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SCHOOL SUCCESS UNDER “NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND” DEPENDS ON LOCATION

Whether a school makes “adequate yearly progress” hinges on the state in which it’s located as much as its students’ performance, new study finds

Washington, D.C. (February 20, 2009) – Schools nationwide are under the gun to “make adequate yearly progress” (AYP) under the federal No Child Left Behind law (NCLB) and avoid intrusive and embarrassing sanctions. Yet *The Accountability Illusion*, a study released yesterday by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, finds that whether schools make AYP is as much a product of inconsistent and arcane rules set by state education officials as of actual pupil achievement.

“The Accountability Illusion highlights that we have some important problems to fix in the No Child Left Behind law,” said U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. *“Our kids need high, consistent standards that reflect college-readiness and career readiness with flexibility at the state and local level on how to achieve those standards.”*

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute and the Kingsbury Center at Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) analyzed the performance of 36 real schools, then “moved” them among 28 states, projecting which of the schools would make AYP under the different NCLB rules set by each state. Results showed great variation: of the 18 elementary schools examined, 17 would make AYP in Wisconsin and 15 in Arizona but only one was projected to make the grade in Massachusetts or Nevada. In other words, some states would label most of these elementary schools as “needing improvement” under NCLB, while other states would give passing marks to most of the exact same schools.

“It looks like a school’s ability to clear the NCLB bar depends as much on the state in which it’s located as on how its students perform,” said Chester E. Finn Jr., President of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a Washington-based education policy think tank. *“No Child Left Behind’s image suggests that schools across America are being judged in a consistent, fair and transparent way—but that turns out to be an illusion.”*

Fordham vice president Michael J. Petrilli said *“One of the adages of the NCLB era is that a child’s zip code should not determine her life chances. But neither should a school’s zip code determine whether or not it makes the grade.”*

The Fordham study—*The Accountability Illusion*—also found that middle schools were far less likely to clear the law’s AYP bar; few of the 18 middle schools examined would make AYP in most of the 26 states

examined (due to a lack of necessary data, New Jersey and Texas were excluded from this part of the analysis). Middle schools tend to be larger and more diverse, meaning they are held accountable for the performance of more subgroups of students, such as minorities and students with disabilities, which contributes to their challenge in making AYP.

“This study proves that the current AYP system under No Child Left Behind isn’t truly working,” said the study’s lead author John Cronin, from the Kingsbury Center at NWEA, a national non-profit education organization. “Results vary wildly and a school deemed ‘fine’ by one state doesn’t pass muster in another state. The current system doesn’t help improve our schools.”

The 2002 law requires states to bring all students in grades 3-8 to grade-level proficiency in reading and math by 2014. However, NCLB leaves key details to the states. They set the definition of proficiency; the rate at which the bar rises each year en route to the 2014 goal; the minimum number of students that comprise a school sub-group in categories such as race, English language learners or students with disabilities; and whether and how to apply a margin of statistical error to achievement results. Since all of these factors vary greatly from state to state, as this report showcases, so do AYP results.

In their foreword to the study, Finn and Petrilli wrote that the solution to this dilemma is not to scrap NCLB or to federalize tests and standards. Instead, they argue, the Obama Administration and Congress should create incentives for states to voluntarily sign on to rigorous, comprehensive common standards and tests. Washington should then publish the results for every school in the land, but allow states to decide what to do with schools that don’t meet those common expectations. This would ensure greater transparency and reinforce state responsibility. “Best of all,” they note, “it would end the gamesmanship that has characterized the federal-state relationship for the past seven years.”

About the Thomas B. Fordham Institute: The Thomas B. Fordham Institute is a non-profit think tank dedicated to advancing educational excellence in America’s K-12 schools. Nationally and in our home state of Ohio, we promote education policies that strengthen accountability and expand education options for parents and families, including sponsoring charter schools in Ohio. Our reports examine issues such as No Child Left Behind, school choice and teacher quality. For more information visit www.edexcellence.net.

About the Kingsbury Center at Northwest Evaluation Association: The Kingsbury Center at Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) is an independent research organization whose mission is to advance the knowledge and practice of education through the use of student assessment data. NWEA is a national not-for-profit educational services organization that provides research-based educational growth measures, professional training and consulting services to more than 3,400 partners worldwide. The Kingsbury Center at NWEA relies on its Growth Research Database (GRD), which houses demographic



information and highly reliable, longitudinal student achievement information for approximately 10% of the United States student population. The Kingsbury Center supports researchers by providing access to datasets extracted from the GRD and other sources, performing research studies in collaboration with external organizations and also provides consultation services. For more information visit www.nwea.org.

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