NASET Q & A Corner

Issue #10

Questions and Answers About No Child Left Behind: Accountability and Testing

Accountability

How are school report cards put together and what kind of information do they provide?

Reports on individual schools are part of the annual district report cards, also known as local report cards. Each school district must prepare and disseminate annual local report cards that include information on how students in the district and in each school performed on state assessments. The report cards must state student performance in terms of three levels: basic, proficient and advanced. Achievement data must be disaggregated, or broken out, by student subgroups according to: race, ethnicity, gender, English language proficiency, migrant status, disability status and low-income status. The report cards must also tell which schools have been identified as needing improvement, corrective action or restructuring (defined in Q-and-A below: "What if a school does not improve?").

How can parents see these local report cards, which include school-by-school data?

States must ensure that the local districts make these local report cards available to the parents of students promptly and by no later than the beginning of the school year. The law requires that the information be presented in an "understandable and uniform format, and to the extent practicable, in a language that the parents can understand." States and districts may also distribute this information to the media for publicizing; post it on the Internet; or provide it to other public agencies for dissemination.
Further, local school districts must notify parents if their child's school has been identified as needing improvement, corrective action or restructuring (defined in Q-and-A below: "**What if a school does not improve**?"). In this event, districts must let parents know the options available to them. Also, districts must annually notify parents of students in Title I schools of their "right to know" about teacher qualifications and how to exercise it (see section on Teacher Quality).

What information is provided on state report cards?

Each state must produce and disseminate annual report cards that provide information on student achievement in the state--both overall and broken out according to the same subgroups as those appearing on the district report cards listed above. State report cards include:

- State assessment results by performance level (basic, proficient and advanced), including (1) two-year trend data for each subject and grade tested; and (2) a comparison between annual objectives and actual performance for each student group.
- Percentage of each group of students not tested.
- Graduation rates for secondary school students and any other student achievement indicators that the state chooses.
- Performance of school districts on adequate yearly progress measures, including the number and names of schools identified as needing improvement.
- Professional qualifications of teachers in the state, including the percentage of teachers in the classroom with only emergency or provisional credentials and the percentage of classes in the state that are not taught by highly qualified teachers, including a comparison between high- and low-income schools.

What is "adequate yearly progress"? How does measuring it help to improve schools?

No Child Left Behind requires each state to define adequate yearly progress for school districts and schools, within the parameters set by Title I. In defining adequate yearly progress, each state sets the minimum levels of improvement--measurable in terms of student performance--that school districts and schools must achieve within time frames specified in the law. In general, it works like this:

- Each state begins by setting a "starting point" that is based on the performance of its lowest-achieving demographic group or of the lowest-achieving schools in the state, whichever is higher.
- The state then sets the bar--or level of student achievement--that a school must attain after two years in order to continue to show adequate yearly progress.
- Subsequent thresholds must be raised at least once every three years, until, at the end of 12 years, all students in the state are achieving at the proficient level on state assessments in reading/language arts and math.

What if a school does not improve?

States and local school districts will aid schools that receive Title I funds in making meaningful changes that will improve their performance. In the meantime, districts will offer parents options for children in low-performing schools, including extra help to children from low-income families.

The No Child Left Behind Act lays out an action plan and timetable for steps to be taken when a Title I school fails to improve, as follows:

- A Title I school that has not made adequate yearly progress, as defined by the state, for two consecutive school years will be identified by the district before the beginning of the next school year as needing improvement. School officials will develop a two-year plan to turn around the school. The local education agency will ensure that the school receives needed technical assistance as it develops and implements its improvement plan. Students must be offered the option of transferring to another public school in the district--which may include a public charter school--that has not been identified as needing school improvement.
- If the school does not make adequate yearly progress for three years, the school remains in school-improvement status, and the district must continue to offer public school choice to all students. In addition, students from low-income families are eligible to receive supplemental educational services, such as tutoring or remedial classes, from a state-approved provider.
- If the school fails to make adequate progress for four years, the district must implement certain corrective actions to improve the school, such as replacing certain staff or fully implementing a new curriculum, while continuing to offer public school choice and supplemental educational services for low-income students.
- If a school fails to make adequate yearly progress for a fifth year, the school district must initiate plans for restructuring the school. This may include reopening the school as a charter school, replacing all or most of the school staff or turning over school operations either to the state or to a private company with a demonstrated record of effectiveness.

In addition, the law requires states to identify for improvement those local education agencies that fail to make adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years or longer and to institute corrective actions.

How are teachers or schools that do well rewarded?

No Child Left Behind requires states to provide state academic achievement awards to schools that close achievement gaps between groups of students or that exceed academic achievement goals. States may also use Title I funds to financially reward teachers in schools that receive academic achievement awards. In addition, states must designate as distinguished schools those that have made the greatest gains in closing the achievement gap or in exceeding achievement goals.

What can parents do to help their child's school succeed and meet the accountability requirements? How does the law help parents become involved?

No Child Left Behind supports parent involvement because research overwhelmingly demonstrates the positive effect that parent involvement has on their children's academic achievement (Clark 1983; Comer 1980, 1988; Eccles, Arbreton, et al., 1993; Eccles-Parsons, Adler and Kaczala 1982; Epstein 1983, 1984; Marjoribanks 1979 as cited in Eccles and Harold 1996). In the event a school is identified as needing improvement, corrective action or restructuring, the law requires the local education agency to notify parents accordingly and to explain to them how they can become involved in school-improvement efforts. In any event, the law requires the same agency to provide parents with local report cards, which include data on each individual school in the district, as described earlier. Thus, parents have up-to-date

information about their child's school, which they can use in whatever manner they choose to be involved. Parents may help their child's school in a number of ways, including: Attending parent-teacher meetings or special meetings to address academic problems at the school; volunteering to serve as needed; encouraging other parents to become involved; and learning about the school's special challenges, community resources and the No Child Left Behind Act. In addition, parents should take advantage of the increased flexibility given local decision-makers by No Child Left Behind and talk with their school board members, principals and other state and local education leaders about which programs they think will help their students the most.

In addition, the law has other specific requirements on parent involvement that include the following:

- Each state education agency must support the collection and dissemination of information on effective parent involvement practices to local education agencies and schools.
- The law in Title I spells out specific measures that local education agencies and schools receiving Title I funds must take to ensure parent involvement in significant areas, including: overall planning at the district and school levels; written policies on parent involvement at both levels; annual meetings; training; coordinating parent involvement strategies among federal education programs (i.e., Title I, Head Start and Reading First); and evaluating those strategies and revising them if needed.
- Schools that have schoolwide programs must involve parents in developing plans for such programs--that is, programs designed to raise the achievement of low-achieving students in high-poverty Title I schools by improving instruction throughout the entire school (thus using Title I funds to serve all children).
- The law provides for involvement of parents of private schools students served by various federal education programs such as Title I.

Testing

What impact does testing have on children?

Although testing may be stressful for some students, testing is a normal and expected way of assessing what students have learned. The purpose of state assessments required under No Child Left Behind is to provide an independent insight into each child's progress, as well as each school's. This information is essential for parents, schools, districts and states in their efforts to ensure that no child--regardless of race, ethnic group, gender or family income--is trapped in a consistently low-performing school.

Will student results be made available to parents?

Yes. State assessments will produce reports on each student that will be given to parents.

Will the results of a child's tests be private?

Absolutely. Only the parents and school receive the results of an individual child's tests. Individual student scores will not be made public. They are not a part of student achievement data on report cards issued by districts and states.

On what subjects are students tested and when?

No Child Left Behind requires that, by the 2005-06 school year, each state must measure every child's progress in reading and math in each of grades 3 through 8 and at least once during grades 10 through 12. In the meantime, each state must meet the requirements of the previous law reauthorizing ESEA (the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994) for assessments in reading and math at three grade spans (3-5; 6-9; and 10-12). By school year 2007-2008, states must also have in place science assessments to be administered at least once during grades 3-5; grades 6-9; and grades 10-12. Further, states must ensure that districts administer tests of English proficiency--to measure oral language, reading and writing skills in English--to all limited English proficient students, as of the 2002-03 school year.

Students may still undergo state assessments in other subject areas (i.e., history, geography and writing skills), if and when the state requires it. No Child Left Behind, however, requires assessments only in the areas of reading/language arts, math and science.

How is testing handled for children with disabilities? How is it handled for those with limited English proficiency?

No Child Left Behind requires that all children be assessed. In order to show adequate yearly progress, schools must test at least 95 percent of the various subgroups of children, including their students with disabilities and those with limited English proficiency. States must provide reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities or limited English proficiency. For the latter, accommodations may include native-language versions of the assessment; however, in the area of reading and language arts, students who have been in U.S. schools for three consecutive years will be assessed in English.

For more information on accommodations in a particular state, contact the appropriate state education agency.

Some say that testing causes teachers to teach to the test. Is that true?

State assessments are expected to measure how well students meet the state's academic standards, which define what students should know and be able to do in different subject areas at different grade levels. Under the previous reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1994, states were required to develop or adopt standards in mathematics and in reading or language arts; No Child Left Behind requires states to do the same with science standards by 2006. Curriculum based on state standards should be taught in the classroom. If teachers cover subject matter required by the standards and teach it well, then students will master the material on which they will be tested--and probably much more. In that case, students will need no special test preparation in order to do well.

Nevertheless, state assessments sound like they could take a lot of time and effort. What will be gained?

The point of state assessments is to measure student learning. A key principle of quality management is the importance of measuring what is valued (e.g., production rates; costs of materials, etc.). Such measures enable an organization to identify where and how to improve

operations. In the same manner, if schools and school systems are to continuously improve, they must measure growth in student achievement. After all, the core of all activity in schools and school systems is teaching and learning, and the key question is: ***Are the students learning?***

Do tests measure the progress of schools?

Annual state assessments required under No Child Left Behind produce data on student performance at individual schools; and this information is used to gauge whether each and every school is meeting the state's standard of "adequate yearly progress." Parents can check progress made in improving student performance at their child's school by checking the annual district report card. (See above section on Accountability.) If their school is not making adequate yearly progress and has been identified as needing improvement, corrective action or restructuring, No Child Left Behind requires that districts notify parents and offer options.

How does testing help teachers?

Annual testing provides teachers with a great deal of information. For example, overall poor results could indicate that the curriculum needs to be reviewed and aligned with the content upon which state standards are based; poor results could also mean that teachers need to modify their instructional methods. Another likely indicator of the same problems would be if teachers saw poor performance by their students in certain areas. Test results could also help teachers to clarify those areas in which they may need professional development. Finally, teachers gain a great deal of information about the performance of individual students that enables them to meet the particular needs of every child.

How does testing help principals?

Annual tests show principals exactly how much progress each teacher's students have made. They can use this information to guide decisions about program selection, curriculum arrangement, professional development for teachers and school resources they might need. Tests also show principals the strengths and weaknesses of students--in terms of the whole school, various subgroups and as individuals--and enable them to make plans that bolster strengths and address weaknesses.

How can parents find out if their child's school uses information gathered from testing to improve teaching and learning?

Parents can ask the principal how their school makes decisions about teaching and learning. They can ask such questions as: Does the faculty meet regularly; review performance data; and identify weaknesses to be targeted? Do programs and curricula follow state content standards defining what students should know and be able to do in a given subject, at a given grade level? How is the school using test data to guide decisions about teaching and learning (e.g., how do those data influence professional development, tutoring, and selection of materials)? Is there a schoolwide plan that uses testing to evaluate performance, determine areas of strengths and weaknesses in instruction and respond to targeted needs of students? Have test data revealed weaknesses at the school (e.g., low math scores in the fifth and sixth grades)? What are the teachers and principal doing to assess such problems and address them? These are important

questions for parents to ask about how their child's school is using testing and the data obtained from it.

What about the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)?

Since 1969, NAEP has been the only nationally representative and continuing assessment of what American students know and can do in major academic subjects. Over the years NAEP has measured students' achievement in many subjects, including reading, mathematics, science, writing, history, civics, geography and the arts. Since 1992, the current NAEP reading assessment has been given in four different years (1992, 1994, 1998 and 2000) to a nationally representative sample of fourth-grade students. NAEP provides a wealth of data about the condition of education in the United States.

Under No Child Left Behind, as a condition of receiving federal funding, states are required to participate in the NAEP math and reading assessments for fourth- and eighth-grade students every two years, beginning in 2002-03. Resulting data will significantly increase information that parents--and others--can use to compare the performance of children in one state with that of children in another state. To carry it one step further, NAEP data will highlight the rigor of standards and tests for individual states: If there is a large discrepancy between children's proficiency on a state's tests and their performance on NAEP, that would suggest that the state needs to take a closer look at its standards and assessments and consider making improvements.