Fail Now or Fail Later
No Child Left Behind guarantees that huge numbers of schools will fail to make the grade by 2014

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(EAST LANSING, MI) - Despite fewer schools in the Great Lakes region being labeled as “failing” this year, if the federal No Child left Behind (NCLB) law in its current form continues to be the driving force behind the measurement of school and student success, most schools in the region will be so labeled by 2014.

According to a study funded by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice, approximately 95 percent of the schools in the Great Lakes region will be labeled “failing” by 2014 because they do not meet their states’ current annual academic targets.

By comparison, under the most optimistic scenarios in Illinois it is projected that over 65 percent of schools will fail by 2014. Under a more realistic scenario, that number is closer to 85 percent.

“The Great Lakes Center is putting together a growing body of research that shows our current system, which uses high stakes tests as the primary measure of school success, is not reliable, nor does it increase student learning,” said Teri Moblo of the Great Lakes Center. Under the current system, schools are destined to be labeled as failing and there is no way around it. The question isn’t WILL schools fail, it’s WHEN will they fail.

The study is the first multi-state research to use actual state data to predict how schools will fair under the current Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements. The authors assessed how much gain schools actually made in 2003-04 and used this data along with each state’s established growth expectations, to predict how many schools will meet the federal requirement of 100 percent proficiency on state high-stakes tests by 2014.

Under NCLB, states are allowed to set their own academic targets for achieving AYP each year as long as the academic targets lead to all students being proficient by 2014. States that set lower growth expectation rates for schools in the early years are forced to set higher ones in later years. The schools in states with lower initial academic targets will experience failure later than those in states that set higher academic targets in early years and lower ones in later years. Regardless of the growth expectations set by the Great Lakes states, the research findings are clear: massive numbers of schools are expected to be labeled as failing by 2014.

According to Moblo, “Without increased flexibility in the AYP requirements and a focus on the underlying reasons why students do not perform well on such tests, we will continue to invest huge amounts of time and money in a system where failure is guaranteed.”
Co-authors, Edward Wiley of University of Colorado, William Mathis of the University of Vermont, and David Garcia of Arizona State University also point to a great deal of controversy surrounding other aspects of AYP. They point out that AYP measures the success or failure of schools and students solely on high stakes test scores in basic academic areas; that the special needs and learning styles of students are not taken into account; that the impact of poverty and diversity on a school’s ability to achieve AYP is not address; that testing and sanctions for not making AYP do not address the underlying causes of poor test performance; and that in order to meet yearly AYP goals states are forced to direct their increasingly limited resources toward the administering and scoring of standardized tests, estimated to cost between $1.9 billion and $5.3 billion for 2002-08.

According to study co-author David Garcia, “The fundamental structure of the AYP requirements are unworkable under any realistic scenario. Ultimately, NCLB holds schools to an arbitrary deadline with unproven academic expectations.”

Many states are no calling for increased flexibility in the AYP requirements, but to date, few, if any, state requests have been approved.

The study goes on to recommend ways to increase student learning and improve AYP results:

- Develop programs that focus on strengthening and including families, community, health providers, childcare, early education, summer and after-school activities and technical education, among other vital and essential services.
- Dedicate adequate funding for remediation and social infrastructure, to overcome disparities and meet student educational needs.
- Create realistic, comprehensive school evaluation systems that involve a variety of evaluation methods.
- Set realistic standards linked to external expectations and grounded in research.
- Use aggressive confidence intervals and subgroup sizes to measure rates of growth.
- Modify the standards and growth expectations for special education, non-English speaking, and migratory students.

The full study is available at www.greatlakescenter.org. The mission of the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice is to identify, develop, support, publish, and widely disseminate empirically sound research on education policy and practices with the explicit goal of improving the quality of public education for all students within the Great Lakes Region.