

THE PUBLIC'S RIGHT TO KNOW

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The public, as taxpayers, has a right to know how public schools are performing. Access to information about public education is increasingly available, thanks to the reporting requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002. Building on the reporting provisions in the 1994 reauthorization of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Congress now mandates disclosure of information that is understandable and uses languages parents know. Public reporting is intended to show how the education system, whether a single school, an individual school district, or a state, is functioning for all students.

Local Report Cards. Beginning with the 2002-2003 school year, each school district must issue an annual report card for the district and each school in the district. In some states, the state education agency, rather than the district, actually produces these report cards via its web page. Preexisting report cards mandated by Title I in 1994 or by state law must include the new elements called for in the No Child Left Behind Act.

School report cards include basic information about enrollment, teachers and staff, special programs, and financial data. They must also include the performance of students that is disaggregated by subgroup on state tests compared to the achievement of students in the district and the entire state. In addition, they must indicate if the school has been identified for improvement because it has failed to meet the state's standard for adequate yearly progress.

District report cards must also include the achievement of students on state tests compared to all students in the state disaggregated by subgroup and the number and percentage of schools identified for improvement and the length of time these schools have been identified.

School systems may, of course, add any other information to district and school report cards. The report cards must be disseminated to all schools in the district and to all parents of students attending those schools. In addition, they must be posted on the Internet, distributed to the media, and sent to public agencies such as the court house and the library.

State Report Cards. For the first time, federal law requires states to issue annually a State Report Card that provides in a concise and understandable format information

- on student achievement by each proficiency level in the aggregate and disaggregated by student subgroups;
- comparing the actual achievement level of each student subgroup with the measurable objectives for each subgroup in both reading and mathematics;

DISAGGREGATION

Disaggregate by subgroup means that the results of state tests must be broken out by certain categories of students: each major racial/ethnic category, by English proficiency status, by gender, by migrant status, and for disabled students and for poor and non-poor students. When reporting these numbers in each subgroup, the number must be statistically reliable and not identify individual students. For that reason, a school report card will have a blank or be blacked out when the number of students in a category is so small that it would be easy to know who the students are.

- on the percentage of students not tested;
- on the most recent two-year trend in student achievement in reading and mathematics for each grade level;
- on high school graduation rates;
- about the adequate yearly progress of all school districts and the name of schools identified for improvement;
- about the professional qualifications of teachers, the percentage of teachers teaching with emergency or provisional credentials, the percentage of classes not taught by highly qualified teachers for the state and broken out for the top and bottom quartile of school poverty.

State Report Cards could include other optional data, such as attendance rates, average class size per grade, the incidence of violence and substance abuse, the extent of parent involvement, the percentage of students completing Advanced Placement courses, and the rates of passing Advanced Placement tests.

State Report to the Secretary of Education. In addition to the State Report Card, each state must report annually, beginning with the 2002-2003 school year, to the U.S. Secretary of Education and make the report widely available within the state. This report must contain the following:

- the state's progress in developing and implementing state tests for grades 3-8 in reading and mathematics and science by 2007-2008;
- test results, disaggregated by student subgroup;
- results of student tests, disaggregated by student subgroup, in any year prior to the 2002-2003 school year;
- the results of tests of English language proficiency of limited-English proficient students, unless the state has received an extension; and
- the number and names of each school identified for improvement, the reason for the identification, and the measures taken to address the problems of student achievement in those schools.

Notice About School Improvement. The No Child Left Behind Act requires states to set measurable objectives, or goals, for all schools and each student subgroup in reading and mathematics so that all students reach proficiency in those subjects by the 2013-2014 school year. Schools that receive Title I funding and that do not reach those goals go through three stages—school improvement, corrective action, and restructuring--until they succeed in achieving the goals. However, before the state places a school in one of those categories, it must provide local school officials a notice and opportunity for a hearing within 45 days. That notice must be sent to all parents of children in the effected school and to the general public via the internet, the media, or other public agencies.

Title I schools that have not attained the goals for student achievement in both reading and mathematics are supposed to receive extra federal school improvement funds in order to meet those goals. The extra help may not be just more money for the school budget. Schools may require services, such as technical assistance for a comprehensive needs assessment, for specialized training for teachers in reading or math instruction, or for reorganizing their parent involvement activities.

If after the hearing, the school is identified in one of the three categories, the state must make publicly available a list of schools that have received funds or services provided by federal school improvement funds and the percentage of low-income students in each school. With the information on this list, anyone can inquire further about whether these funds and services are utilized and, in their view, are reasonably expected to lead to improved student performance.

Teacher Quality. The No Child Left Behind Act requires that all classroom teachers teaching core academic subjects be “highly qualified” by the 2005-2006 school year. Each state must set benchmarks for districts and schools receiving Title I funds by which this goal will be achieved.

Beginning with the 2002-2003 school year, each local school district receiving Title I funds must compile a report on the annual progress that the district and every school in the district are making toward this goal. Using these local reports, the state education agency prepares a report for the entire state and submits it to the U.S. Department of Education. These state and local reports may be combined with the State and Local Report Cards to avoid duplication.

Paraprofessional Qualifications. The No Child Left Behind Act upgrades the qualifications for paraprofessionals who assist teachers with instruction. Principals of Title I schools must have written information regarding compliance with these new requirements and make it available to any member of the general public upon request.

All paraprofessionals currently assisting in instruction under the direct supervision of a classroom teacher in Title I schools must have completed two years of college, obtained an associates’ degree, or demonstrated, through a formal assessment, their knowledge of how to support instruction in reading, writing and mathematics. Currently employed aides in these positions must satisfy these requirements by January 2006.

Paraprofessionals cannot be hired after January 8, 2002 for instructional support positions in Title I schools unless they already have those qualifications. These qualifications do not apply to other paraprofessional in non-instructional roles, including those providing translation services for non-English speaking children and/or parents.

Limited English Proficient Students. For the first time, all school districts receiving Title I funds are required to administer to limited-English proficient (LEP) students a test that measures their proficiency in oral language, reading and writing in English. Students have three years to become English proficient. The law requires that LEP students who have attended U.S. schools (except for Puerto Rico) for three consecutive years must be assessed in the English on the reading/language arts state test. Exceptions to the three-year rule on a case-by-case basis are possible.

Each school district receiving Title I funds must report to the state education agency at the end of every second fiscal year for which it has a grant under Title III (Language Instruction for Limited English Proficient and Immigrant Children) on the number and percentage of children attaining English proficiency and a description of the progress children who are no longer receiving special language instruction made in meeting the state’s standards in reading and mathematics. The state agency compiles this information from every local district and submits a report to the U.S. Department of Education.

While the law says that this information must be made publicly available and widely distributed, state and district practice will vary. The most likely place to look for this information is on the state’s web site. Ask state and local officials how and when they will comply with these reporting requirements.