



# **AYP & API: Why the New Federal Measure is a Crucial Complement to California's Accountability System**

**C**alifornia education is at a crossroads. This year, California and all states are required to identify which schools made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

We have received a number of questions about how AYP compares with California's Academic Performance Index (API) and whether one measure is better than the other. Actually, we need both measures to help us close gaps. We respond here to some of the questions we've received and explain why AYP is a good fit with California's existing accountability system.

## **Q: What is AYP and what does it do?**

**A:** AYP is the heart of NCLB's accountability system. It measures whether all students in a school—of every race, socio-economic level, and special education and English Learner status—are making benchmark gains in achievement each year. This data will shine a spotlight on the strengths and weaknesses in California's public school system and help California tailor its reforms to ensure all students are proficient in reading and math in a dozen years. We know it won't be easy. But we must and we can meet this challenge. Indeed, many schools across California already do so, every day. The key is to make these schools the rule rather than the exception.

## **Q: Should we ignore AYP and focus only on the API results, or vice versa?**

**A:** Absolutely not, both provide us with important information. The API provides useful summary measures of student performance and detailed information about improvement.

AYP shines a spotlight on the overall achievement of all subgroups of children, to help us see whether gaps are closing fast enough. We must resist the urge to throw away the thermometer just because it shows us we have a fever. Ignoring the achievement gaps that all California won't make them go away.

## **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 look specifically at the performance of all subgroups so any struggling subgroup will receive the attention it needs to improve. Anything less means we have accepted a system that routinely will allow certain groups of children fall through the cracks.

## **Q: Doesn't the API require progress, also? What's the difference?**

**A:** The API does measure improvement. One part of the API provides each school with a 1–10 rank compared to all the schools in the state, and a 1–10 rank compared to schools with similar demographics. A second part provides information about whether a school has made significant improvement from last year for the school as a whole and for each subgroup.

AYP takes it a step further. It sets a more ambitious timeline and puts more emphasis on making sure subgroups are improving. Under AYP, all subgroups must reach the same minimum proficiency targets (for example, 16% proficient in math for elementary and middle schools in 2003), and all students must reach

proficiency in a dozen years. In contrast, the API sets a target at 5% growth every year, meaning that API targets are always 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 lower. Under this scenario, a school could make its targets every other year and make no movement toward proficiency over the long run. While this has advantages from a motivational standpoint (because the target scores are always just a little bit above the school's current level), it means that target scores for high-performing schools will always be higher than those for low-performing schools. By contrast, AYP targets are the same each year for all students in all schools, regardless of whether the school was initially low-performing or not. In short, AYP tells us whether we're bringing all students—in all groups in all schools—to proficiency fast enough.

AYP is also distinguished from API in how subgroups targets are set. Because the API goals are set exclusively based on the overall school's performance, API does not set ambitious enough goals for groups that are already far behind. In fact, schools can meet their targets while gaps grow.

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. Even though Latino students were 238 points behind white students, their goal for API was only to improve by 2 points. 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 at best. Yet, under API this school would fall under our radar. AYP doesn't let that happen. AYP draws necessary and required attention to the huge achievement gaps at Farallone, and asks district and state leaders to provide more technical assistance, support, and resources to improving the education of Latino students at schools like Farallone.

**Q: Isn't it unfair that schools making improvement still may not make AYP?**

**A:** No, the "safe harbor" provision of NCLB accommodates for this concern. Schools can make AYP even if they didn't meet their achievement target for a specific group, so long as they reduced the number of students in that group who were not proficient by 10% and made AYP for all other indicators.

For example, an elementary school that didn't meet this year's API target of 14% in English Language Arts could still make AYP if it increased the percentage of students that are proficient from 1% to 12%.

**Q: Does the large number of schools that failed to meet AYP this year mean California's world-class standards are too tough?**

**A:** No. In Phase I of 2003, almost half of all schools (and over 90% of high schools) that didn't meet AYP did so because of problems with participation rates, not problems of achievement. Each state sets its "starting point" for AYP based on achievement levels in that state in the baseline year. California set 13.6% for ELA and 16% for math based on how well students were then meeting standards. This means that California is not competing with other states with lower standards, but rather with our own achievement from the year before. Eventually, our high standards will mean that California's students have to reach higher levels of achievement than students in most other states. But we want our children to be the best, that's why we set our standards high.

**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:** There is a reason why the law's authors characterize schools that don't make AYP as "in need of improvement" and not "failing": Most schools that don't make AYP are not

"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 in that "D" subject. It's the same for our schools. In essence, 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? Of course not. 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. Keep in mind that there are no consequences to a school that misses AYP for only one year. Sure, the 95% requirement could throw some schools off, particularly in this first year as schools and districts adjust to the new participation rate requirement. But that is not a reason to reject AYP. Keep in mind that most elementary and middle schools were already aiming for the 95% participation rate required for awards. The biggest change here comes for high schools, which used to face only a 90% requirement.

Another big change is that schools will be required to test 95% of students in each subgroup. The API system looked only at overall participation rates, not at those of each subgroup. The AYP requirement is an important way to signal to schools that all students in all subgroups must be accounted for.

NCLB is focused on making sure that all children master the core subjects, and the 95% requirement ensures that all really means all. If the 95% participation rate is the sole reason schools didn't make AYP (as it was for many California high schools), then next year the state and those schools can ensure they put in place measures—such as schools making clear to parents and students the importance of being in school on test day or the state creating make-up test days—to meet the cutoff next time. Recent rules put in place by the U.S. Department of Education also allow schools and districts to average participation rates over a three-year period, so that a fluke case of the flu in a particular school should not cause the school to fail to make AYP.

**Q: How does AYP affect English Language Learners (ELL)?**

**A:** Under the API, English Language Learners were included in each school's results, but their results weren't broken out separately for comparison purposes. While the technical aspects of NCLB as related to ELL students are tricky, AYP shines a greater spotlight on the achievement levels of ELL students and gives us the added focus on our efforts to help these students achieve to high levels.

There has been some concern that, by definition, English Language Learners could never reach proficiency, especially in English/language arts. In response to this, California has chosen to designate, for NCLB purposes, that students remain classified as English Language Learners until they have demonstrated proficiency in English for three consecutive years. This will ensure that schools and districts are rewarded for moving students to fluency and alleviate the concern that the English Language Learner population, by definition, would include only those not proficient in English.

**Q: How does AYP affect special education students?**

**A:** Like ELL students, while special education students were included in schools API results, their scores were not broken out for API comparison purposes. NCLB has increased the emphasis on special education students by making them part of AYP.

We have heard some concern that it is "unreasonable" to expect special education students ever to reach proficiency in reading and mathematics, and that the scores of special education students could bring down otherwise successful schools. That is not the case. Under NCLB, students whose disabilities require accommodations, such as students who are hard of hearing, must be provided with them. Soon-to-be released federal regulations allow up to one percent of students in a state—in California that's about 10% of all special education students—to be tested with an alternate measure. That means these students, the most severely cognitively disabled students, will not be evaluated under the same standards as the rest of the state. California uses an alternate assessment called the California Alternate Proficiency Assessment (CAPA). Less than one percent of all of California's students took CAPA last year.

While it can be a challenge to help all special education students reach proficiency, we believe AYP will help focus attention on these



students, for whom lower expectations have unfortunately become the norm. The good news is, when this level of attention is brought to bear, special education students can and do make fast and meaningful improvement. In Massachusetts, for example, special education students started out with stark first-time passage rates on the MCAS—the high-school exit exam. Only 30% passed. By their final try, 82% were passing. That kind of improvement is precisely why NCLB puts the focus on special education students, and precisely why many members of the special education community have

been supportive of these provisions.

**Q: Is the API going to be replaced by AYP?**

**A:** No. In fact, the AYP results for California schools are based in part on their API scores. The NCLB allows states to include one additional indicator of the state's choosing in calculating AYP. The California Department of Education decided to use the API as that additional indicator. This sends an important message: the API is still a crucial measure for California schools.

**Q: What's the bottom line?**

**A:** 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 that we can spend that money more wisely. That means AYP is a useful complement to our API system, and that both AYP and API are valuable tools in the fight to narrow the achievement gaps that divide our students.



## About the Education Trust West

The Education Trust West is the West Coast presence of the national policy organization, the Education Trust. The Education Trust West works alongside policy-makers, parents, education professionals, business and community leaders, in cities and towns throughout California to help improve the academic achievement of all students from all subgroups and in all schools. Our mission is to help close the achievement gaps that divide California students along racial and economic lines, and to ensure that every high-school graduate is empowered and prepared to choose among all postsecondary options. As one state-level policymaker recently said, this work has made us "the conscience of the state." We wear that label proudly.

