

Talking about No Child Left Behind and AYP

Many Montana parents are understandably confused and worried about reports that their children's schools are "missing" Adequate Yearly Progress. The sixth AYP report recently released by the Office of Public Instruction said 231 of Montana's 824 schools currently are identified as "missing AYP."

MEA-MFT members can help parents and others understand why the law gives an inaccurate picture of Montana schools by using these talking points:

1. The No Child Left Behind law requires steadily rising targets:

- Each year, an increasingly higher percentage of children at every grade level must score at "proficient" or "advanced" levels in reading and math -- or else the entire school will "fail" to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). By 2013-2014, 100% of children at every grade level must score "proficient" or "advanced."
- This includes children in poverty, those with limited English, and those in special education.
- It's a nice idea and a worthy goal – but unfortunately the law paints a false picture of how schools are really doing.
- This year, NCLB's required level of proficiency to achieve AYP increased from 74 to 83 percent in reading and 51 to 68 percent in math.

2. Rising targets for AYP make it appear that Montana schools are somehow getting worse, when the opposite is true:

- The AYP results hide the facts: Montana students are improving. The overall trend for NCLB test results for math and reading is up.

Percentage of Montana Students at or above "proficient"		
	Reading	Math
2003-2004	62	57
2004-2005	68	59
2005-2006	78	61
2006-2007	81	63

3. Results of another national test confirm that Montana students do well in math and reading. The 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test of 8th graders showed:

- 8th grade students in only two other states scored higher than Montana students in reading.
- Montana 8th grade students ranked 10th in math.

4. NCLB labels a whole school as "failing" to make AYP if just one subgroup of students is unable to reach a target that may be unrealistic. Is that fair?

- In Montana, the most common subgroups are students with disabilities, students with economic disadvantages, students with limited English proficiency, and American Indian students.
- Schools or districts must have 30 or more students enrolled in a subgroup for those scores to be reported.

The low-income subgroup:

- In Montana, many of the schools that “failed” to make AYP did so because the subgroup of children living in poverty did not achieve the target proficiency.
- Many children living in poverty struggle with unstable home lives, inadequate nutrition, and high mobility (their families move many times, making it difficult for kids to adapt to new schools.) Should these children be punished for situations out of their control? Should their schools be punished by being labeled as “failing”?

The special education subgroup:

- In Montana, 13% of public school students receive special education services.
- To qualify for special education, the student must have a disability AND struggle enough with academics or behavior to need special education services.
- No Child Left Behind requires students in special education to achieve the same test scores and graduation rates as students without special needs. If they don't, the whole school is labeled as “failing” to make AYP.

The limited English language subgroup:

- Students categorized as “English Language Learners/Limited English Proficiency” are students who have difficulty in listening, speaking, reading, and writing English.
- No Child Left Behind requires these students to achieve the same test scores and graduation rates as students without a language barrier. If they don't, the whole school is labeled as “failing” to make AYP.

Additional talking points:

- We believe in accountability for schools and high expectations for children. But No Child Left Behind focuses on punishment and rigid federal mandates rather than helping schools. You don't help schools by punishing them. You do it by giving educators the resources they need to educate all their students.
- The NCLB test is on just two subjects – reading and math. NCLB ignores how well schools do in science, social studies, and other important subjects.
- There is no way one test can measure a child's achievement and ability. No Child Left Behind uses substandard methodology to try to push high standards. It is wasting billions of dollars on paperwork and bureaucracy. It is getting in the way of real improvements in classroom learning.
- We are more interested in finding the best way for each child to make progress and be prepared for work and life. We should focus on what we know works to boost achievement for all children: small class sizes, teacher training, parental involvement, and up-to-date books and materials.
- No Child Left Behind gives a false impression of the quality of our schools and educators.

- Overall, Montana fares well compared to other states, with 72 percent of public schools making AYP. In neighboring North Dakota, 61 percent of its schools make the grade, while Idaho has 55 percent, Hawaii has 40 percent and Georgia and California each are only at 32 percent.
- Many Americans believe AYP is one aspect of NCLB that should be totally eliminated when the law is up to be reauthorized by Congress next year.
- In fact, fewer than 2 out of 10 Americans polled believe NCLB should continue without significant change. (Phi Delta Kappa-Gallup poll)

Working with parents:

1. Give real examples of what your school is doing to help improve math or reading. Talk about things parents might have noticed or will notice, such as Math Night, summer reading programs, or extra homework. Terms such as "program improvement plan" won't cut it -- they're not specific and they sound bureaucratic.
2. Invite parents to call or meet to discuss AYP.
3. Consider having a school community meeting where parents can discuss AYP, get more explanation, learn about activities to raise scores, and learn ways to help in the school.