

## Defining ailure

### 'No Child' A Better Gauge

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No Child Left Behind isn't perfect. No law ever is. But the notion that California's Academic Performance Index (API) is a superior measure of school performance is just plain wrong.

While the API does provide some important information about student and school performance, particularly how achievement levels compare from one school to another, the API system does not hold districts and schools accountable for making sure students are sufficiently progressing toward proficiency or that achievement gaps between groups are narrowing.

Instead, the API actually codifies low expectations into law. Rather than setting more ambitious targets for the groups that start the year behind, the API system does the opposite by expecting subgroups to reach just 80 percent of the improvement of the school's overall goal.

If the schoolwide score is 700, then the schoolwide goal is 5 points improvement (or 5 percent of the difference between the schoolwide score and 800). But the goal for Latino students at this school would only be 4 points (or 80 percent of 5 points). The Latino students could have an API score of 500 or even 300, and their goal would still be only 80 percent of the school goal. API does not expect the school to close that Latino gap.

So long as California considers this kind of marginal improvement sufficient, Latino students at this school wouldn't get the public attention they need and deserve. They'd fly underneath our accountability radar.

In the end, much of the confusion and rhetoric about No Child Left Behind comes from the flawed message that API is better than Average Yearly Progress (AYP) because it is all about growth and AYP is not.

To the contrary, AYP does credit improvement. It's called the Safe Harbor Provision of AYP and it allows for a school that didn't make the proficiency goals to still make its

accountability goals if it reduced the number of students not reaching proficiency by 10 percent from the previous year. But state officials tend not to mention Safe Harbor when they bash No Child Left Behind.

No one would argue against looking at whether student learning is growing over time. But if growth is the primary focus of an accountability system (as is the case with the API), then it is easy to lose sight of the end goal of that growth -- getting students to reach an accepted standard of proficiency.

Take Vallejo Middle School, for example. Vallejo successfully made progress under API; indeed, it exceeded the schoolwide API growth target and the growth targets for every subgroup. But achievement gaps are growing -- looking at the percent proficient in sixth-grade reading in 2003 and seventh-grade results in 2004, we see that the gap separating poor students from their wealthier peers grew by 4 percentage points at Vallejo Middle.

Even though low-income students start out behind, and even though Vallejo made less progress for these students, API credited the school with meeting its goals.

Despite the rewarded "growth" under API, white students are at least three times more likely to be proficient than Latino, African American and low-income students at Vallejo Middle. Using API alone we wouldn't know this. Shouldn't we?

The truth is, we needed an accountability system that gave the public a new lens to examine schools. That's why the nation's leading Democratic and Republican senators and congressman joined together to sign No Child Left Behind into law -- and why liberal stalwarts like Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass., and California's own Rep. George Miller still stand by the law to this day.

Without the pressure of an accountability system that draws attention to achievement gaps and the groups of students trailing behind, the things we know matter most to education will continue to be implemented at a sluggish pace -- even though we know that poor students and students of color still get the least. This is an unfortunate characteristic of American education, surely -- but it is an undeniable characteristic nevertheless.

California officials should stop whining about what No Child Left Behind tells us about California schools, and get on with the business of improving our schools.