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AYP v. API: What Does It All Mean?

(Oakland, CA) – **T**omorrow, August 15, California will release the school-wide STAR scores and the list of schools that didn't make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

By some estimates, almost 70% of our schools won't meet their AYP goals. That number shakes our educators and policymakers up a bit. It should. It shines a spotlight on the achievement gaps that plague our schools.

Even though this is crucial information, there are some California educators and policymakers who would rather draw public and press attention *away* from AYP, which uncovers our achievement gaps, and keep the focus solely on the Academic Performance Index (API). While API is our best way to measure growth, it can actually contribute to the achievement gap problem in California by declaring schools successful even if gaps between groups of students grow.



We've gotten a lot of questions about which measure is better and whether we should discount AYP because it's "unreasonable." We've tried to answer some of those questions here.

Q: Should we ignore AYP while we wait for the release of our own API results in October?

A: Absolutely not. AYP is a good tool—probably the best we have—for rooting out achievement gaps. The federal government crafted AYP fully aware that states with wide gaps would wind up with more schools on the list than states with narrower gaps. And states with large achievement gaps need to take a good hard look at what's really ailing their systems and start working on a cure. That's us. We must resist the urge to throw away the thermometer just because it shows us we have a fever. Ignoring the achievement gaps that ail California won't make them go away. Only we can do that. And AYP, used as a necessary complement to the API, can help.

API focuses primarily on growth, not on closing achievement gaps aggressively and within a certain time frame. It looks at whether a school has met an overall target.

Under API, children from racial and economic subgroups have to meet only 80% of the school-wide goal. Yes, all groups must improve. But API doesn't hold us accountable if some groups progress at a slower rate. That means gaps could widen even as a school meets API year after year.

AYP makes us work faster. Under AYP, it isn't adequate for subgroups to meet 80% of the school-wide targets. All subgroups must reach the same minimum proficiency targets (i.e. 13% proficient in math in 2003), or at least show some progress under "safe harbor AYP," and all students must reach proficiency (translate: be at grade level) in a dozen years. In short, AYP measures whether we're closing achievement gaps fast enough. It's a crucial question.



Q: Is it unreasonable that one group of kids can make the whole school not meet Adequate Yearly Progress?

A: That's not unreasonable, that's the point. The federal government required states to measure all subgroups – including those we currently let float somewhere beneath the accountability radar: English language learners (ELL) and special education students.

We're now forced to confront why any group of students lags behind. More than 25% of our public school students—almost 1.6 million—are ELL. And the achievement of our Latino and African American students is scandalously low.

We've heard some claims that it is unreasonable to measure and force benchmark improvement goals upon special education students – who by definition are not at grade level. No it's not. Especially since special education students take the California Alternate Performance Assessment (CAPA) not the California Standards Tests. CAPA is specifically crafted to assess children with different needs. So if a school didn't meet AYP because it's special education students didn't improve on the skills we've deemed appropriate for their level, then schools need to focus on why. AYP makes us do that. Finally.

Q: Is AYP unreasonable because schools we think of as “good” schools—the affluent, primarily high-achieving schools in Beverly Hills, Palo Alto and Orange County—might turn up as “failing?”

A: The short answer is, they're not failing...overall (and, failing to make AYP is not the same as “failing”). They may, however, need to improve in one or more ways. Four A's and one D on a report card doesn't make a failing student. But no one can question that the student needs to improve where they got the D. It's the same for our schools. AYP fleshes out our state's report card.

We must ask ourselves what it means to be a “good” school. Is a “good” school one that is “good” only for some children? Or only for your children? No. A school isn't a “good” school unless it's a “good” school for all of its children.



Q: Is AYP unreasonable because it requires 95% of all statistically significant subgroups to be measured?

A: No. Could the 95% requirement throw some schools off? Yes, particularly in this first year as schools and districts adjust to the new participation rate requirement (API has only required us to test 85% of students on a school-wide basis, not 85% of subgroups). The participation rate for each group of students is necessary to ensure that whole groups aren't sent off on a 'field trip' on test day to try to bump up a school's achievement results, as has been known to happen in the past.

AYP is meant as a signaling system. If the 95% participation rate is the sole reason

a school didn't make AYP, then next year that school can ensure they put in place common sense measures—such as making clear to parents and students the importance of being in school on test day or offering test make-up days—to meet the cutoff next time.

What's the bottom line? California is expected to receive \$1.6 billion in Title I funds this year. That money is earmarked to help us close gaps. AYP helps us hone in on what we have to do to reach that goal. So we can spend that money more wisely. That's not unreasonable. That's what we must do. The consequences, both morally and economically, are too grave if we don't.

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