambitious progress goals for groups that are already far behind.

For example, look at student achievement for Farallone View Elementary School in Cabrillo Unified. In 2002 Farallone’s API was 740. Its Latino API was 565, while its White students had an API of 803. Farallone’s API growth target was 3 points (or 5% of the distance between its overall API of 740 and 800). Even though Latino students were 238 points behind white students, their goal for API was only to improve by 2 points (or 80% of the school wide target). In 2003 Farallone made its growth targets by improving its API from 803 to 817 for white students and from 565 to 567 for Hispanic students. Gaps have grown. Latino growth is marginal. Yet, under API this school falls beneath our radar – and these children become invisible.

AYP doesn’t let that happen. AYP draws necessary and required attention to the achievement gaps at Farallone. District and state leaders need to step up to their responsibilities to provide more technical assistance, support, and resources to improve the education of Latino students at schools like Farallone. By contrast, API tells communities everything is OK, even when there are huge achievement gaps that need to be addressed.

Worse still, our API targets are adjusted every year based on the current level of performance of a school or district. So if a school’s performance drops one year, the next
year the API target is even lower. Under this scenario, a school could make its targets every other year and make no movement toward proficiency over the long run – in fact, a school could lose ground, and still meet its API target.

Many suggest that this debate is really just about two different roads to the same destination. One, a growth model like API, and the other a status model like AYP. But this is based on a false premise.

AYP includes a growth model -- the “safe harbor” provision. Even if a school does not meet the annual AYP benchmark, it still makes AYP if it reduces the percentage of students below proficient by 10% from the year before. People can disagree over whether this growth model is generous enough, but it is inaccurate to represent that AYP does not give schools credit for growth.

The truth is, AYP and API will not lead us to the same destination. Our end goal of 800 on the API is not the same as NCLB’s end goal of proficiency for all students. In fact, the bar under our API is significantly lower. If a school were to reach proficiency for all of its students, it would have an API of roughly 875. It is inconsistent to say that our goal is for all students to be proficient by 2014, but to insist on an accountability system that does not share this goal.

There is no reason why our API system could not be revised to address the concerns raised here in a way that actually complies with the spirit of NCLB. In fact, that would be a huge step forward in aligning the sometimes mixed signals about student achievement currently sent to schools, parents, and the public.

Long before NCLB our state leaders waxed eloquent that our goal was to see all Californians reach proficiency on our standards. The reality is, we are far from that goal. Yes, AYP will bring more attention to that sad state of affairs. And yes, we need it.

It’s time to stop bemoaning and tinkering with the system that signals the problem and to redouble our efforts to make California’s public schools better serve our students. For two years now, we’ve fought over implementation of NCLB. We spent well over a year debating the definition of a highly qualified teacher – at one point setting the bar so low as to allow our emergency credentialed teachers to be considered highly qualified. We’ve spent as much time arguing over NCLB’s accountability system, a system that essentially mirrors everything we’ve said we wanted for our students since we enacted the Public Schools Accountability Act six years ago. It’s time to roll up our sleeves and do the hard work necessary to fix California’s ailing system. Our students just don’t have any more time left for us to waste.”

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