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Northwest Education is available online in both PDF and HTML versions at www.nwrel.org/nwedu/. Look for Web exclusives, marked with ⚡.
FORUM

The Current Environment in Education Research

I am curious: The author (Steven Nelson, “The Promise of Scientific Evidence in Education,” summer 2004) frequently tells us that the only research that is “good” is that which is empirical and objective, and follows proof-of-reason based on the theory and evidence. This effectively excludes ethnography, qualitative studies, and case studies. He writes, “So we generally recognize that true experiments are less equivocal than quasi-experiments, and those are better than correlational and case studies, which in turn supercede expert opinion, which trumps anecdotal evidence.”

My question is: With what scientifically based research does the author support this claim? It seems to me that this statement is a matter of “expert opinion,” which is clearly not considered to be of high enough quality to demonstrate the usefulness of this statement, much less the article as a whole. How is this article, which seems to be largely a matter of opinion rather than rigorous, scientifically based research, supposed to help me as a teacher?

A.M. Will
Instructor
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Alpena, Michigan

The author responds:

Thank you for your comments and concerns regarding the article in Northwest Education magazine on scientific research. You might be surprised to learn that I agree with your observations about the merits of various research methods. The claims that I use to support the assertions in the article are based upon federal policy: the No Child Left Behind Act and the Education Sciences Reform Act. Indeed, goal four of the U.S. Department of Education’s strategic plan is to “transform education into an evidence-based field.” Their performance indicators include: “Of the new research and evaluation projects funded by the IES (Institute for Education Sciences) that address causal questions, the percentage of projects that employ randomized experimental designs [will increase].

The hierarchy I cite is theirs, not mine. But it is the same hierarchy of research designs used for testing the efficacy of pharmaceuticals and the environmental quality of land-use plans.

The poster child of IES is the What Works Clearinghouse, which employs criteria so rigorous in its search for high-quality research that, for example, they only found four acceptable studies out of 800 reviewed in the area of middle school mathematics. These are the facts of the public policy environment within which both you and I are operating, whether we agree with them or not. As a trained sociologist, I also struggle with the true experiment as the gold standard. You will note that I referenced the National Research Council’s Scientific Research in Education (The National Academies Press, 2002), which I encourage you to read. It provides a broader perspective on the nature of evidence and scientific inquiry both in purpose and approach. So I will conclude with a congratulatory touché, that indeed expert opinion doesn’t constitute scientifically based research. Federal law, however, still stands. Thank you for your readership and comments.

Steven R. Nelson
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Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

We want to hear from you! Send your letters to the editor, article ideas, and tips on places where good things are happening to nwedufeedback@nwrel.org. Letters may be edited for length or clarity.
I sat with Yétúndé Lániran at her dinner table one night in March while dusk settled outside. Porch lights were coming on up and down the street in her North Portland neighborhood. It was cozy inside. Yétúndé considered the question I’d put to her: “When you think of ‘accountability in public education,’ what does that mean to you?” In preparing this issue of Northwest Education, we had talked with teachers, administrators, and policymakers around the region about their views on accountability. Now, I wanted to hear a parent’s perspective.

Yétúndé, I knew, would be a good person to ask. She’s a parent of two boys who go to public schools in Portland—Mayowa, a sixth-grader, and Yinka, who’s in first grade—and she is a single, working-mom professional. She’s one of those people who can always be counted on. People at her church get wide-eyed and positively gush when talking about Yétúndé’s generosity and warmth. Not a few young people—her sons’ friends, her friends’ daughters—spend weekends in her home, finding comfort and, sometimes, the right measure of tough love. I knew, too, that she’d have a fresh perspective on the question. She is an expatriate of Nigeria, having come to the United States more than a dozen years ago to earn a doctorate in phonology—the physics of sound—from Cornell University. She stayed in the United States, her home country never being politically stable enough to return to, and she’s done what so many expatriates do: She stays in close touch with her extended family back home by phone, e-mail, letters—and sends money, whenever she can. Being accountable to others is the fabric of her life. She looked at me and answered readily.

“It’s reciprocal. Parents have a role. Teachers have a role. The school administrators have a role. The students themselves have a role; they have to be accountable, too, otherwise it can be all on the teachers.”

She’s sometimes frustrated because Mayowa isn’t always as challenged in school as she’d like for him to be. He’s a gifted learner and his middle school only offers one accelerated class, an AP course in math.

“He’s doing well in school but he finishes his work too soon,” Yétúndé says. “I tell Mayowa, ‘You’re not challenging yourself in school. You hurry and get your homework done and then you spend time watching TV.’ And he’ll say, ‘But I’m on the honor roll.’ And I’ll say, ‘That’s exactly my point!’

“One thing I hate about my job is that I don’t get off work until the end of the day, and then I’m too tired to work with him on extra projects and study. “I could get workbooks from Barnes & Noble and I could go through them with him,” she says wistfully. “Parent involvement is so important.”

The reality is that, like most working parents, she must rely heavily on her son’s teachers to meet his learning needs. “I want him to do well academically, but that’s asking teachers who are not that well paid to do more things after school. How much more do I want to ask of teachers to challenge my talented kid, you know, when they already have 25 students in each class and they teach classes all day long?”

In one of Mayowa’s classes, students are not required to write a report on the books they read, their grades are based on the number of pages they have read. Yet, writing essays is just the kind of thing that would give Mayowa a worthy challenge. “But if I, as a teacher, assign papers to 25 kids in three classes,” reasons Yétúndé, ‘how many of them can I grade? People don’t realize that teachers work regular hours and then go home to grade papers and prepare for the next day’s class.”

No Child Left Behind has placed an unprecedented expectation on schools to ensure every child succeeds. More than ever, teachers are having to balance the needs of each student—from those who struggle academically to the talented kids like Mayowa, and all of those in between. Yétúndé recognizes this, but she worries that the law encourages a focus on testing as the sole measure of student success, and that this hamstrings teachers’ ability to individualize their teaching. Focusing on testing “is not the solution to the problem,” she says.

Her point is that while schools must be accountable to federal law and to parents, the reverse is also true. Federal lawmakers—as well as local governments and citizens—have a responsibility to see that public schools get the resources they need to meet the worthy objective of the law. For example, says Yétúndé, give public school teachers classroom aides who can help give that personalized attention that kids need so much to flourish. The way she sees it, accountability in public education shouldn’t only be about scrutinizing whether others have done their part, but about stepping up to share in the responsibility. In this issue of Northwest Education, there are stories about people who step up and demonstrate every day that they can be counted on to do their part—and then some.

—Denise Jarrett Weeks

EDITOR’S NOTE

Photo by Denise Jarrett Weeks
ON THE ROAD TO ACCOUNTABILITY

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The Coach in the Classroom

Helping teachers be all that they can be, a cadre of instructional coaches are “embedded” in classrooms throughout Spokane—placing them at the front lines of the school district’s strategy to improve student achievement.

By Mindy Cameron
Photos by William Berg
SPOKANE, Washington—Jerry Bock, a veteran art teacher at Spokane’s Glover Middle School, has just completed a unit on pottery. Students have created a variety of clay figurines and now the teacher wants them to think more deeply about what they have accomplished and the artistic impulses from which these creatures emerged.

Not so many years ago, Bock would have been on his own in developing a writing assignment to wrap up the pottery unit. This time he has help, and so does every other teacher at Glover.

In fact, most teachers in the Spokane Schools District now have access to instructional coaches. All six of Spokane’s middle schools, 29 of its 35 elementary schools, and two of five high schools have instructional coaches. The coaching model is a key element of the district’s strategic plan for increasing student achievement.

Nancy Stowell, associate superintendent for teaching and learning, explains Spokane’s emphasis on coaching. “The place to impact teaching is in the classroom—not in conferences and professional development sessions,” she said. Putting that belief into practice means that coaches are “embedded in classrooms.”

At Glover Middle School, Charlene Hombel is one of four instructional coaches embedded in classrooms. She arrives at Bock’s class after spending about 15 minutes working with a teacher and several students in a language arts class. Bock tells Hombel he wants students to respond to a question something like this: “What did you learn that I haven’t already asked about?”

Teacher and coach talk about the assignment and how to phrase a question that will elicit what Bock is seeking. In the pottery unit students made three pieces—a creature, a functional piece, and a nonfunctional shape. Their assignment is to write about the project. The first part of the assignment directs them to be descriptive about the creature they made—body type, facial expression, color, size, features, and texture. The second question is about the process and construction techniques of the other two pieces.

As Hombel and Bock discuss how best to phrase a third question, the one that’s still puzzling the art teacher, some clarity begins to emerge.

“This is exciting, working with Jerry on this,” Hombel says as she leaves the art class to drop in on yet another classroom. During the next few days they will finalize a question that meets Bock’s goal, she explains. Then they will look at the student responses and use them to model future assignments. “Close examination of student work is the best way to learn how to teach,” Hombel says, saying once again how exciting her work is.

The Spokane Public Schools District has been focused on school-improvement strategies for more than a decade, a focus that has led to many changes and some notable successes. Most recently it has established what is readily acknowledged as a “stretch goal”—90 percent of students will meet standards by 2007.

For a district of nearly 30,000 students and considerable poverty (46 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches), it is indeed an ambitious goal. Also, Washington state has some of the toughest testing standards in the nation.

In its steady drive to improve schools and learning outcomes for students, the Spokane district has developed a nine-point strategy:

■ Use a systems approach
■ Raise expectations
■ Collaborate and build relationships
■ Use data to drive instruction
■ Provide professional development
■ Provide leadership development
■ Implement districtwide curricula
■ Build community support
■ Celebrate success

Instructional coaching grows out of the third imperative, collaborate and build relationships. Most teachers, and others who have spent time in and around schools for many years, probably would agree with Stowell, who describes teaching in the past as “an isolating experience. You’d go into your classroom, close the door, and do your thing.

“Getting all kids to standards,” she said, “provides an opportunity to come out of the classroom and talk to each
"The state moved from a straight trajectory toward goals to a stair-step model that emphasizes yearly growth and progress with time built in to reach the goals rather than meeting a singular goal each year."

other." For Spokane teachers it is more than an opportunity; it is a necessity. Two years ago during contract negotiations, the district and the teachers’ association agreed to set aside time—one hour each Thursday—for every teacher to engage in collaboration around student learning.

Not every teacher, however, is eager to collaborate. Stowell acknowledges some foot-dragging, but said she is seeing changes as the district has provided more training. "It’s evolutionary. We are changing thinking a little bit at a time."

At Glover Middle School there is no evidence of foot-dragging. Asked what is most challenging about their role, Glover’s team of instructional coaches lists lack of time, changing state and federal mandates and, more recently, possible changes in the state curriculum. Teacher resistance is not on the list. Relationships among coaches, Glover Principal Roberta Kramer, and the 55-member teaching staff are strong.

Joe Slauson, instructional coach in science, calls it luck. The coaching model has been used for more than four years at Glover without resentment or resistance. He thinks it helped that before coaching was instituted teachers worked in teams so teacher-to-teacher relationships were already a part of the school’s culture.

Glover Middle School sits in the center of a modest neighborhood in the northwest corner of Spokane. It has 811 students in seventh and eighth grades. Its 62.5 percent poverty level puts it well above the district average. "As a staff we are not stuck in the reality of the school’s poverty level," said instructional coach Hombel. "We believe all these kids can learn." Teachers and coaches focus on "What can we control? What do we influence?" said math coach Diane Floyd.

Glover Principal Kramer is deeply committed to the coaches and their integral role at her school. "I think back to when we didn’t have coaching," said Kramer. "It was a different place."

Conversation among the coaches and Kramer is animated and focused. They gather around the table in the "cave," a windowless room in the center of the school where each coach has a highly personalized work space. Coaches and principal talk enthusiastically about how Glover has become a true learning community. They also agree that the Spokane district is a learning community. This is not by accident, of course. Building professional learning communities, or PLCs, is part of Spokane’s strategy for improvement.

Essential to a high-performing learning community is access to data and thoughtful use of all available information. Kramer, who came to the Spokane district five years ago, said she was “amazed by the access to data and the skilled use of data. The combination of good thinking and good computer tools—‘depth with data’—is powerful, she said. It drives decisions, planning, and teaching.

Kramer said Glover coaches are skilled at working with data. It enables them to have “data-driven dialogues” with teachers. A data-driven dialogue means asking questions before decisions are made and reflecting on available data.

Professionals at Glover are using data to align curricula and professional development. They are in the early stages of learning how to do that, and it is a shift for teachers who are not accustomed to using data to determine how to instruct.

“Everything is a research base,” said Hombel. “If something doesn’t work, that’s OK; we learn from it. More teachers are willing to take risks and learn from what works and doesn’t work. This is new. Seven or eight years ago, it wouldn’t have happened.”

What do the data say about instructional coaching at Glover? It’s too early for conclusions, but everyone is digging into the numbers. In 2003–2004, literacy scores increased 17 points, but math scores were less impressive. “We’re working on that,” said math coach Diane Floyd.

One of the things that must change to create professional learning communities within the school is the role of the principal. “We’ve moved away from the idea of the principal in total control,” Kramer said. Instead, principals are seen as instructional leaders and are held accountable for that role by district administrators such as Associate Superintendent Stowell. To ease that transition for principals, Stowell said, the district provides support services to individual schools, taking care of mundane building management tasks once left to principals.

Kramer has apparently made a good adjustment to the role. Coaches say she is a frequent “dropper-in” to classes. Social studies coach Moleena Harris praises the principal. “Roberta is aware of the vibes of the school. She knows when to push, when to pull back.” Slauson sums up the creative tensions at Glover: “Coaches are like cartilage. Teachers are grinding on one side and the principal on the other. Sometimes it hurts.”
The current widespread use of instructional coaches in the Spokane schools district grows out of earlier successes using Title I funds to hire instructional facilitators. During six or seven years, the district experienced significant achievement results with a strategy of instructional facilitators for Title I students. The results were noted by Washington State’s Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), which highlighted the district and the instructional facilitator practice as a model for success.

OSPI recognized the following as primary elements of improvements in high-need schools in Spokane:

- Embedded professional development
- School-based facilitators
- Use of assessment data
- Principal leadership
- Active learning
- Coordinated central office support

The district embarked on a major research effort to learn more about instructional coaching. The research led to large districts, including San Diego and New York, where instructional coaching programs were in place. In April 2004, Spokane formed an Instructional Coaching Work Team to guide a districtwide transition from instructional facilitators to a coherent instructional coaching model for use in all schools.

“Data-driven” and “research-based” are mantras at Spokane Public Schools. Research into instructional coaching is clear and compelling. A June 2004 district report, Instructional Coaching Model, cites studies by Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers that show that teachers who participate in standard inservice models apply less than 20 percent of what they learned back in their classrooms. (The report is available at www.spokaneschools.org/Professional Learning/) The district report concludes: “Given the diverse needs of students and the expectation that students learn an increasingly rigorous curriculum, most teachers need ongoing, side-by-side support as they attempt to incorporate effective instructional practices into their classroom routines.”

Spokane launched its districtwide coaching program using Title I money and state funds from the Learning Assistance Program (a state version of Title I). Now, Stowell said, the coaching model is “central to what we do as we change what happens in the classroom to make sure kids learn.”

To be successful over time with the coaching model, the Spokane district will face a new challenge—finding enough good coaches. Good teachers, even great teachers, may not necessarily be good instructional coaches. “Not everyone who works well with children can work well with adults,” Stowell said.

Besides being able to work well with adults—teachers, principals, other coaches—instructional coaches must demonstrate a deep knowledge of their content area. They must be curriculum experts. They must be willing to learn,
a trait best demonstrated by having lots of professional development on their résumé, and they must be able to model a wide range of good teaching practices in the classroom. It is, as Stowell said, a “fairly sophisticated set of skills.”

One thing that coaches do not do is evaluate other teachers. Nor do they provide information to be used in evaluations, serve as substitute teachers, or fill in for the principal. Instructional coaches are not mentors. Mentors focus on support for new teachers; coaches work with all staff members, creating a safe environment in which to ask for assistance.

The overarching role of the coach, as stated in the June 2004 report, is to “build teacher capacity to implement effective instructional practices to improve student learning and performance.” The teacher role is to be a learner who is “continually engaged in the study of teaching and curriculum.”

When both teacher and coach fulfill their roles they engage in an ongoing conversation about what happens in the classroom. Spokane district lingo for this conversation is “reflective discussion.” Glover coaches say reflective discussion is a new emphasis at the school this year, which means teaching strategies are discussed before and after they are used in the class.

Bock, the art teacher, and Hombel, the coach, engaged in reflective discussion as they collaborated on getting the “right” question on the pottery-unit review. Here’s what they finally came up with:

Consider all the elements, principles, experiences, and processes that we have explored during this unit. Write a well-developed paragraph about something you have learned that was not covered in either of the first two questions.

The process of collaboration and reflection helped Bock to come up with an additional question.

Picasso said, “Art just looks like fun, but it’s a lot of work.” Write your own quote about art that shares an insight into the creative and artistic work you have experienced so far.

Editor’s Note: As part of its national leadership in re-engineering schools, the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory developed an online case study of the Spokane Schools District, documenting its strategies leading to success. Visit www.nwrel.org/spd/reengineering/SpokaneSD/index.asp.

structure was developed and more than 200 stakeholders participated in the development of Washington’s NCLB plan. The debates were long and often intense, said Heuschel. The result was a system with a “straight trajectory” toward a goal that Heuschel describes as “out there”—reasonable, but challenging.

That was before NCLB’s stringent regulations. The federal law, signed by President Bush in January 2002, raised the stakes on existing state standards with its AYP calculation requirements. The state moved from a straight trajectory toward goals to a stair-step model that emphasizes yearly growth and progress with time built in to reach the goals rather than meeting a singular goal each year.

The stair-step model, said Heuschel, “gives us time to support changes in our system. It builds in flexibility and time to implement the changes in schools and districts as we move toward our goal.” All without losing sight of yearly progress, she added.

Particularly troubling to Heuschel and many other educators is the expectation built in to NCLB that students in special education programs and those with limited proficiency in English will meet the same standards as the larger population of students. “How can we expect those kids to meet the same standard?” Heuschel asked. After all, they are in special programs because learning is more challenging for them, a reality recognized by the federal government, which provides additional dollars (through Title I, Title III and special education) to help them learn. Requiring these students to meet achievement standards on a par with the larger student population is inherently unfair and leads to the “failure” label.

Across the state, Heuschel said, there is a fear of labels. “We must alleviate that fear to focus on learning. If we don’t get to that level, then this is just a public way to criticize public education.”

The key to progress with low-performing student groups is research. Thanks to NCLB, the state and districts know more about who the students are, but still don’t know enough about how to overcome the achievement gaps. “We don’t yet know enough about what interventions will work,” Heuschel said.

As Washington’s OSPI strives to achieve balance between fairness and high standards, it is working with other states to send a common message to the national level for the same balance.

It is essential to have collaboration and teamwork between state and federal education officials to make this work, said Heuschel. “It takes everybody, starting with the president.”
WILDER, Idaho—Turning off the highway, your first introduction to Wilder—population 1,500—is Chula Vista or “el campo,” an unbroken line of identical two-family, no-frills public housing units ranged along winding roads. Almost half the residents of this rural town, about an hour west of Boise, call Chula Vista home. The town itself—a Mexican restaurant, the Polar Bear snack shop, a double-wide that serves as the public library, and other unprepossessing storefronts—beckons in the distance, separated physically and emotionally from the campo by a dry gulch and a high chain link fence.

The Simplot food processing plant claims one edge of town while at the other sits Holmes Elementary, butting up against dusty brown fields that soon will sprout onions, sugar beets, and hops. With its 251 students, Holmes faces more than its share of challenges. Many of the children are not literate in English or Spanish; almost 100 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch; and there is high student turnover as families look for agricultural work. The 50-year-old school building has no central hallways, with each classroom opening to the outside and isolating the staff from each other. In the office, the giant jar of peanut butter labeled “mouse bait” attests to just one of the problems of a physical plant that’s old and inadequate. Another barrier extends beyond the school walls: Although the town is largely Hispanic, school and town leaders are not and almost all the teachers commute from other towns.

Still, there are glimmers of hope. A new leadership team, a core of committed teachers, and a fiery public advocate are determined to break through the barriers just as Wilder’s crops struggle to push through the hard-packed dirt.
Activist/educator Sylvia Rel Bain has a hug for everyone on the playground at Holmes Elementary.
ONE PASSIONATE MEXICAN
¡Si, se puede! (or “Yes, we can!”) reads the sign over the portable classroom that straddles one end of Holmes Elementary’s playing field. It was the rallying cry of Cesar Chavez’s farm workers’ movement and it’s now the motto of an education experiment that holds promise for Wilder and other communities like it. Sylvia Rel Blain, a self-described “passionate Mexican,” is the driving force behind the Family Learning Center, a combination preschool and adult education program that opened its doors in the portable last November.

On one side of the two-room center, three- to five-year-olds practice their colors and letters while their parents tackle basic English and computer skills on the other side of the wall. At the end of the two-hour session, the preschoolers join their moms to share simple English storybooks. Today, it’s a tale about cats called Mac and Tab and each mother leaves the portable with her own photocopy of the story to read at home.

Blain gives three-year-old Manuelito a goodbye hug and then offers his mother encouraging words in both Spanish and English. “You need to be here as an example,” Blain reminds the mother of five who is pregnant with twins. The 60-year-old Blain is at once a concerned friend, a role model, a community activist, and a tireless teacher. No one escapes her grasp: Later, as she finishes a lunch of taco salad at Los Jarritos restaurant, Blain reminds the waitress to show up for GED classes on Friday night and Saturday morning at the Family Learning Center’s satellite classroom at Chula Vista. It’s hard to say no to Blain, whose stylish black linen dress and stiletto heels hint at her former life as a hard-charging corporate executive.

SETTING PRIORITIES
Taking a lesson from business, Blain did some “market research” before launching the Family Learning Center with Wilder Superintendent Dan Arriola’s backing and a mixture of public and private funds. She sent home a survey with Holmes Elementary’s students, asking their parents to identify high-priority needs in the community. Each child was promised a new book when he or she brought back the completed survey. It only took two days—and 300 books—to get 100 percent participation.

From the survey, Blain set an agenda. Her nonprofit, ¡Si, se puede!, helped reopen Wilder’s food bank and stock a clothing center while the Family Learning Center offered preschool and adult education classes for the Hispanic community as well as Spanish lessons for the town’s Anglo business owners and residents. To further empower the Hispanic community, Blain has organized monthly evening meetings on the rights and responsibilities of parents.

“I tell them they need to ask [teachers] ‘What are you teaching? How are you helping my child?’” Blain says. “In
the past, parents’ questions have always focused on behavior: “How has my Juanita been acting?” not ‘How much is she learning?’ That’s why No Child Left Behind has been such a wake-up call for Mexicans and others. We didn’t know the questions, much less the answers.”

Blain’s mission in Wilder is motivated by both a religious calling and a personal debt. Peppered her speech alternately with “Praise God” and Spanish cuss words, she confides that she was “a poor Chicana” who grew up in a dirt-floor chicken coop, the daughter of onion pickers in New Mexico. Her first brush with the U.S. education system opened up a world of possibilities and she still thanks her first teacher, Mrs. Bryant, for “making me what I am today.”

Mrs. Bryant offered the young Sylvia a trade: If Blain would teach her Spanish, she would help Blain learn English. Besides a new language, Blain learned that her heritage could be a welcome part of her education. She hopes to pass that lesson on to the students in Wilder, hooking their parents in along the way.

“If we recognize the giftedness of our Hispanic families, they’ll buy into the system,” she believes. “These parents are no different from the non-Hispanics. Everyone wants to learn and to be part of the American dream.” To help accomplish that, Blain says we need to make sure teachers represent the makeup of the community: “We need role models or people who have a heart for the poor.”

Poverty’s effects ignore ethnicity and race. Blain tells the story of a teacher giving a white five-year-old a marker. The puzzled girl had never seen one, and didn’t know how to use it.

While it’s too early to measure the long-term impact of the Family Learning Center program, it’s already grabbed the public’s attention and imagination. Three other school districts have scheduled visits and a front-page feature splashed across a recent Sunday edition of The Idaho Statesman, the state’s largest newspaper. In addition to $15,000 in Title I money from the school district, the Family Learning Center garnered grants from the Whittenberger Foundation and the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation.

Superintendent Arriola considers the program a good investment and, in a sense, providential. Knowing there was a “disconnect” between the school and the community, he was searching for a way to bridge the divide when he caught Blain on a public service program on local television. “I happened to see this lady who was very committed, very enthusiastic, just a ball of fire,” he remembers. The two got together and in less than six months, the Family Learning Center became a reality. “When I see 17 adults in classes working diligently, learning English, and having a great time, that’s paying off for us,” says Arriola. “Our parents will understand more about their child’s education, and the kids are excited by their parents’ learning too. Another piece is the preschool, which is getting kids kindergarten-ready. We’re just in the baby stages of this program but it keeps growing and growing.”

PARTICIPATORY LEADERSHIP
For the past four years, the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory has collected data on Holmes Elementary and its progress toward improving teaching and learning. Through classroom observation, document review, student focus groups, and interviews with teachers, administrators, and parents, NWREL evaluator Ann Davis has tracked the school’s performance on 18 dimensions of a high-performing learning community (HPLC). The dimensions fall into six domains: shared vision, shared facilitative leadership, supportive organizational structure, challenging curriculum/engaged student learning, collaborative learning community, and proactive community relations.

According to Davis, Holmes has shown considerable improvement in participatory leadership, thanks to the introduction of professional learning teams and site councils. The school has also bolstered its organizational structure, with improvements in the environment and use of time.

Davis says the rubrics help Holmes’s staff “develop a common language and common understanding of what’s meant by an HPLC.” Using the ratings, teachers and administrators can identify weaknesses, target areas for improvement, develop strategies, and then see whether their actions have made a difference.

Wilder School District Superintendent Dan Arriola sees the evaluation data as “a wonderful tool” that he shares with all staff members. He plans to continue using the HPLC rubrics as an assessment tool at Holmes and expand their use to the middle and high school.

“You can be a victim or victorious,” Blain states. “I choose victorious.” If she has her way, that victory will ripple beyond the portable, all the way to Chula Vista.

WORKING TOGETHER
A stone’s throw from the Family Learning Center, another portable serves as Holmes’s teachers’ lounge and conference room. There, members of one of the school’s three professional learning teams (PLTs) are deep in a discussion of leveled reading, preparing to make a recommendation at that afternoon’s faculty meeting.

PLTs are new to the school and teams are still marking their territory. But, they’ve given the staff a sharpened focus, according to Jayne Sowers, who coaches the PLTs as part of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory’s partnership with Holmes. PLTs are small, highly collaborative teacher teams that meet regularly to look at improving student learning. They use four key strategies: studying school and classroom data; sharing and reflecting on classroom practices; applying research and best practices; and improving teamwork and collaboration skills.
IDAHO: ACCOUNTABILITY FOR ALL

While Title I schools around the country work feverishly to avoid the sanctions contained in the No Child Left Behind Act, Idaho schools face a double whammy. Starting this year, all schools there—not just Title I—will be held to the same standards and face identical penalties for failure to make adequate yearly progress (AYP). At the same time, there are no state funds to help non–Title I schools pay for supplemental services or school choice.

How well Idaho students measure up is primarily determined through the ISAT or Idaho Standards Achievement Test that covers reading, language usage, math skills, and (starting in 2004) science. Students in grades 2–10 take the ISAT in the fall and spring. The multiple-choice test is generally administered via computer and results are reported in two ways: Fall scores reflect individual growth while spring scores are linked to the percent of students who meet state proficiency targets. Besides the ISAT, performance-based assessments in math are given to students in grades 4, 6, and 8 while writing assessments are administered in grades 5, 7, and 9. High school students must pass the 10th-grade ISAT to graduate.

Idaho is in the process of creating a state assessment for English language learners and hopes to implement it in spring 2006. Until then, each district chooses its own measurement. “There’s a huge need for a single state language proficiency assessment, so that Idaho can accurately and consistently measure growth,” says Wendy Verity, the state’s limited-English proficiency manager.

To help schools meet ISAT targets and avoid AYP sanctions, Idaho education officials have launched an ambitious campaign of targeted technical assistance. When NCLB went into effect, the state collaborated with the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory to organize a dozen two-day workshops. The institutes—for districts and schools—taught issues like using data effectively, applying scientifically based research, aligning curriculum and assessment, and developing school improvement plans. More than a thousand people participated in the sessions and the results were dramatic: At the start of the institutes, 110 Title I elementary schools were in school improvement; within two years, only five remain there.

Now, additional technical assistance initiatives are being planned. “We don’t want to deliver a ‘spray and pray’ form of TA,” says Marybeth Flachbart, who is in charge of services for special populations. According to Flachbart, the goal is to help schools and districts build capacity and develop “a community of practitioners” through leadership training and academic achievement coaches. Flachbart says that whatever issues schools need to work on—whether it’s helping English language learners, serving special education students, or dealing with Title I programs—we need to plan together, so we’re all getting the same kind of help.

Sowers believes that PLTs have made a huge difference in the level of conversation at Holmes. “Teachers talk to each other now about what and how they’re teaching,” she observes. “They’ve stopped placing blame on others.Effectively, they’re taking responsibility for improving test scores and talking about instruction instead of complaining about student behavior.”

Clearly an attitudinal shift was called for: While Holmes succeeded in making adequate yearly progress last year and had high proficiency scores on the Idaho State Achievement Tests (or ISATs), it came at a price: Almost one-third of the student body had been retained. This year, fewer students will be held back, and the chances of making AYP at the elementary school are seen as slim.

Sowers has worked with Holmes staff to study “90-90-90 schools”: schools with 90 percent minority enrollment, 90 percent free and reduced-price lunch eligibility, and 90 percent of students reaching achievement goals. Sowers asked Holmes teachers what strategies they could emulate that were used by those successful schools. PLTs were one answer. Now, each of Holmes’s dozen faculty members has signed on to teams studying reading, language, and character education.

On this unseasonably hot spring day, the reading PLT goes back and forth with co-Principal Joe Youren over cut-off levels for retention and progress forms that students will take home to their parents. It doesn’t all go smoothly, as the teachers and Youren wrangle over their respective responsibilities. In the end, though, the PLT comes away with a clear direction and an acknowledgment that their recommendations on certain issues carry weight. Later that afternoon, the PLT members inform the rest of the staff that the school will continue with leveled reading and present their research on why that decision makes sense. They also offer an introduction to Development Reading Assessment, a new testing model that Holmes will start using four times a year to track students’ progress. The reading PLT will be in charge of getting the rest of the faculty up to speed on how to administer the assessment tool.

Despite some turf wars and frustrations, the four teachers who make up the reading PLT think the team has had an impact. “We’ve benefited from having built relationships of trust,” says Helen Marie Maguire, a fourth-grade teacher. “We value each other as professionals.” Marilyn Dacolias, who teaches third grade, agrees: “We rely on each other’s strengths. Having Leslie here (the kindergarten teacher) has opened up my understanding.” Leslie appreciates the “nice variety of strengths in the PLT” and special education teacher Liz Nelson says the PLT has made her feel less isolated, giving her a window into what’s going on outside her area.

A FOCUS ON INSTRUCTION

Co-Principal Joe Youren recognizes that PLTs are “an outstanding way of promoting communication, improving collegiality, and making incremental progress in a building.” But, he says, Holmes needs more than incremental change: It needs a
sea change in its approach to teaching. He and Co-Principal Sandy Maras are counting on ongoing professional development to help bring up test scores at Holmes. They think it’s already made a difference at Wilder Middle-High School.

Once a week, Holmes teachers stay after school to attend classes on instructional practices to improve reading comprehension—what Youren labels “the core of all instruction.” At the secondary school, teachers spend three lunch periods each week studying SIOP—sheltered instruction observation protocol—to meet the varied needs of a student population that’s made up of 60 to 70 percent English language learners. The teachers receive credit for the courses, designed with the help of Northwest Nazarene University, and the district covers the costs. Outside the sessions, Youren and Leona Manke, a retired professor from Albertson College, provide more individualized teacher coaching and mentoring centered on literacy.

Both Youren and Maras, who’ve shared the role of principal for only a year, are acutely aware that others have tried to transform Holmes and fallen short. In fact, Holmes has seen four different principals in the last eight years. That high rate of turnover is one reason that Arriola pushed to split the leadership role. Youren, whose office is in the secondary building, is in charge of K–12 curriculum and instruction while Maras handles management and operations from her desk at the elementary school. “I believe one reason why we’re failing in education is because principals aren’t instructional leaders—they’re tied up with maintenance,” says Arriola. “This arrangement enables me to use Joe’s background as a master teacher and give him time each day to be in the classroom, focusing on methodology.”

“The teachers at Holmes are learning as much as the students,” says Priscilla Pounds, Idaho’s recently retired Title I coordinator. “The school is making great progress: Once they accomplish one thing, they take on another.”

Arriola agrees there’s been progress but admits that change doesn’t come easy. There’s discomfort in overhauling entrenched habits. “When I first arrived, the staff was very distrustful of each other and fragmented. Everyone was in their own classroom, doing their own thing,” he says. “Three years later, we still have to tear down that ‘Lone Rangering’ so we’re all doing the same thing, at different times and at different levels, so our kids can learn more.”

The way Arriola sees it, Holmes Elementary doesn’t have a choice in the matter. He bluntly observes, “For us in Wilder, it’s come down to we’re here to save children’s lives. We’ve got to continue to find ways to do that.”
Starting From Where You Are

Riverside Middle School yearns to be measured by its accomplishments in boosting achievement, notably among its Native American students.

Story and photos by BRACKEN REED

BILLINGS, Montana—Every town has it: the “wrong side of the tracks,” the part of town where the “poor people” live. If you grew up on that side of the tracks you know how those labels can bite, and how the realities of life there can tear at a child’s self-confidence. But there are other sides to that life you may also know: the ironic humor that’s often mistaken for cynicism; the wordplay that mangles grammar but somehow hits the nail exactly on the head; the do-it-yourself resourcefulness; the working class pride and fierce family loyalty; the refusal to cave in under immense challenges. Take even a short walk through the hallways of Riverside Middle School and you will see examples of all these qualities and more.

A Challenging Environment

A 7–8 middle school, Riverside serves not only the rough south side, but a large portion of students bused in from the west side, where urban sprawl has shifted the center of the city’s population. Students come to Riverside from 16 different feeder schools—more than any other school in the district. Of its nearly 600 students, more than half receive Title I free and reduced-price lunch.

The school is also one of the most diverse in the district. Due east, across the flat, treeless prairie, is the Crow Indian Reservation, one of the largest in the state. Adjacent to the Crow Reservation is the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. As the medical, financial, and educational center of eastern Montana, Billings exerts the usual pull of a big city. Many tribal members come to Billings looking for opportunities, and many find them. But some find only dead-end jobs, rundown rentals, and a cycle of poverty that keeps them moving back and forth between the city and the reservation at regular intervals.

The numbers at Riverside reflect these realities. Nineteen percent of the students—or nearly one in five—are of Native American heritage. The mobility rate—which is by no means...
limited to the Native American population—hovers near 50 percent in most school years. Teachers and administrators alike list the high mobility rate as possibly the biggest challenge they face.

Riverside is also the only middle school in the district with an English language learners (ELL) program. One certified ELL teacher and one paraprofessional serve at the school for three class periods a day, spending the rest of the day at Billings Senior High. Any seventh- or eighth-grade student in the district needing ELL instruction is sent to Riverside, no matter where they live.

Other challenges at Riverside are familiar to many schools serving a low-income population: a large number of special education students, a struggle with student motivation and parent involvement issues, and a lack of necessary resources and facilities.

For Principal Mike Smith, there is a big difference between acknowledging these challenges and dwelling on them. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned in 34 years in public education,” says Smith, “it’s that there are some things you can change and some that you can’t. And the social-economic situation or the home conditions that kids come from are things we cannot change. We try to focus on the things we can change, like making the experience here at school a positive one.”

Making a Difference
Focusing on the positive is a defining feature at Riverside, but it has its limits. Ask the staff to share their feelings about accountability and adequate yearly progress (AYP), for instance, and the gloves come off. In the 2003–2004 school year, Riverside did not meet AYP. Or, as the Billings Gazette trumpeted soon after the test results were released: “Billings Schools Fail Progress Review.” For many at the school the results—both how they are measured and the public perception of them—are a source of deep frustration and wounded pride.

Two subgroups at Riverside scored below the “magic number” for making AYP: Native American students and Title I students. In both categories the school made AYP in math, but fell just short in reading. The only other school in the district that failed to make AYP was Riverside’s main feeder high school, Billings Senior High.

Riverside staff members are not prone to complaining. They do not make excuses. As a whole, they are a veteran crew—a large percentage has been at the school for 20 years or more—that has willingly chosen to work at one of the most challenging schools in the district. They are proud of their work, and embrace accountability as a central part of their philosophy. But, for many, there is a clear distinction between accountability and the current AYP system.

“I personally feel that accountability is a very positive thing,” says math teacher Kathy Tucker. “I believe in being accountable, absolutely. But AYP is something different.”

GETTING THE WORD OUT
Montana implemented a new statewide assessment, the Montana Comprehensive Assessment System (MontCAS), Phase 2, in spring 2004. Designed with Measured Progress Corporation, MontCAS, Phase 2, is a criterion-referenced test (CRT), which is significantly different from the state’s Phase 1 assessment, the norm-referenced Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Currently, both tests are administered, although to slightly different grade configurations. MontCAS, Phase 2, the CRT, is the basis for adequate yearly progress (AYP) determinations.

The challenge of implementing an entirely new statewide assessment system is immense, especially in a state as large and rural as Montana. Judy Snow, Director of Statewide Student Assessment for the Montana Office of Public Instruction has led the effort to educate teachers and administrators about the new test, using every possible resource, outlet, and approach.

Beginning in fall 2002, the Office of Public Instruction and Measured Progress began conducting a series of workshops, including a general overview of the test, professional development opportunities for educators, and training on the administration of the test and the use of test data in the classroom. Many of these were broadcast throughout the state via videoconferencing, and were also made available as videotapes and as online video streams—a multimedia approach that is essential to reach all parts of Montana.

Snow has also collaborated with Michael Kozlow, the director of the Assessment Program at NWREL, and with trainers from Measure Progress, on several workshops that focus on narrower topics, such as teachers’ use of “released items” to drive classroom instruction.

Released items are an essential feature of MontCAS, Phase 2. As Snow explains, “Basically, you can find the test from last year online, and along with that teachers receive an item roster report that shows what answer each student gave to each question. Because of how those questions are constructed, you can really see a student’s thought patterns. So, what we’re training teachers to do is to use the information they get about their students, together with the released items, in order to help raise student achievement.”

Looking at the released items closely also helps bring the state standards alive for teachers, says Snow. “Sometimes it’s hard to understand exactly how a standard might look in actual classroom instruction, but when it is seen in a test item—in several items—then understanding of what that standard means is much greater.”

Snow and a small group of trainers continue to hold workshops throughout the state, as well publishing a small monthly online newsletter called Join Us in Measuring Progress (JUMP) [www opi state mt us/Assessment/JUMP html].

According to Snow, the biggest challenge is getting the information directly to the classroom teachers who need it most. “We have a ton of vehicles for teachers to learn about the test, but I don’t know that it gets there all the time. And it needs to.”
The problem, according to Tucker and many of her colleagues, is that true progress, student-by-student, is not what is measured by AYP. “We take students from where we get them,” says Tucker, “and that is not always at grade level. And while we’re very good at trying to get them up to grade level—in fact, I think that’s our expertise here at Riverside—it’s not always going to happen.”

Principal Smith agrees. “This staff is just wonderful at taking kids from wherever they are and working with them and seeing what difference we can make. And we do make a difference. And that’s what we would like to have used as a measure [of AYP] is how much progress a student has made from one year to the next.”

Further muddying the picture, says Smith, is the fact that the school is effectively penalized for its diversity. In Montana, 40 students are required for a subgroup to be included in AYP testing. What that means, realistically, is that those schools with a high number of subgroups (meaning: a lot of diversity) will end up being tested in multiple areas, while a school just up the road—or up the hill—may not be. In fact, a given student’s test scores may be included in multiple subgroups, such as Title I, special education, and Indian education. As Smith see it, “The more subgroups you have tested, the higher your chances are of failing to make AYP, because if even one subgroup fails, the whole school is seen as failing. In our eyes, that’s simply not a level playing field.”

The greatest irony, says Smith, is that the eighth-grade Native American students at Riverside, while failing to make AYP in reading, outperformed every other peer subgroup in the state. “If anything,” says Smith, “maybe the state should be looking at what we’re doing instead of saying ‘you didn’t make AYP’. We must be doing something right.”

In fact, Riverside is doing many things right. And their effort to raise the achievement of Native American students is a prime example. The school supports a full-time Indian education tutor and has worked intensively to build cultural awareness. For example, the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) has provided extensive staff development in the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model. SIOP focuses on delivering high-quality content-area curriculum while still meeting the needs of English language learners. “The SIOP training has made us much more aware of how to design lesson plans that meet the needs of all our students, not just a few,” says Smith. “It’s helped us with our ELL students, of course, but it’s also helped us with our Native American students. We’re much more aware of the different cultures within our school, and a lot of that has come from the training we’ve received and the partnership grant we’ve had with NWREL.”

The school has also turned up the heat on its reading instruction, implementing a model in which any student scoring under the 40th percentile is automatically assigned to a reading class as one of their electives. Students scoring under the 27th percentile are placed in an even longer and more intensive reading-language block. This is just one example, Smith says, of how the pressures of AYP and other elements of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act have been turned into a positive at the school.

“There’s the old saying: Don’t teach to the test,” Smith observes, “but, you know, if you’re not teaching to what you’re testing then what are you teaching to? One thing I can say is that NCLB has made us much more aware of what we’re doing in the classroom and much more aware of how our students are performing. And that can only be a good thing.”

Smith, who is retiring at the end of the year, is proud of how far his school has come, AYP or no AYP, and is clear about where Riverside stands on accountability. “I don’t think we have ever questioned that we are accountable,” he says. “That’s never been an issue for us. We look forward to letting parents and the public know what we’re doing here.”

In this, Smith represents both the school and the south-side community. “We start from where we are” is the attitude here. These are people who deal with the cards they’re dealt. They never give up.
BEAVERTON, Oregon—A hall sign in both English and Japanese points the way. It is 6:30 p.m. and Jerry Colonna walks into the fluorescent-bright maroon and teal library at Beaverton’s Southridge High School.

Waiting for the Beaverton School District superintendent are a dozen Japanese women. Attentive, quiet, hands folded, the women remain parked in their seats around library tables pushed together meeting-style. Their children are English language learners (ELL) in Beaverton’s elementary, middle, and high schools. Altogether, there are 200 Japanese students in Beaverton’s public schools. Forty of them are in ELL classes.

Jerry Colonna is not a man who will or wants to take over a room. No big toothy grin. No showy glad-handing. Rather, Colonna’s neat, trim appearance and serious but warm demeanor translates faultlessly to tonight’s occasion.

Every two months, the 60-year-old Beaverton school superintendent meets separately with a different group of parents of the district’s approximately 5,000 English language learners. These students account for roughly one-seventh of the 35,447 students in the Beaverton School District. Colonna wants both parents and students to feel welcome, and never “lost in translation.” Not an easy task when you realize there are 74 different languages and dialects spoken by Beaverton students.

Beaverton’s diversity extends to its American-born students as well. Minorities account for one-third of all students. Beaverton is also the fastest growing school district in Oregon, and in a decade’s time, it could overtake Portland as Oregon’s biggest school district.

Colonna—with two full years under his belt as Beaverton’s education leader—is determined to meet with as many district parents as possible. He greets each parent tonight with the same respectful nod they offer him.

“Thanks for being such tremendous parents. Your children do as well or better than other children in our schools because of the model you set in your expectations for their education,” he tells them, waiting patiently for his words to be translated by a district interpreter.

LEADERSHIP FOR LITERACY
The Beaverton School District employs 16 translators of Japanese, Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, Russian, Somali, and Arabic. It’s the diversity that attracted Jerry Colonna to
the Beaverton job. Perhaps that’s why he sometimes spends his lunch hour visiting the district’s schools and gazing at the ethnic mix.

“It is something to be nourished. It is not a problem to be fixed,” Colonna explains in an interview.

Challenged by the racial and ethnic makeup of Beaverton’s student population, he’s determined to see that every single student not only meets literacy targets but continues to make progress, whether native born or not. Here in Beaverton, he has taken on the mantle of leadership in Oregon’s literacy push. Beaverton is one of the few districts in Oregon with a K–12 literacy plan. Colonna’s number one goal: Each and every student should show progress over the next five years.

The superintendent is putting the weight of his office and his district’s spending power (including Title I funds) behind the literacy initiative. And he’s also gotten help and support from voters who passed a local option providing an extra $22 million to fund staff training and to make changes wherever needed to support literacy. Every single department in the district is required to support literacy goals. Not just those departments directly involved with educating students, but those in supporting roles as well. For example, the district’s transportation department now provides additional bus service to students who need to stay late for extra coursework. And the food services department labels pork with icons of pigs in the school cafeterias. This practice began after one of Colonna’s meetings with Somalian ELL parents. They told Colonna their Muslim children weren’t eating lunch because they couldn’t tell which food choices contained pork.

Colonna cites statistics that show the vast majority (83 percent) of inmates in the Oregon State Penitentiary are dropouts and poor readers. He mentions other studies, too, demonstrating that children who are poor readers may become frustrated readers and then stop reading altogether.

Illiteracy, Colonna says, leads to low self-esteem, behavioral problems, and a host of other social problems and societal costs that can last a lifetime. Colonna labels this the literacy-failure cycle: “The good students do better and the weak students do worse.”

EARLY LITERACY

Colonna also promotes literacy development in pre-kindergarten education. Kindergarten, he believes, needs to be more academic. Three elementary schools in the district started offering pre-kindergarten this year. It’s a pilot program, but Colonna expects these pre-K programs to pay huge dividends down the road. He will know in four years when these kindergartners are third-graders and take the state tests.

Colonna also wants to expand full-day kindergarten. Eleven of the district’s 31 elementary schools now offer expanded instructional time in kindergarten—providing four
OREGON: STATEWIDE FOCUS ON LITERACY

As the federal government increasingly holds states accountable, Oregon is doing the same with its 198 school districts. Accountability kicks in full force this coming school year when every one of Oregon’s 551,656 public school students is expected to read at grade level or above.

Long a local-control state—with the Oregon Department of Education rarely intervening in the work of local school districts—the Oregon legislature is called upon, more and more, to fund improvements in education. In part, this is a response to No Child Left Behind, but educational reforms in terms of requirements and school funding began in Oregon in the 1990s. There were “common curriculum goals” for school districts, but no real statewide standards until 1995.

It was actually one year before No Child Left Behind—2000—that Oregon began reviewing its standards in terms of accountability, defining and delineating “rigorous” standards for each grade level. Oregon’s new English language arts standards represent the first time that the state has addressed K–2 literacy in terms of foundational expectations to prepare students to meet standards in grades 3–10, says Julie Anderson, the state’s English/language arts curriculum specialist.

This past school year, the state implemented a continuous improvement plan (CIP), an effort to coordinate district planning with state and federal requirements. Districts must identify improvement goals based on current practices and performance. CIP requires an action plan and a corresponding budget outline.

“It’s about targeting your resources and delivering so all kids will be successful” —these are State Superintendent of Public Instruction Susan Castillo’s marching orders.

Meantime, Oregon’s latest literacy test scores from 2004 show a disturbing trend. While 82 percent of all third-graders met standards, by fifth, eighth, and 10th grades, there’s a marked decline. In fact, by 10th grade, only 51 percent of Oregon public school students reached standards. This downward trend is even more dismal for minorities. For example, while 63 percent of Hispanic third-graders met reading standards, by 10th grade, only 22 percent of Hispanic students read and comprehended at grade level.

There are a couple of caveats here: First, state educators believe the performance standards—cut scores—may be set too low in the primary grades and need to be adjusted to reflect the growth needed in the lower grades to be on track to meet the high school standards. And second, Castillo doubts that current reporting systems are giving educators an accurate picture of how to target the achievement gap in their classrooms. She expects to have better data by 2007.

With its emphasis on disaggregating student subgroups, NCLB changed the way Oregon views “accountability.” Until recently, there was little testing data to suggest just how these subgroups fared. Now, the state has the numbers, separate scores for special education students, talented and gifted students, English language learners, the poor, the homeless, white, black, Asian, Hispanic, Indian, multiracial. Even male and female scores are now distinct. No longer will Oregon blanket literacy scores with one overall statistic. In the past, that often hid the bleak scores of some of Oregon’s minorities. According to Castillo, the major focus now is to close the achievement gap and meet the needs of all school children.

Oregon’s new literacy initiative focuses on K–12 education in two ways: From kindergarten through third grade, the spotlight is on learning to read; from fourth to 12th grade, the focus is learning to read increasingly complex subject matter. Oregon’s mission to improve literacy includes accelerated reading programs for delayed readers: programs such as Lexiles, Great Leaps, and Reading First. Key to the state’s literacy initiative is teaching classroom teachers to assess literacy. The state’s goal is to train every teacher in literacy including content teachers.

Besides state assessments and writing samples, Oregon is also relying on frequent, efficient tests to help teachers understand their students’ abilities. Schools are using programs such as DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills), a one-minute measurement of early literacy; and SIPPS (Systematic Instruction in Phoneme Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words), a program that also helps with word comprehension and fluency.

Reports of adequate yearly progress (AYP) should help Oregon improve its current accountability system. Schools and teachers will have to revamp their educational practices if students aren’t improving. NCLB does not measure school success beyond students reaching “minimum” thresholds, but Oregon, through an Oregon Report Card, will. Here, educators recognize that literacy is the gateway through which every child must pass.

The district now has half-time literacy coaches at every elementary school. The coaches teach classroom teachers to assess, diagnose, and teach literacy to this young group of readers. This past school year, coaches concentrated on the five basic reading skills: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. This coming school year, they’ll emphasize writing along with reading. Coaches meet monthly to share resources and talk strategy and interventions for students not progressing.
Key to making an early reader is frequent monitoring. Beaverton’s Literacy Task Force of Principals chose a three-prong approach to assessing K–5 students. In K–2, all Beaverton elementary schools have begun using DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy) in at least one class in each grade. Next year, the district will begin also using High Frequency Vocabulary and Developmental Reading Assessments for all K–2 grades. By next year, all three components will be in place.

STRUGGLING OLDER READERS

For Colonna, early reading has become a moral imperative. He argues that remedial reading programs don’t work, and he wants the district to move away from them.

“The most difficult problem in public education today is how to deal with the struggling older reader,” says Colonna. Literacy is the pathway to all other subjects, he says. There’s a high correlation between reading well and success in other subjects, such as the sciences, math, and social studies. Unfortunately, in Beaverton’s secondary schools—as in other secondary schools across Oregon—the achievement gap only gets worse.

Colonna believes children who can’t read at grade level in the higher grades (whether they’re ELL or native-born struggling readers) need less rather than more curriculum. His approach is to double, even triple, “the dose of literacy … flooding in the resources” to help students focus on learning to read. So, instead of a middle or high school student with poor reading skills taking just one literacy course, he or she should take another, and maybe even a third, after school.

Eventually, under Colonna’s plan, every teacher in the Beaverton School District will be a reading teacher. Every teacher. Secondary math and science teachers who think of themselves only as content teachers will be required to teach literacy in their classrooms in terms of their specialty. Colonna knows there is some resistance to this among teachers, but the superintendent believes that’s because they lack the professional development to teach reading. The district’s secondary literacy specialist Janet Fortier is working with teachers, and she’s established cross-curricular literacy teams in every Beaverton middle and high school.

FIVE OAKS MIDDLE SCHOOL

Saunter down Five Oaks Middle School’s yellow brick hallway just before school begins at 9:05 in the morning and you might feel you’re in a mini-United Nations. African American, Asian, Hispanic, and Caucasian students lean against lockers, donned in Che Guevara T-shirts and camouflage pants, sporting green hair and ubiquitous headphones. You will not find a more diverse secondary school in all of Beaverton than Five Oaks Middle School:

• 45 percent of the 1,170 students are minority students
• 21 percent are English language learners, with 29 different languages spoken

But other, challenging statistics are also in the mix:

• Roughly 50 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals
• Fifteen percent of students take special education classes
• Student turnover is 30 percent a year

Five Oaks has the lowest test scores of all nine middle schools in the Beaverton School District. The latest state assessment data show that almost one-third of Five Oaks students are not meeting reading benchmarks. The numbers look even grimmer when you break the data down into student subgroups: 91 percent of ELL students, 61 percent of special ed students, and 48 percent of low-income students did not reach Oregon benchmarks.

Despite or because of those test scores, Five Oaks teachers are challenged and motivated. Staff turnover here is low, and staff job satisfaction is high—93 percent according to a survey. Literacy specialists from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory and Beaverton’s secondary literacy specialist Fortier have been working with Five Oaks to help the school develop literacy strategies. They agree there’s a need here for more staff development. Not only so that teachers can teach literacy along with content, but also so that they can accurately assess students’ progress. The plan is for...
every Five Oaks teacher to become a “literacy specialist.”

Already, as part of the district’s new literacy plan, changes have been made at Five Oaks. Periods are one hour long, not the normal 48 minutes. Fewer curriculum choices means fewer transitions; students here may get one elective period a day, while in other middle schools students get two electives a day. Some students will take as many as four literacy-related classes.

“NO MAS CHICLE”
The sign on Chris Ann Daugherty’s classroom door says No Mas Chicle [no more chewing gum]. Inside the English Lit One class are eight students—and a medley of accents from six different countries: Korea, Japan, China, Laos, Mexico, and Guatemala. Most of these students have been in the United States for only one year.

“Omar, you read page seven!” commands Daugherty. Omar reads smoothly even if he has trouble with some pronunciation. Afterward, Daugherty asks the sixth-grader if he understands what he’s just read about the Trojan War. The textbook is written at a grades 2–4 level, but the Ancient Greek subject matter is mainstream sixth-grade curriculum. So while students struggle with words like “furious” and “captured” they also must tackle “Menelaus.” While these ELL students learn English, they are also learning required history lessons.

At times, Daugherty cranes her neck to hear a shy and soft-spoken Japanese girl intone the tricky, foreign sounds of English. With more exuberant students, the veteran teacher waves her arms as she explains or questions.

Daugherty speaks very distinctly: “What do you think the Greeks will do?”

One student accurately predicts, “The Greeks will fight a war.”

“OK, so the Greeks are ‘enemies’—that means ‘I don’t like you,’” explains Daugherty.

When students are slow to answer, Daugherty perches on the edge of her stool, pursing her lips, practically willing the ELL student to blurt out what he or she is thinking. During this give-and-take, a teacher’s assistant walks among the rows of students checking to make sure each student is following along in the text, even if a student has to track every word with a pointed finger.

In another class called Academic Content English, the lowest-level ELL class taught at Five Oaks, first-year teacher Sandy Boe stands in front of 15 students from eight different countries including the Congo, Sudan, Argentina, and Somalia. The Somalians come to Beaverton by way of refugee camps. Many of these teenagers have never attended school.

Carlos is a new student from Mexico. He’s only been in the United States three weeks. Today, he’s stumped by a textbook about the Ancient Mayans. Unfamiliar with English, he asks his Spanish-speaking classmates questions in Spanish to see if he understood what he just read.

In English Lit Three, students are Hmong, Pakistani, Iranian, Ethiopian, and Mexican, as well as several American-born struggling readers. Many of these students are nearly ready to advance out of their special literacy program into mainstream classes.

Five Oaks has begun a three-year-focus plan to improve reading instruction in the classroom and to increase the percentage of students meeting reading standards at Five Oaks. The goal is to see a 13 percent hike in those numbers so that roughly three-quarters of Five Oaks students will meet or beat standards by 2008–2009. For some student subgroups, this will mean doubling performances by the end of the decade.

Meantime, back in Chris Ann Daugherty’s ELL classroom they’re making headway: “Captured.” That means they took the Greek King’s wife, Helen of Troy.” Daugherty steps forward as she says this, full-body action illustrating “the grab.”

One boy speaks up, “Because she’s so beautiful,” illustrating that he understands not just the words, but the inference as well.
A Symbiotic Relationship

BY KIM O. YAP

A n elementary school in a Midwest state, having been reconstituted following years of chronic low performance, embarks on a schoolwide effort to improve students’ test-taking skills. Teachers and administrators believe that a major contributing factor to low test scores is that students are not testwise. Increasing testwiseness will raise test scores.

A middle school in the South provides targeted, focused instruction to its borderline students—those who score just a point or two below the proficiency level. By pushing these students over the threshold, the school will easily show adequate yearly progress and be identified as a satisfactory, if not high-performing, school.

A high school in the West mounts an intensive effort seeking parental assistance in ensuring that students show up for mandated testing. The effort is intended to avoid a previous disaster of failing to meet accountability requirements because not enough students took the mandated tests.

Arguably, these interventions are not totally without merit. Teaching students appropriate test-taking skills, for example, is likely to increase the validity of assessment. Providing intensive instruction to borderline students would increase the academic achievement of that segment of the student population. When an increased number of students participate in statewide testing, the results will be more representative. Thus, each of these efforts has the effect of enhancing the validity of test results and consequently the validity and fairness of the accountability system.

However, the fact is that interventions such as these—which may or may not address the root causes of low performance—appear to be proliferating as a result of high-stakes accountability pressures. The reasons, I suspect, are entwined with a desire to raise not just test scores at the school but also living standards in the community.

In a larger sense, these and other interventions are more than school improvement efforts. For in reality, there is a symbiotic relationship between the school system and its surrounding community. With rare exceptions, a distressed school finds itself in a distressed community. And a distressed community learns more often than not that its schools are not making the grade.

In rural America, the symbiotic relationship between the health of the school system and the quality of life in the community is particularly strong. The rural school is the center of the community. As the school thrives or declines, so does the community.

Rural or urban, communities with low-performing schools are well aware of the fact that failing schools have consequences far beyond depressed student achievement. There are economic consequences that impinge on the quality of life in the community. It is no wonder that failing schools are making every attempt to reverse the trend, including interventions that do not address the root causes of low academic achievement—the absence of effective pedagogy and a rigorous curriculum aligned to state standards.

Thus, the impetus of school improvement is not only a desire to raise the bar of academic achievement, but also a wider societal concern for a community’s quality of life. The recent spate of school reforms initiated by education leaders, increasingly including mayors and governors, stems from not only educational concerns but also economic interests.

Nationally, the link between education and the economic well-being of citizens is well recognized. Indeed, it is the foundation of many federal education policies. For instance, the Title I program—the largest federal investment in education—remains an essential part of the war on poverty. For nearly four decades, the program has provided supplemental funding to improve schools in poor communities. More recently, the nation was declared at risk of losing its economic competitiveness as a result of “a rising tide of mediocrity” among its school systems. Waves of reform efforts soon followed the clarion call for improvement. With public and private funding, in school districts large and small, a variety of school reform models were designed and implemented to boost academic achievement. For rural America and other underserved populations, increased access to quality education is made available through distance learning technology bolstered by federal support and incentive. The Star Schools program, for example, has provided instruction in core
subject areas, teacher professional development, and services to the most at-risk populations, including incarcerated youth.

At the regional and community level, the link between school health and quality of life appears incontrovertible. In survey after survey, respondents indicate that the quality of schools is a key consideration when they decide where to live. Similarly, business and industry take a close look at academic institutions in the community when they make locational choices. Proximity to good schools—which implies the availability of a well-trained workforce—ranks high on their list of priorities. Generous public expenditures on education enhance the attractiveness of a community to business and industry.

Thus, the quality of public schools has a dominant influence on business and industry, as well as individuals, as they decide where to locate. Both public officials and private homeowners believe that good public schools boost property values.

However, what is insidious about this is that it is the perceived quality that counts. The public, including individuals as well as business and industry, often judges the health of a school system by broad strokes, temporary indicators. Categorical labels such as those used in accountability systems substitute for more comprehensive empirical evidence. For instance, when a school falls short of making adequate yearly progress for any of a large number of reasons, it is perceived to be a failing school. This happens—more often than one might expect—to schools that had been judged to be exemplary under the same accountability system just a year or two before.

Moreover, the fan-spread phenomenon is a self-fulfilling prophecy. As new business and industry move into a community with schools perceived to be of high quality, employment in the community grows, resulting in a stronger tax base to support its public school system. A well-supported school system further strengthens school quality and renders the community even more attractive to new business and industry (and their employees), creating what is called the Matthew effect—the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

As a community becomes more attractive to firms and individuals, home prices soar. Infrastructure gets updated and quality of life improves for its residents. School quality plays an ineluctable role in the competition for a better quality of life.

There is, however, a downside. In a climate of high-stakes accountability pressures, a community’s desire to safeguard the reputation of its schools, and consequently its quality of life, can create a perverse incentive. Witness the recent rise in requests for waivers and modifications under the No Child Left Behind Act. Some of the changes have the effect of lowering academic standards instead of raising them. Others have sought a delay in implementing higher standards. More serious, surrogate, or spurious reform efforts may be conceived and implemented to create positive indicators of school health in the hope of preventing an erosion of quality of life.

To ameliorate the perverse incentive resulting from accountability pressures, it is perhaps instructive to look at the etiology of state and federal policy. Current federal accountability measures are primarily based on a moral perspective that people are responsible for creating and solving their problems. Thus, if states and local districts have created low-performing schools—schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress—they are also responsible for turning these schools around. Shame and sanctions would follow should they fail to do so within a prescribed timeframe. On the other hand, local districts are more apt to look at the situation from a compensatory perspective: People are not blamed for their problems but are held responsible for solving the problems. In this perspective, low-performing schools are largely a result of the types of students (e.g., students unprepared to benefit from instruction for a variety of reasons) enrolled at those schools, for which the schools should receive no blame. Shame and sanctions are, therefore, not appropriate consequences in a situation largely beyond their control. They are, however, responsible for improving the academic achievement of the students. In this perspective, support and positive inducement—focusing on reward for success rather than punishment for failure—may work better as a policy instrument to improve schools.

On another front, setting absolute standards on school performance, as No Child Left Behind requires, further reinforces the perception that the accountability system stacks the cards against low-performing schools. Looking at growth and incremental gains may be a better way to hold low-performing schools accountable as they try to improve themselves. The advent of various value-added assessment systems—which take into account growth rather than absolute standards to be met—provides a means of correcting this perceived inequity and, in doing so, stemming the potential rise of perverse incentives to circumvent state and federal accountability requirements.

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska—Step inside a kindergarten classroom at North Star Elementary and the sheer diversity of the students might be the first thing you notice. Even for those used to a multicultural urban environment, North Star is striking in its rainbow of race, language, nationality, and ethnicity. Students have come from all over the globe and from most states in the lower 48. Nearly 90 different languages are represented districtwide, with two dozen at North Star alone. It’s an accurate reflection of the surprising demographics of this urban outpost. According to the 2000 U.S. census, 37 percent of Anchorage’s residents are from an ethnic minority group—second only to Los Angeles among U.S. cities.

Comparison to a city many times its size is unfortunately apt in other ways as well. Despite having fewer than 300,000 residents, Anchorage struggles with the common problems of urban life: Unemployment, homelessness, drug and alcohol addiction, domestic violence, lack of affordable housing, and racial tensions are all part of the reality here. While not the city’s only defining features—and definitely not what the Chamber of Commerce would like to talk about—the Anchorage School District grapples with these realities and their effects on children every day.

North Star Elementary is at the very epicenter of that struggle. A Pre-K–6 school located in the historically gritty Spenard neighborhood, the school serves two of the city’s three major homeless shelters. Almost one-third of its students are English language learners, and close to 90 percent qualified for free and reduced-price lunch before the school was given full free-lunch service. At one point in the mid-1990s the annual student mobility rate was nearly 90 percent. Students moved through the school so fast that teachers barely had time to learn their names, much less make a meaningful connection with them.

You may not be surprised, then, to hear that the school did not make adequate yearly progress on the state assessment. You might assume that parents, given the option under federal rules, would be eager to send their children to another school across town. But before you jump to conclusions, step back inside that kindergarten classroom at North Star Elementary.
classroom. If you look more closely, diversity is not all that will strike you. First, some of these students don’t seem to be the same age. Second, there are more adults in the classroom than you would normally expect to see. And third, they seem to be collaborating so seamlessly that you cannot tell who is “in charge,” and so effectively that the students, working in small groups, are focused and fully engaged. These are not insignificant details. They are all part of a schoolwide plan that has taken more than 10 years to implement, a plan that was implemented to make sure that no matter what the challenges, no child would pass through the doors of North Star without making a meaningful connection with an adult.

A Window of Opportunity
When current Principal Myrna Moulton arrived in the 1992–1993 school year, North Star was losing the battle. New teachers had to be lured to the school with the promise that it would be a temporary assignment. According to several longtime teachers, the school’s climate was “caustic”: teacher collaboration was minimal, parent involvement was rare, and the “blame game” was running rampant. “Something had to change,” says Moulton. “We were looking for a window of opportunity.”

Ironically, that window opened when the school’s challenge got even steeper. The percentage of students qualifying for Title I free and reduced-price lunch had been rising rapidly for several consecutive years. In the 1994–1995 school year it topped the 50 percent mark and the school qualified for schoolwide Title I status, which meant greater flexibility in how those funds were spent. At the same time, staff turnover at the school and the district office brought a fresh perspective to the Title I program. Administrators encouraged Moulton and her staff to think creatively. “So we did,” says Moulton. “We really decided to think outside the box.”

Moulton formed a staff team and signed them up for a state-sponsored professional development program called Community of Learners. The yearlong program included an intensive needs assessment, which proved to be the catalyst the school had been looking for. It was a step that would take them farther outside the box than they could have imagined.

“We brought in as many different stakeholders as we could for that needs assessment,” says Moulton. “Community members, parents, teachers, students, school board members—you name it. We did a lot of reading, a lot of research. It was extremely informative.”

The invaluable contribution of all stakeholders notwithstanding, the clearest message of the needs assessment came from the regular classroom teachers. “They said, ‘Stop the pull-outs!’” says Moulton. “That was definitely the strongest message we heard: ‘Let me have my kids, and train me what to do, and I will do it. But I can’t do it when the kids are constantly being pulled out.’”

Closing the Revolving Door
As with most high-poverty, high-minority schools, North Star has a large number of students who fall into instructional subgroups: special education, Title I, migrant education, bilingual education, and Indian education, to name a few. Prior to the needs assessment the school operated entirely on the pull-out model—taking kids out of the regular classroom to provide these specialized services. The result, says special education teacher Debra Benedict, “is that sometimes they would have virtually no kids in their classroom because they were all directed elsewhere. They were finding that they never had any real blocks of teachable time. This group would go and then come back and then this other group would go—nothing was really coordinated.”

The negative effect, says Benedict, was not just instructional. “We were so fragmented that no one spent enough time with any one child to really know them. You would go to a classroom teacher and ask them about a particular student, and they would say, ‘Well, I don’t know, because I never see the kid.’”

Moulton heard the message loud and clear. Working with her staff she decided it was time to radically alter not only the classroom schedule but the entire instructional model. Taking full advantage of the flexibility pro-
GETTING DATA TO THE PEOPLE WHO NEED IT MOST

In the 2003–2004 school year, the Anchorage School District implemented an online data-tracking system that has quickly become an essential part of classroom instruction. Several features of the system are unusual and have attracted both state and national attention. First, rather than buy a packaged program from a commercial vendor, the district made the daunting decision to design its own system from the ground up.

According to Ed McClain, director of Assessment & Evaluation, this decision was based less on the inadequacies of commercial programs than on the unique and complicated needs of the district—one of the largest and most ethnically diverse in the region. As with many large districts, Anchorage faces a steep challenge in its effort to make adequate yearly progress due to the many different subgroups they are required to include.

What this means, says McClain, is that the district’s teachers have specific needs that would be difficult for a packaged program to meet. For example, student assessment scores need to be disaggregated in a way that pinpoints achievement gaps both for individuals and for various subgroups. In addition, those scores need to be directly and clearly linked to standards and to grade-level expectations. And this information should come directly to teachers’ desktops, with frequent updates, and without creating any additional data-input requirements.

Incredibly, the current system does all of this and more, and it does so using the same kind of information that is available to any other district. “These data have always been available,” says McClain. “It’s always been there but it hasn’t always been readily accessible to the teacher. That’s what this does. We’re not creating new information, we’re just putting it out in a way that gets it right to the desktop of the people who need it.”

With updates twice a day, teachers can now use assessment data to drive their instruction as never before. And because the system is locally designed and operated, says McClain, teachers have easy access to training and direct input into its further development. “Once the teachers saw that they could get that information on their desktop quickly,” says McClain, “they started to ask for more. And we use that feedback. We’re constantly working on enhancements that will make it more useful for teachers.”

Changing the Culture

It was harder than it sounds. At first, the special subject-area teachers—including art, music, PE, and library—were not happy. “Traditionally,” says Moulton, “the scheduling in most schools is set up for the convenience of those teachers, so that they can have one grade level at a time. But we decided that we really needed to create the schedule that would allow us to focus on our core subject areas: reading, writing, and math.” says Moulton. “We could still meet the specialized needs of our students, but we could close that revolving door.”

Developing Partnerships

By the 1997–1998 school year, many of the initial pieces of the puzzle were in place, but several challenges and several pivotal partnerships still lay ahead. First, the district’s Children in Transition/Homeless project (CIT/H) strengthened its involvement at the school. CIT/H provides services to approximately 1,300 of the 2,500 students in the Anchorage School District, ages one to 18, identified as homeless. For Beth Snyder, the early childhood/elementary teacher specialist at CIT/H, that means working closely with all 62...
SHARED ACCOUNTABILITY, SHARED DECISIONMAKING

Alaska has made shared accountability central to its vision of education reform. The Alaska Quality Schools Initiative, begun in 1998, created a complex system of standards that goes far beyond the usual areas of curriculum content and student performance. The state standards handbook covers everything from minimum performance expectations for teachers and administrators, to potentially murky areas such as student employability and school culture. Making such a system work is a delicate, collaborative process that walks a fine line between statewide consistency and local control.

“In terms of control over the school system,” says Les Morse, the director of assessment and accountability for the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (EED), “it’s a shared process in Alaska between local school districts and the state. Many decisions are guided through regulation at the state level, but there might be specific processes at the local level that are different.”

One example, says Morse, is that each district comes up with its own system for evaluating teachers and administrators, but those evaluations are all based on the statewide standards. It’s a give-and-take process that extends to nearly every aspect of the state’s accountability system.

When it comes to statewide student assessments—and measuring adequate yearly progress—local control is obviously limited. But even here, districts have an important role to play, says Morse. “There is a significant amount of stakeholder involvement in building the standards and the grade-level expectations, and in reviewing the items that go into our assessments. Everything we do involves statewide committees and a regulatory process.”

Local input has also had a major impact on the state’s controversial High School Graduation Qualifying Exam (HSGQE). Currently, Alaska is the only state in the region to require that students pass such an exam in order to graduate. Because it is such a high-stakes exam, the CTB/McGraw-Hill test that the state had been using had to be revised each year to include new, field-tested items. Extensive evaluation of the program, which included input from a wide range of stakeholders, determined that the turn-around time for scoring it was too slow, and that the overall cost was too high. Due in no small part to parent, school, and district feedback, the state switched to a different assessment contractor in 2003–2004 and has commissioned not only a new HSGQE test, but a revamping of the entire assessment system.

In fall 2004, the dialogue between the state and local stakeholders temporarily broke down. Parents of children with disabilities filed a class-action lawsuit in federal court against both the Alaska EED and the Anchorage School District. The lawsuit claimed that the implementation of the HSGQE discriminated against students with disabilities. The lawsuit was eventually settled out of court, when the state agreed to develop an alternative program for these students. In the current system, after the student has taken the test for the first time—with or without certain accommodations for their disability—they are subsequently allowed to take a modified version of the test.

As Morse sees it, these modifications are a sensible compromise. “The students don’t just choose any modification they want,” says Morse. “The IEP [Individualized Education Plan] team has to meet and decide in what way the test can be modified to make it more fair, more accessible for the student, but without destroying the integrity of the test completely. And then the state has to approve those modifications.”

While it might occasionally require a lawsuit to reach a compromise, Alaska continues to be a state in which shared accountability is more than just a catchphrase. In spring 2006, the new assessment system will be implemented, with testing in grades three through nine, along with the HSGQE for all 10th-graders. You can bet that representatives from every stakeholder group had a hand in developing each grade-level test. The dialogue continues.

With Snyder’s support, North Star has been able to cut its mobility rate almost in half, and the ripples have been felt throughout the school. Teachers get to know the students better, parents become more comfortable with school personnel, and students get the benefit of more meaningful connections with their teachers and classmates. The longer the student stays, the better the service the school can provide and the deeper the connections they can make.

Another key partnership for the school has been its five-year contract with the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL), which began in 2000. NWREL has provided professional development focused on helping North Star become a high-
performing learning community. According to Moulton, prior to this time staff development had been generic and district-driven. Teachers had little say in their own training. The partnership with NWREL has been different. Moulton and her staff have requested specific, school-based training that meets immediate needs. This has included help in revising the school vision statement, strengthening teacher collaboration, and building family and community partnerships. It has also included more direct, instructional-based training in areas such as 6+1 Trait® Writing, math problem solving, and using the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol model to deliver content to English language learners.

Along with increased involvement of CIT/H and partnership with NWREL, another change to North Star’s instructional model has had a profound impact. As staff became comfortable with team teaching and collaboration, the idea of multiage classrooms took hold. The school experimented with several configurations and eventually settled on three: a K–1, a 2–3, and a 4–5, each of which is co-taught by two certified, full-time teachers. In addition to these three classrooms, each grade level also has at least one traditional classroom, taught by a single teacher. This dual approach allows for maximum flexibility in meeting the diverse needs of both students and staff.

Traditional and multiage classrooms receive the same support: a one-and-a-half-hour block during which at least one special ed or Title I teacher is present. Bilingual education specialists also provide support to regular classrooms in the afternoon, while spending mornings in the language lab working with students in the earliest stages of English acquisition.

While both approaches have their virtues, the multiage program has one benefit that has been especially powerful: Students that stay at the school have the same set of teachers two years in a row. The human connections that are made between the staff and these students—especially those who continue to have a troubled family life—can have a measurable impact not just on the students’ test scores, but on the entire course of their lives.

Looking Ahead
North Star Elementary has made tremendous gains since the days of acrimonious infighting, high mobility rates, and a revolving door instructional model. They have been named a Distinguished Title I School. Their students’ test scores have risen steadily. They have created a schoolwide culture of collaboration and developed a shared vision that is student-centered. They have maximized resources and created a sustainable, integrated instructional model. They have truly become a community of learners. And most important, they have changed from a school in which many students slipped through the cracks to one in which several caring adults are interacting closely with each student, every day. In short, they have made the kind of progress that truly matters. ■
SHADES of Meaning

Webster’s Dictionary describes accountability as “an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one’s actions.” As accountability systems become the basis for substantial sanctions and rewards to schools, teachers, and students, the word holds a range of meaning and impact for different stakeholders. We asked a number of stakeholders in the Northwest states to react to our questions and comments. Below are excerpts from their responses.

CAROL COMEAU
Superintendent, Anchorage School District
Anchorage, Alaska

Accountability in the big picture is responsibility for our actions and for what we are entrusted to do. In public education it’s determined by the fact that we are funded by the taxpayers, state government, and somewhat by the federal government. We have to account for the use of those funds. And we also have to be accountable for our core mission, which is to educate all students for success in life. We take it very seriously. Every child—no matter what the individual or family circumstances—deserves the very best quality education that we can provide for them. And we have to keep doing that regardless of our resources. But it is more and more difficult when we keep getting under-funded mandates, without adequate resources or, in some cases, personnel to do the job.

NCLB is only the latest example. I could go back to IDEA in 1975. I was teaching at that time and it changed everything with regard to special education. In both cases [NCLB and IDEA], the intention is totally understandable and logical, but neither one of these bills was adequately funded.

Our school board and I feel very strongly that all of our students deserve to be challenged and to be pushed to reach their potential, but to do that we cannot redirect all of our resources to only low achievers. We have directed the majority of any new funds toward the goal of meeting the needs of those children, and meeting the requirements of NCLB, certainly, but we’ve got a large and growing number of highly successful students—and a large number in the middle—that also need to be challenged and provided with a top-quality education. To redirect all of our resources to meet the requirements of this federal mandate is not appropriate.

TERESA MOLITOR
Lobbyist
Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry (IACI)
Boise, Idaho

When we started getting more involved in the K–12 discussion in Idaho, we got the feeling that the majority of those in the education industry didn’t necessarily want to consider us a stakeholder. We have attempted to spend time at the outset asserting the fact that the business community is indeed a stakeholder, and then explaining why.

“From our perspective, accountability has two parts. The first part is focused on greater student achievement, which relates to that issue of providing a diploma that actually means something. The second part is the fiscal part: How efficient and effective is the K–12 system with its resources? Because business contributes so much of the property-tax base to the state budget, that question factors into our analyses on all kinds of education issues.

Taken one step further, many within the business community have asked whether we are accountable to the K–12 system beyond mere financial support. Should we do more in terms of charitable giving or mentoring students or offering internships? What should our full contribution be to the K–12 system?

And then the other part of that question becomes obvious: What is the education system’s level of accountability to the
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Billings, Montana
Montana State University–Billings
Assistant Professor, Special Education,
Chairperson, Billings School Board

KATHY KELKER
Chairperson, Billings School Board
Assistant Professor, Special Education,
Montana State University–Billings
Billings, Montana

In Montana, school trustees have a great deal of local control—constitutionally and according to statute—and that makes us very accountable for local results. I have been a trustee for almost 15 years now, and we have always been accountable for student achievement. It’s not new with NCLB. To me, as a trustee, what that has meant is that we provide a learning environment where students are given the basic skills that they need to learn, and then they have opportunities to use those basic skills to gather knowledge on their own.

Our hope, as trustees, is that we can say to the community: Our students are making progress in their classes from year to year; their intellectual and social needs in the school environment are being met.

Prior to NCLB, our board always did an annual report to the community in which we provided information about how our students were doing. We used a variety of measures—not just test results—and those annual reports were well received. NCLB has changed that accountability picture because instead of using our own methodologies for determining whether our students are successful, we are now forced into a narrow arena, where test scores are the sole measure. We’re obligated to report those, and there is a general impression that they are the only thing you need in order to show accountability. Personally, I think there is a lot more to accountability than the results of a particular test.

AYP adds another layer of pressure, because we are not, as a state, well funded in terms of education. Trying to raise the achievement of students who are not proficient requires resources that cost money we don’t have. It’s a good thing to provide those services, but we just don’t have the money to do it.

With special education students, for example, I don’t think just saying “all special ed students must be proficient” is going to do it. You have to have a much more subtle approach. I never want to doom a kid to low expectations, but you also can’t put a student in a situation where they can never be successful. There is a balance. What I would prefer to do is to set short-term goals for students and have them accomplish those goals and then just keep moving, and that can happen in a very well-run program where the students are treated, at least to some degree, on an individualized basis.

I think what we have with NCLB is an effort to treat all special ed students, or almost all of them, in the exact same way, in the guise of having high expectations. And I am absolutely convinced that will not work.

There needs to be accountability at the federal level, in terms of keeping the promise they made to adequately fund the legislation. They have not kept that promise. One of the best examples is the special ed program. The original promise was that 40 percent of the funding would come from the federal level. There have been increases in funding in the past two years—Congress has been making an effort to catch up on their original promise—but we’re not even close to having the federal government at 40 percent of the cost. In Montana and in our district about 25 percent of the cost of special education is paid for by local taxpayers, in addition to their taxes that go for education in general. So there has been a kind of subsidizing of the special education program, which is mandated by an additional cost at the local level. And I don’t think that was the original intention of the people who wrote the special education law in 1975. Now, we are seeing the same thing happening with NCLB, only with a broader population of students.

STEVE WYBORNEY
Oregon Teacher of the Year
Nyssa Elementary School
Nyssa, Oregon

The cry for constant school improvement is very important, and must be answered with the reality that, while there will never be a perfect school, the striving and striving toward becoming the best of what we have been, and the best of what we can be, is very important.

Nobody in our society is outside of the influence of our schools; everyone must claim responsibility. While we often describe how today’s schools will impact the future, a much more immediate reality is that the quality of the education that we provide to our students instantly defines us as a society.

Accountability must recognize the dynamic nature of education, and allow for risk and growth. Legislators and policymakers should be accountable to give schools room to grow and explore, to expand and seek out any new ideas that their students need.

Sometimes in the classroom we can feel a little bit squeezed between what is expected and what is available. Teachers come to my classroom and see what I am doing with PowerPoint and say: ‘This is great. I know this would impact my students. I could take this back right now, and this would be a powerful approach to use with my students. But then they say, ‘I can’t do it, though. There is no money, or support, or training.’

I’m troubled that teachers who feel the pulse of specific student needs can become aware of powerful practices that
would help to meet those needs, but are then unable to make them into a reality. I think accountability in education should allow room for educators to stretch for new possibilities that will have a positive impact on their students learning and their lives.

**CAROL SCHRADER**
*Parent and Strategic Planning Committee Member Hollyrood Elementary School Portland, Oregon*

Hollyrood’s mission states that a purpose of the school is “to know and value ourselves, to know and value others, and to make a positive difference in the world.” What this means to me is that a ‘good education’ helps you to recognize who you are in the context of the world so that you can be accountable to yourself and to the world. To love yourself, that is, to know who you are, your strengths and weaknesses, the good and the bad about you, and to accept yourself, is a strong foundation for learning. When you know and value yourself, you can take responsibility for your own learning: I know who I am, I know how I learn, I know what I need to ask for help with, and I know what I have to offer other people. This transitions well to knowing and valuing other people.

Through reading, scientific inquiry, and other exploration of the world, students can learn something about the diversity of experience in Portland, Warm Springs, and Nairobi, for example, and gain an increasingly complex and appreciative understanding of who other people (and places and things) are. As students learn about other people, they may be surprised by, enjoy, and be troubled by the differences, and they can avoid a warped sense of who they are—see that they are not the center of the universe, but rather one of billions of people, celebrating and struggling with who they are in the context of their world, just like the student does. And making a difference in the world is rooted in this knowledge of themselves and others; knowledge of a spectrum of wealth and poverty, of religious belief, of peaceful and violent struggle, of women and men of different racial and cultural identities, of sexuality, of music, architecture, and poetry, of science, etc. And being accountable to ourselves and to each other leads to working together to make a positive difference in the world.

**KATHRYN ANDERSON**
*Assistant Principal Hollyrood Elementary School Portland, Oregon*

The tsunami comes at us in a variety of forms and a variety of times. At one moment, it might be a ‘budget tsunami,’ but it also may be a school closure or a school consolidation tsunami. But no matter what those ‘tsunamis’ are, we still have an important mission to maintain here at school. While we know that these challenges are looming for us, we still have children to educate every day and families to care for every day, and teachers’ professional growth to nurture every day. And if we don’t have a strategic plan for that, then it is a lot easier for that tsunami to sort of wipe us out. But if we have a solid foundation here of nurturing and support and academic excellence, it makes it much harder to be knocked down.

**BILL FROMHOLD**
*Washington State Representative Vancouver, Washington*

I think the responsibility and the accountability for the legislature is to deal with the broad spectrum of public education. We can no longer allow structural funding issues to get in the way of the expectations that we have for the education system. So the public needs to be holding us accountable as well. I am the vice-chair of the Appropriations Committee in the House of Representatives and I also serve on the Higher Education Committee. I spent the last two years chairing a subcommittee of Appropriations dealing with the structure of the finance system of K–12. It is not, in all cases, aligned with a goals-based education system.

One perfect example comes to mind. Probably 75–80 percent of the money spent in the basic education allocation method is compensation and related benefits. The largest share of that goes to pay for classroom teachers. The compensation methodology that we use to pay teachers takes into account longevity and education level. But, in 2000, we established new professional certification standards for those teachers that are no longer related to the degree attainment of an individual. So the salary allocation and the certification standards for teachers, since 2000, are going in opposite directions. One of the things that we have recommended be considered in this [legislative session] budget process is a stipend on the current salary schedule to recognize compensation for ‘pro cert’ (Professional Certification Standards). That’s one very clear example in the biggest area of expenditure in the basic education formula where we are completely misaligned. Our accountability [in this example] may be to a teacher, but it’s to a teacher as a citizen.
Already, at 17, Kourosh Zamanizadeh has been at the table with some of Washington state’s biggest movers and shakers, weighing in on education reform policy and legislation. Serving as Western Washington’s elected student representative to the state board of education, he urged lawmakers to fully fund the state’s new graduation requirements, nearly in place when he came on the board. Then, he set about helping to create a student-led program, the Student-2-Student Engagement Project, in which juniors and seniors explain the new graduation requirements to freshmen and how they can make the most of their high school experience (www.k12.wa.us/S2S/). The class of 2008 will be the first class to be required to pass the 10th-grade reading, writing, and math sections of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning exam in order to graduate from high school. This fall, Zamanizadeh will enter UC, Berkeley where he will pursue either a pre-med or a business major.

Compared with many of my peers, I believe I possess a unique outlook on high school. I understand what my parents had to go through to get their education when they immigrated to the United States from Iran more than 20 years ago. As a result, I regard school as a privilege rather than an obligation. Also, seeing firsthand the struggle many students around the world face in pursuing their education has provided me additional motivation to take advantage of the available resources and opportunities for my education.

I visited Iran during the summer between seventh and eighth grade. It was intended to be a fun trip. Instead, it turned out to be devastating. My dad was forced to stay home due to work commitments so it was just me, my mother, and my little brother, traveling to the other side of the world to Tehran, Iran. I was 12 years old and had the responsibility of looking after my mother and younger brother. We faced many of the typical difficulties of traveling internationally, such as dealing with stringent airport security, customs, and long airport stops. Once we arrived in Iran, I hoped the “fun” would begin. That changed after my uncle became very ill. My mother spent almost the entire 52-day trip at the hospital with her sick brother.

I hated the way the medical system worked there. The doctors acted as if they thought they were God and were very rude. There wasn’t any sense of caring toward the patients in the hospitals. I believe they had the mindset that since they had such a high education, that put them above everyone else and gave them the right to look down on everyone, including the patients whose lives were in their hands. It was a very sad experience, especially after my uncle died days after we arrived back home. This somehow opened my eyes to the real world and helped me find a passion for helping others. At the time, I wasn’t quite sure what I wanted to do, but I was certain I would become involved in community service. After returning from Iran, I became actively involved in many service clubs—Associated Student Body (ASB), the Washington Association of Student Councils, and eventually the Washington State Board of Education.

This experience, along with seeing how seriously students in Iran view their education in order to pass tests that determine whether or not they will go to college, really had an impact on me. I saw these students study as though their lives depended on passing the exams. While my mother was with her brother in the hospital, I stayed with our relatives. I couldn’t believe that it was summer break and my cousins would still spend their days studying. I’d ask them what they were doing and if they were crazy. They would look at me and say that they were just trying to get a head start on the coursework to come. They were doing everything they possibly could to have an opportunity to continue their education at the postsecondary level. This desire and passion to learn was drastically different from many students’ outlook on school in the United States. Here, students feel they are being forced to go to school. In contrast, students around the world dream of going to school.

These two experiences have had a strong influence on my outlook on both life and education. When I earned the opportunity to serve as a student
representative to the Washington State Board of Education and as a member of the Washington Association of Student Councils (WASC), I was very excited. It was a chance to work with both my peers and adult educators/mentors to spread my desire for learning to students in Washington state.

My service as a student representative to the state board and as a member of the WASC has been a powerful experience. It has been a tremendous responsibility to represent the 1.2 million K–12 students in Washington. I have had the opportunity to be involved in the continuing dialogue and policy discussion on reforming the state’s education system. Yet, as a student, I’ve felt that while great improvements are being made, too many students remain unaware of the changes due to a communication gap between adults and students. Our state’s top education leaders and legislators hoped that crucial information regarding education reform would simply permeate down to the students. When this approach failed, it was clear that a new path was needed.

It all began at a lunchtime meeting of the state board of education. The board had invited a panel of students from all around the state to share some of their high school experiences. After some discussion, it was evident that these students had no idea what the purpose was behind education reform in the state. Even worse, they felt they were trapped in a monotonous routine of going to school, doing their assignments, and anxiously counting off the days until graduation. Simply put, they just didn’t know what was going on outside the classroom to try and improve their schooling. These students were not engaged in their own education. After discussions with the state board of education and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Terry Bergeson, the WASC Board was asked if it would take the lead in creating a product that would engage students in their own education and help them realize the value of school.

It has been 18 months since that lunchtime conversation. The WASC board is now hearing the largest student-led community service project in our state’s history: the Student-2-Student Engagement Project. This project helps students make the connection between what they are learning in school and how it is relevant to their future. Student leaders around the state who serve on the WASC board have developed, produced, and appeared in a video that is a supplement to a toolkit that also includes a comprehensive lesson plan. The video and lesson plan explain recent education reforms and new graduation requirements that will first apply to the graduating class of 2008. (Visit the Student-2-Student Web site at www.k12.wa.us/525/)

The Student-2-Student project will help this year’s ninth-graders plan for their post–high school future using the resources available to them. Older students will be providing vital information about the new graduation requirements to the ninth-graders. The principle of this project is that the message is from students to students because, sometimes, learning from peers can be more meaningful than hearing things from parents or teachers.

WASC has been working to train student leaders statewide so they can go into secondary school classrooms and present the message and materials of the Student-2-Student Engagement Project. Trained student leaders will work with adults at their schools to mentor ninth-graders and teach a two-period lesson about why school matters and how to make the new requirements relevant to their lives. We hope that by the end of the year, all 85,000 freshmen in Washington will have experienced the program. This effort has significantly bolstered the visibility and status of the WASC board within Washington state and, more important, has brought students to the forefront of their educational choices and direction.

My high school, Mountain View High School in Vancouver (Evergreen 114 School District), was the first school in the state to pilot the program. Dolly Nguyen, the WASC board secretary, helped me present the program to two freshman classes. It was amazing how receptive the ninth-graders were. Even the few students who were skeptical the first day came back the second day with a positive attitude, eager to learn and impress us since we were, in fact, seniors. By the time we had completed the lesson plan, there were 60 ninth-graders who were experts on the graduation requirements. More important, there were 60 students who now understand how they can use their four years in high school to help them prepare for their future. They have begun to understand that no matter what they want to do after high school, whether it be going to college, joining the military, or entering a vocational field, they could still make high school relevant to their lives. There is no reason to waste four years sitting behind a desk and earning a diploma that is meaningless to them. Furthermore, they understand that wasting four years isn’t a viable alternative to earning a diploma, because, for the first time, students in the class of 2008 will be held accountable for their learning. They will actually have to show competency on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning exam in areas of mathematics, reading, and writing. There will no longer be an easy way to earn a diploma. The Student-2-Student Engagement Project helps freshmen realize this before it is too late. It gets ninth-graders thinking about their future. This is something I know some seniors at my high school have still not done.

I know this project will help students statewide do better in school and will help focus their thoughts on the future. I strongly believe that students must understand the purpose behind educational reform and the resources available to them in school in order to become fully engaged in their own education. Although students are the driving force behind this project, they will need everyone’s support for it to be successful and fully effective.
Educators Grapple With NCLB’s Demands for Accountability  

By Anne Turnbaugh Lockwood

When the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was signed into law in 2001, accountability became the new maxim nationwide. Schools and districts were charged with a hefty requirement: The achievement of all students must be boosted to 100 percent proficiency by the year 2014. Along the way, states have set intermediate targets that schools and districts must meet—with escalating sanctions for those schools and districts whose students do not meet NCLB’s adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements. These AYP requirements apply to all subgroups of the student population.

Clearly, the new NCLB-mandated accountability measures pose stiff new demands for public educators. In the past, educational leaders and teachers have frequently pointed to outside influences far beyond their control that influence student achievement—and for which they should not be held accountable. Now, NCLB’s accountability provisions regard these arguments with a stringent response. No more rationalizing, the law says: Schools and districts are accountable for student achievement—regardless of ethnicity, race, English language status, special needs, or socioeconomic status.

PRESS FOR ACCOUNTABILITY CAUSES IMPLEMENTATION CONCERNS

Admittedly, many educators are tackling challenges as they work to implement the law. Some feel torn between what they admire as the intent of the law and the issues related to its practical application. And they are not alone. According to Richard F. Elmore, a Harvard Graduate School of Education professor, “Accountability for student achievement is one of the two or three—if not the most—prominent issues in policy at the state and local levels right now” (Education Week Research Center, 2005). This is clearly demonstrated by the maelstrom over how schools and districts should be evaluated for student performance—since rewards or sanctions await. Any discussion of accountability is entangled with complicating factors. A smattering of these include funding, testing, and how accountability should be evaluated. Much legislation is criticized for inadequate funding, and NCLB is no exception (Center for Education Policy, 2005). Proponents of this view maintain that without an increase in funding, schools and districts may flounder on the shoals of good intentions—held unfairly to accountability requirements they cannot meet due to insufficient funds.

Testing has been another prickly issue. W. James Popham, an emeritus professor in the University of California, Los Angeles Graduate School of Education and Information Studies and an authority on assessment, points to serious shortcomings in state-chosen NCLB tests. Popham argues that NCLB seeks to evaluate schools by assessing students’ improvement on state-chosen NCLB tests. Yet, he finds it disquieting that a state’s chosen NCLB tests might not detect instructional improvement, even if it has occurred (Popham, 2005).

This, he contends, could have Draconian repercussions. Schools that do not meet AYP requirements might not be failing, and schools that do meet AYP requirements might, in fact, “be doing a dismal instructional job.” Finally, Popham raises concerns that state-chosen tests might be more sensitive to students’ socioeconomic status than to a school’s instructional success. Strong words. But Popham is not alone in his worries about how accountability is measured under NCLB.

VALUE-ADDED ACCOUNTABILITY: ANOTHER DIMENSION

Other experts on assessment raise the issue of value-added accountability. While NCLB has strong accountability requirements, based on student achievement scores on state tests and whether they meet AYP requirements, these tests do not measure the gains individual students make from year to year. (Nor are they intended to do so.)

Measuring annual student gains—and tying these gains to school, district, and teacher performance—is known as “value-added accountability.” Simply put, a value-added or growth model offers a means of tracking the amount of school, district, and teacher contribution to student achievement annually. It extends a different way of measuring accountability than taking student test scores and holding them up to AYP requirements. Many states and researchers would like to add value-added accountability to the accountability provisions of NCLB.

(See the related Web-exclusive article on value-added assessment, “Expert Opinion: Andrew Porter and Value-Added Assessment.” Porter is professor of educational leadership and policy and director of the Learning Sciences Institute at Vanderbilt University. His Web site is at http://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/faculty/lpo/porter.htm.)

STATES FACE NEW CHALLENGES

In addition to these issues, a recent spate of news items points to the tension some states are experiencing with NCLB. Florida, for instance, is considering the option of lowering its academic standards to make it easier for students to meet AYP requirements so that its schools do not risk the progressive sanctions of NCLB—a development worth watching across states.
In Texas, a potential showdown has been mounted between the state and federal government (Hoff, 2005). Schools and districts issued a rash of appeals seeking permission to follow less demanding state, rather than federal, rules for assessing special education students. When state officials granted these appeals, they jeopardized millions of dollars in federal aid.

And in Utah, conflict between state officials and the U.S. Department of Education became a closely watched situation as it escalated in intensity. State officials reported that NCLB is “too invasive,” particularly in its accountability requirements, and have shown themselves to be willing to forgo approximately $116 million in federal aid.

But states might take heart. U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings is showing some interest in value-added accountability, as well as signs of lightening NCLB requirements—particularly for states grappling with mandates related to students with disabilities and limited English skills. Spellings also appears to be contemplating how calculations should be made that will result in sanctions for schools and districts (Samuels & Davis, 2005).

CONTINUING WORK, CONTINUING ISSUES
Meanwhile, much work remains—and implementation issues persist. Despite popular enthusiasm for accountability requirements, states have lagged in meeting NCLB requirements. As of October 2004, 19 states had not yet released report cards that included 2003–2004 data. Based on the most current report cards available at the time, 44 states and the District of Columbia reported school-level test data broken down by racial and ethnic groups. In 23 states, high school report cards included disaggregated dropout or graduation rates (Skinner, 2005).

There is little debate about the good intent of NCLB. It has been applauded for its emphasis on equity. It has been commended for its relentless insistence that all ethnic, racial, and special-needs subgroups of the student population must achieve to 100 percent proficiency. Finally, it has received kudos for its “no excuses” approach to school and district accountability for student performance. In short, the philosophy that undergirds the law has been considered virtually unassailable—and it enjoys broad popular appeal.

It should be noted that educators have longed for education to be placed on the front burner since the original authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965. And now, although issues remain and implementation struggles continue, they have their wish. Education flares more brightly than it ever has on the public agenda—and shows no signs of sputtering out.


Anne Turnbaugh Lockwood is a senior program advisor for NWREL’s Center for Classroom Teaching and Learning. She holds a Ph.D. in educational psychology from the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, and is the author of six books and more than 100 articles on educational issues.

REFERENCES


Expert Opinion: Andrew Porter and Value-Added Assessment When the Music Stops: The Cost of NCLB’s Data Demands
The effects of the No Child Left Behind Act and adequate yearly progress (AYP) accountability systems are only beginning to make their way into book-length studies. The following relies heavily on journal articles and online documents for current information.

Articles


Summarizes the debate over state-to-state variance in measuring AYP—a sticking point for many educators.


Offers a good synopsis of major issues under debate concerning AYP testing of English language learners, one of the most controversial aspects of NCLB legislation.


A primer for principals, this special section includes separate articles that address many of the most daunting issues facing today’s administrators.


Part of a special issue, this article draws on baseline data to identify the most persistent factors that contribute to the achievement gap.

Books


A practical guide for schools and districts struggling to create comprehensive accountability systems.


Together, the prominent educational researcher-authors of a collection of articles make a compelling argument for the necessity of implementing a meaningful and challenging accountability system in the U.S. public school system.

On the Web


Makes a pro-NCLB argument for the necessity of current accountability measures as the only effective way to close the ongoing achievement gap.


A useful summary of the basics of AYP and what the results have revealed so far. Especially good for teachers and parents.


What have AYP assessments revealed so far? This government office report to the Secretary of Education draws on nationwide AYP results to offer a broad overview of areas in need of improvement. An indepth look at AYP from the federal point of view.


One of the more in depth and scathing critiques of the current accountability system to have yet been written.

Organizations

Council of Chief State School Officers
Accountability, including Adequate Yearly Progress www.ccsso.org/federal_programs/NCLB/3348.cfm

U.S. Department of Education
No Child Left Behind’s school accountability provisions have brought an unprecedented focus to achievement gaps among student subgroups. This is an important and positive change. Much of the public dialogue around No Child Left Behind has missed this change, though, and uses the school adequate yearly progress (AYP) designation of “Met” or “Not Met” as if it were a straightforward measure of overall school performance, as if a school not meeting AYP is necessarily “lower-performing” overall than one that is meeting AYP.

One of the most important facts to know about the No Child Left Behind Act’s adequate yearly progress requirement is its “starting point” on the way to the 12-year goal of having 100 percent of students meeting standards. No matter how difficult or how easy a state’s standards, tests, and cut scores might be, by statutory definition 20 percent of each state’s students were in schools below the starting point objective for AYP in 2002.

While the starting point was based on the percentage of all students in a school meeting state standards, NCLB—with its focus on achievement gaps—also holds schools accountable for the performance of demographic subgroups. In practice, schools are most likely to miss AYP based on a subgroup’s performance rather than on all students in aggregate. Holding the subgroups to the same standards as all students in aggregate can result in more than 20 percent of a state’s students being in schools not making AYP. On the other hand, a “safe harbor” provision for schools showing strong progress has allowed some states to have fewer than 20 percent of students in schools designated as not meeting AYP.

The most common pattern across the Northwest states, at least in the first years under NCLB, is that the AYP requirements spotlight achievement gaps between student subgroups rather than overall performance. This may change as the AYP objectives are raised from the starting point for the first time this year. But now and in the future, large and demographically diverse schools are more likely to meet the minimum subgroup size needed to be held accountable for achievement gaps.

In 2004, the Oregon schools not meeting AYP were on average almost three times larger in enrollment than those meeting AYP (168 tested students versus 60). Of the 69 largest Oregon high schools (ones with more than 250 students tested in grade 10), only three made AYP. Among the other 66, the majority (36) did better than the statewide average for all students meeting state English/Language Arts standards. In fact, 17 beat the state average by 10 percentage points and three beat it by 30 percentage points. This example demonstrates that when we are looking at AYP designations, it is vital to look at the specific categories—including proficiency, test participation, attendance, and graduation by subgroup or in aggregate—that were missed rather than assuming a school marked “not meeting AYP” is a “low-performing school.”

![Number of Idaho schools not meeting AYP for the specified subgroup and subject](nwrel.org/nwedu)
The bottom line in accountability is the individual student: helping each child reach the highest potential, no matter what challenges he might face. Emanuel—from the Anchorage elementary school profiled on page 30—is just one of the nation’s 12.5 million Title I students who hold us accountable at the end of the day.

I Am From  By Emanuel

I am from trash can
I am from snow in the wild
From the trees in the park
I am from the violin to the bikes
And the cars
Last, but not least,
I am from the houses of my neighborhood

I am from my PS2, my Gamecube, X Box, TV
And the pencil that writes in my secret notebook
I am from the computer, I type on.
I’m from the family, that’s far, far, away

I am from Indiana, Louisiana, Montana
And the Caribbean
I am from rice, chicken and beans
I am from “Don’t look in the refrigerator
If nothing’s in there!”
Northwest Education is available online in both PDF and HTML versions. Look for Web exclusives.

Up next in the fall 2005 issue:
Working Together To Improve Teaching