

An Interview with Camille Maben and Diane Levin, California Department of Education

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BACKGROUND BY LEADERSHIP REVIEW

Public law 107-110, later known as the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* (or NCLB), was signed into law on January 8, 2002. Among the goals of NCLB is to have every public school student scoring at proficient or above in reading/language arts and mathematics by 2013-14. In order to qualify for federal funding to augment their education budgets, states are held accountable for closing the achievement gap among groups of students and leaving no child behind. NCLB is an effort to increase each state’s accountability at the district, school, teacher, and student levels. Yet, the complexity of the situation, the differing numbers and demographics of the students in public schools across the states, the adoption of varying testing instruments, as well as differing outcome requirements have demanded mammoth efforts toward implementation.

For example, teachers must meet specific criteria in order to be considered “highly qualified” (or “NCLB compatible”). Individual students are tested for proficiency in mathematics and reading/language arts, with results reported both for school-wide aggregates as well as for subgroups of students (e.g., major racial/ethnic subgroups, students with disabilities, students with limited English, economically disadvantaged). There are statistical issues regarding validity and reliability of assessments that must be considered along with a minimum percentage of student participants required for meaningful statistical analysis. If a school does not demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for two consecutive years, it is designated as a “Program Improvement” school, and parents will be offered the option of transferring their child to a school that is not in Program Improvement. In ensuing years, further corrective action or restructuring could be required of schools that continue to fail to make AYP.

While NCLB is prescriptive, there is some flexibility and some choices that are decided by each state, such as setting academic standards, use of specific assessment instruments, and defining “proficiency.” All states have spent considerable time and resources in the implementation of NCLB.

INTERVIEW

One case in point is the State of California. *Leadership Review* spoke to **Camille Maben** and **Diane Levin** who work in the Executive Office of the California Department of Education to understand the intricacies of NCLB implementation in their state.

Question: *Leadership Review* What are some of the pros and cons of NCLB?

Answer: Ms. Maben and Ms. Levin All of us wholeheartedly agree with the goal of raising standards and expectations for academic achievement of all students. We concur that schools should be held accountable for results as they embrace this goal.

A troubling issue, however, is that calculations suggest that within a few years, the vast majority of all schools will be identified for Program Improvement. Many of these schools will be given that designation despite having shown steady and significant improvement for all groups of students.

Q. What changes have had to be made in California to implement the No Child Left Behind Act?

A. Long before the passage of NCLB, California had already adopted rigorous academic content standards, aligned statewide assessments to those standards, and passed state law called the Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA), which called for the development of a statewide system of accountability. The centerpiece of California's accountability system is the Academic Performance Index (API). The API is based on a growth model, in which annual growth targets are set for increased student achievement in all schools and districts.

NCLB, on the other hand, requires student achievement to be measured using a "status bar" model rather than on growth. In such a model, every school and district (including specific subgroups of students within the school) must have a certain percentage of students scoring at the "proficient" or "advanced" levels on the statewide assessments in order to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), which is the centerpiece of the NCLB accountability system. In California, because we already had a statewide accountability system in place, we had to layer the federal system on top of the state system. The challenge was to merge two very disparate systems into a single, seamless accountability system. It would almost have been easier to implement NCLB if California had not already had a system in place. We had to continue to meet the letter of existing state law as well as the new federal requirement.

Q. What about the flexibility that NCLB provides to states? Wouldn't this allow states to use a growth model for NCLB accountability?

A. Although “flexibility” is the watchword of NCLB, states currently do not have the flexibility to use alternative models to determine which schools are making AYP and which schools are not on the right track. NCLB’s requirement that all schools show adequate yearly progress by reaching a single bar – the status bar model – has had the unintended effect of penalizing our thriving accountability system. A growth model, on the other hand, considers the net improvement of individual districts and schools and actually is more congruent with high academic standards and rigorous definitions of student proficiency than a status model.

Q. What would you like the public to understand about NCLB?

A. California is working diligently to implement all the requirements of NCLB, focusing heavily on improved academic performance for all our students. The reality, however, is that states across this nation face budget limitations and, in some cases, severe shortfalls. This makes it imperative that we focus our resources on schools with the greatest need for improving academic achievement.

Statewide achievement scores have been on the rise for the past five years, and we are seeing the beginnings of a narrowing of the achievement gap (based on meeting API growth targets). Yet, a sizable number of our schools are in Program Improvement because they failed to make AYP for two or more consecutive years. One of the greatest challenges is explaining the difference between the API and AYP to the public.

Q. Where should readers go for detailed information on California’s progress?

A. The most comprehensive information for California can be found at www.cde.ca.gov/pr/nclb/workbook/wb6061.html. Reading our *Accountability Workbook* will give the reader an appreciation for the depth of the effort. For national information try http://www.house.gov/ed_workforce/issues/107th/education/nclb/nclb.htm

NEWS UPDATE BY *LEADERSHIP REVIEW*

On the day of this interview, March 24, 2004, the Chief State School Officers of 14 states sent a letter to The Honorable Roderick R. Paige, U.S. Secretary of Education. The states are Alaska, Arizona, California, Connecticut, Idaho, Louisiana, Maine, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Utah, and Washington. Regarding the status vs. growth model, the letter states that, “What constitutes ‘significant improvement’ or ‘significant movement’ in a particular state should be informed by the best research in educational measurement, not federal mandate. We are proposing that the federal government hold the state responsible for educational outcomes, not processes.”

Secretary Paige’s reaction is to stress is further flexibility for the States yet no change in the law.