



Georgia's 2010 Adequate Yearly Progress Results: What Does the Data Really Mean?

~ July 2010 ~

When the Georgia Department of Education released the initial Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) report on July 19, detailing how public schools across the state fared on the annual measurement of academic performance, the data seemed disheartening at first glance. Solid growth in the statewide high school graduation rate (which is now at an all-time high of 79.9 percent) was nearly overshadowed by the fact that 28.9 percent of all public schools failed to make AYP – a figure greater than that of the past five years. For these schools, failure to make AYP may pose a huge blow to academic reputation and create frustrations among parents and community members. At the state level, this year's AYP results raise questions among public school stakeholders about the effectiveness of recent reform efforts and the direction in which our schools are heading.

But is the underlying message of this year's AYP results really that clear cut? Should Georgia's policymakers, business leaders, teachers, and parents conclude that more than one-fourth of our public schools are failing? This policy brief takes a closer look at our schools' AYP results to uncover more of the story behind the numbers.

What is Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)?

Since the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 became law, AYP has become a buzzword in conversations about public education and a key focus of schools and school leaders. One of the cornerstones of NCLB, AYP is an annual measure of student participation and achievement on statewide assessments and other academic indicators. While the federal law allows each state to establish its own system of standards and assessments, it does mandate the accountability framework by which all schools must be measured.

AYP requires schools to meet standards in three areas: test participation in both mathematics and reading/English language arts; academic performance on state assessments in both mathematics and reading/English language arts; and a second indicator, which for high schools must be graduation rate. To make AYP, standards in each of these three areas must be successfully met by all students in a school as well as by each subgroup that includes at least 40 students (Asian,

Black, Hispanic, American Indian, White, Multiracial, Students with Disabilities, English Language Learners, and/or Economically Disadvantaged).

The overarching goal of NCLB is to ensure that 100 percent of public school students across the country achieve proficiency in reading and math by the year 2014. In order to reach that goal, each state sets annual levels of improvement, based on student performance on state standardized tests, that school districts and schools must achieve. These levels of improvement, known as Annual Measurable Objectives (AMO), establish the percent of students that must meet or exceed proficiency on math and reading/English tests each year. AMO targets must be met by all students and each subgroup in a school. In some subject areas, AMO targets have stayed at the same level for several years in a row. Yet now, as we move closer to the year 2014, the AMO bar will be raised higher and higher each subsequent year.

Part of the original intent of NCLB and AYP was to establish higher standards for schools and provide more information to parents. As President George W. Bush articulated at the 2002 signing of the No Child Left Behind Act, “We are asking states to design accountability systems to show parents and teachers whether or not children can read and write and add and subtract.” Yet as states have written and refined their accountability plans over the years, and as schools have lived and died by their AYP status, it has become apparent that our labeling of public schools as “Meeting AYP” or “Not Meeting AYP” may not be the end-all, be-all measure of whether or not children have mastered reading and mathematics.

For consumers and investors to assess a business’s annual profits, they compute the difference between earnings and expenses. For health leaders to measure the success of a local hospital, they can quantify lives saved. Yet for the vast majority of education stakeholders, AYP is neither easy to understand nor easy to calculate.

Does failure to make AYP really denote a failing school?

The recent data show that the percentage of Georgia’s schools making AYP dropped at every level – elementary, middle, and high. While adequate yearly progress as defined by our state and federal accountability systems is certainly a goal schools should incorporate into their strategic plans, a few specific examples help illustrate how AYP ratings can often misrepresent the true story of a school.

Consider Roswell High School in Fulton County, a suburban school with more than 2,400 students. For the past three years, the school’s graduation rate has been above 90 percent. Current data show the 2010 rate to be 87 percent. The school’s average SAT score in 2009 was higher than the district, state, and national averages. In 2010, 88 percent of all test-takers in the school passed all four subject areas of the Georgia High School Graduation Test. Advanced Placement tests in 25 subjects were taken by students at Roswell High School, and 88 percent of the scores were at level 3 or higher, qualifying students to receive college credit.

Yet as evidenced by 2010 data, Roswell High School did not make AYP due to the academic performance of three student subgroups: Hispanic, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students. Despite the vast accomplishments detailed above, Roswell High School is now marked as having not made AYP because of a few handfuls of students. Specifically, the school missed its math performance target because 24 Hispanic students, 26 students with disabilities, and 41 economically disadvantaged students earned scores at the basic level. For the English performance target, the numbers were even lower: 18 Hispanic students, 18 students with disabilities, and 25 economically disadvantaged students did not receive passing scores.

Certainly, all students at Roswell High School and in schools throughout the state deserve the opportunities and resources to excel. Yet should parents, community members, and businesses now view Roswell High School as inadequate? As a failing school? And if the school has difficulty next year hitting the AYP mark, should students there be encouraged to exercise their right to transfer to another school within the district? These same questions can be asked of dozens of schools at all levels throughout Georgia.

What happens now?

At this point, the 2010 AYP results are only preliminary. After the outcomes of summer school sessions and retests have been gathered, AYP calculations will be adjusted, and the overall data may look significantly different. In 2009, the percentage of all schools making AYP rose from 79 percent to 86 percent after the retest period. This year, however, the final AYP determinations may not yield as substantial an improvement. Quite simply, making AYP has become harder for schools, and the bar will continue to be raised over the next four years.

In 2010, the required target for high school graduation rate is 80 percent, which is an increase of 5 percentage points from last year's target. Though our preliminary state graduation rate is a commendable 79.9 percent, the fact is that 191 of 356 high schools have rates below the state average, putting them below the AYP threshold.

While the increased target was not a surprise – grad rate targets have increased by 5 percentage points each year since 2007 – this is the first year that the state average graduation rate falls below the AYP target rate (see table 1). Even if our state graduation rate continues to trend upward in the future, as it has done each year in recent history, the annual improvements required by our AYP trajectory may be a mountain too steep to climb for some schools by 2014.

Table 1. Georgia’s Graduation Rate Trajectory for Making AYP

Year	Target	State Average
2007	65%	72.3%
2008	70%	75.4%
2009	75%	78.9%
2010	80%	79.9% (preliminary)
2011	85%	
2012	90%	
2013	95%	
2014	100%	

Likewise, the academic performance levels required for schools to make AYP continues to rise each year. In 2010, only elementary and middle schools faced a higher bar, as the AMO for mathematics achievement was increased. Yet beginning in 2011 and continuing each year until 2014, schools at every level will face annual higher targets in each AYP subject area. Incremental, steady growth in student learning will no longer be enough to earn the distinction of “making AYP.”

Final Thoughts

Accountability in education is most certainly a critical piece of ensuring that our schools adequately equip students with the knowledge and tools to succeed in this world. For those schools that have struggled for years and continue to not make adequate yearly progress, there must be targeted intervention and reform to turn things around. In the case of schools that easily meet yearly targets, there must be best practices and lessons to be learned by the broader education community. But for a vast majority of schools, the AYP measure may not be giving an accurate picture of the quality of teaching and learning. And as we round the bend heading down the straightaway toward 2014, the road will get trickier for many of our schools.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act – the legislation that created AYP – is overdue for reauthorization at the federal level. As Congress begins to discuss and debate the needed changes to the current law, it is up to educators, parents, state policymakers, and other stakeholders to weigh in, voice their concerns, and tell the stories of our schools, so that what emerges from the next iteration of the law is a more effective accountability system.

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