

**2002  
POLICY  
BRIEF**



# **The “No Child Left Behind” Act**

**and Minnesota’s standards,  
assessments, and accountability**

prepared by the Office of Educational Accountability

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

The *2002 Policy Brief* has been produced by the  
**Office of Educational Accountability**  
**College of Education and Human Development**  
**University of Minnesota**

Preferred Citation: Davison, M.L., Davenport, E.C., Kwak, N., Peterson, K.A., Irish, M.L., Seo, Y-S., Chan, C-K., Choi, J., Harring, J., Kang, Y.J., & Wu, Y-C. (2002). *The "No Child Left Behind" Act and Minnesota's standards, assessments, and accountability: 2002 policy brief*. Minneapolis, MN: Office of Educational Accountability, College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota.

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November 2002

**Office of Educational Accountability**  
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# THE “NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND” ACT AND MINNESOTA’S STANDARDS, ASSESSMENTS, AND ACCOUNTABILITY: 2002 POLICY BRIEF

Since the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, most states are scrambling to assess their education system and determine what they will need in order to meet the federal requirements. Minnesota is no exception. In light of the ongoing discussion about educational accountability, sparked by the *No Child Left Behind Act*, our office has prepared this report. We begin by highlighting the provisions of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, and then discuss where Minnesota stands in relation to the requirements of the Act. Finally, we provide some policy recommendations.

We do not presume that our recommendations are “the” answers to the questions raised by educational accountability. Our goal is to facilitate public discussion by outlining the major issues in educational accountability, in light of the new federal legislation and the state’s experience with educational accountability over the past five years. Besides outlining the issues, we have also made numerous recommendations and briefly stated our major reasons for them. It is our belief that discussion often proceeds most productively when there are some concrete proposals around which that discussion can take place.

## Accountability at the Federal Level

On January 8, 2002, President Bush signed into law the *No Child Left Behind Act*. According to the Administration, the Act contains the President’s four basic education reform principles: stronger accountability for results; increased flexibility and local control; expanded options for parents; and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work.

These principles require further discussion before policy is based on their provisions. For example, it is important to note that the notion of increased flexibility and local control is limited. The flexibility and local control mentioned by the Administration relate primarily to the allocation of program funds. The legislation allows states the flexibility to allocate federal funds to the programs with the greatest need in a school or district. However, many other aspects of the requirements allow little flexibility. Through all three steps (standard setting, assessments, and accountability) states must go through an approval process with the U.S. Department of Education (USDE). So, while states have the freedom to





choose their own standards, assessments, and accountability systems, all aspects of those standards, assessments, and accountability systems will be reviewed by the USDE for compliance with federal guidelines. In addition, while some expectations are quite explicit, other aspects of the guidelines are in the development stage; it is therefore not entirely clear how states should begin to implement the legislation.

The specifics of the Act that are most pertinent to Minnesota's accountability system can be divided into three primary areas: (1) standards, (2) assessments, and (3) accountability and adequate yearly progress. What follows is a brief summary of what is included in the *No Child Left Behind* Act as it relates to these educational areas. While Minnesota must comply with the federal legislation, the state and district educational accountability systems must go beyond what is mandated in the Act in order to fully monitor progress towards state and local educational goals.

## Standards

The first step in an educational accountability system is setting standards. According to federal legislation, all schools in districts that accept Title I funds must adopt standards in reading / language arts and mathematics by 2002, and in science by 2005. The standards must be the same for all students and identify what students should know and be able to do. The Act requires that standards must also encourage higher order thinking skills and problem solving. However, the legislation fails to clearly define either "higher order thinking skills" or "problem solving."

## Assessments

In order to determine whether students are meeting the standards, they must be assessed in one way or another. Beginning in the year 2002–03, schools must administer tests at least once in reading / language arts and mathematics in each of the following three grade spans: grades 3–5, grades 6–9, and grades 10–12. Beginning in 2005–06, tests in reading / language arts and mathematics must be administered *every* year in grades 3–8 and once in grades 9–12. Starting in 2007, science must be tested at least once in each of the following grade spans: 3–5, 6–9, and 10–12.

States are responsible for choosing their own assessments (subject to federal approval); however, the same assessments must be used to measure the achievement of all children at each grade level. Assessments must be aligned with state standards at all grade levels. The assessments must also include multiple measures (for example, multiple choice and open-ended questions).

Federal legislation requires participation in the statewide assessments from at least 95% of all students enrolled, and at least 95% of each identified sub-group (including gender, migrant status, limited English







proficiency (LEP), special education, ethnicity, free lunch eligibility). Although LEP students may be exempted from the state assessments required by Title I for up to three years, annual testing of language acquisition and proficiency is required for these students. English language proficiency must be tested through reading, writing, and oral skills in grades 3–12; early literacy assessments will be administered in kindergarten, first, and second grades.

Since states will not all be using the same assessments, it will be difficult to compare one state to another. Therefore, beginning in 2003, there will be random biennial National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) testing nationwide in grades 4 and 8 in reading and mathematics, with the intent of providing comparability between states. NAEP results may also be used to confirm or disconfirm results of the state testing in a manner yet to be determined.

### **Accountability and Adequate Yearly Progress**

States have considerable flexibility in establishing an accountability system. Within that system, however, states must include a process (called the Adequate Yearly Progress [AYP] process) for identifying schools that (a) have not reached a state-established achievement bar, and (b) are not making adequate yearly progress toward that bar. States must adopt such a process within the larger framework of their accountability system.

Furthermore, there are strict federal guidelines as to what the process must include. According to the *No Child Left Behind Act*, states must start by defining Adequate Yearly Progress. This is the measure of academic improvement a school must achieve to ensure that, at the end of 12 years (by academic year 2013–14), every student graduating in the state will have a mastery of the essential basics (see the legislation online at: <http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov>). While we hope that Minnesota's accountability system will entail more than just the federally mandated AYP process—for example, it should include a process for identifying high performing schools, not just low performing schools—ESEA stipulates that every state's AYP process must contain at least the following elements:

- Beginning in 2002, each state will be expected to have a single statewide system based on academic standards and assessments. Test results must be published in an annual report card and made available to parents and the community prior to the beginning of the following school year. The results must be disaggregated by gender, migrant status, LEP status, special education status, ethnicity, and free lunch eligibility, and must include itemized score analysis. "Itemized score analysis" refers to the separate reporting on each standard or content area, not each assessment item (See further details in the Accountability section of this brief, on p. 17.)





- The system must include achievement results for all students in all public and charter schools. A student attending the same school for a “full academic year” must be included when determining if a *school* has made AYP. A student who attends more than one school in a district during the school year is only included in *district* AYP counts. All student results must be included in the school level report card.
- AYP will be based on the percentage of students meeting or exceeding proficiency standards, rather than on the school’s average scale score. States must set at least three achievement levels: Basic, Proficient, and Advanced. According to the Act, within twelve years, all students must perform at the Proficient level; however, individual state standards will determine what constitutes “Proficient” performance.
- Each state chooses where to set the initial academic achievement bar. This initial level may be based on the performance of the higher of two categories: either the lowest-achieving demographic group or the lowest-achieving schools in the state. Once the initial bar is established, the state is required to “raise the bar” gradually to 100% proficiency (all students scoring at or above the Proficient achievement level) by the end of the 12-year implementation period. The initial bar must be raised after two years, and subsequent thresholds must be raised at least once every three years during the twelve-year time span.
- AYP must be based primarily on state assessments, but must also include one additional academic indicator. In high school, the additional indicator must be graduation rate, but states are also expected to choose an additional indicator for the elementary / middle school level. While states can consider more than test scores in identifying schools in the AYP process, they are sharply limited in how they may do so.

To see how this works, consider attendance as the “additional indicator.” If a school is meeting the state’s achievement bar as measured by the tests, but has inadequate attendance rates, the school can be added to the list of identified schools. However, no school can be *removed* from the list because of good attendance. That is, if a school fails to make adequate progress on achievement, but has good scores on attendance and other non-achievement indicators, it must still appear on the list. In essence, the state must begin by assembling a list of schools that have not met the state achievement bar and are not adequately progressing to that bar as measured by the tests. Based on other indicators, the state may *add* more schools to the list, but it may not remove any schools from the list.





Within the constraints just described, the state can use any additional indicators it wishes. The achievement tests used in the AYP process must be ones approved by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) and they must be aligned with standards approved by the USDE. For decisions other than AYP identification of schools, such as identifying high performing schools, states are not restricted to the use of USDE-approved tests, nor are they restricted in the way they use additional non-achievement indicators.

If a school fails to meet the state achievement target for two consecutive years it will be identified as in need of improvement. Although states have various labels for schools identified as not making adequate yearly progress towards the state's achievement bar (e.g., Schools in Need of Improvement, Schools under Review) each state must submit the names of the identified schools to the U.S. Department of Education, where they are assembled into the USDE's List of Failing Schools.

According to the legislation, the system will impose consequences only for schools that accept Title I funding. In Minnesota, 90% of elementary schools across the state receive Title I funds. This percentage drops slightly for middle schools and high schools.

After a school has been identified as in need of improvement, the school must make the identification public. If the school is identified for:

- **Two years:** the school will be identified before the beginning of the next school year as needing school improvement. The school must develop a two-year plan for improvement, and school officials will receive help and technical assistance. According to the Act, every student assigned to the school must be given the option to transfer to a non-identified public school or charter school in the district. In Minnesota, this option is already available to all public school students under the state's Open Enrollment Law,<sup>1</sup> even if the student's school has not been declared in need of improvement. However, under the *No Child Left Behind* Act, districts must set aside a percentage of their Title I funds from the district to pay for transportation of students to another public school in the district that has not been identified as in need of improvement.
- **Three years:** the school remains in school improvement status and the district must continue to offer public school choice to all students. The school must also provide supplemental education services to disadvantaged children who remain at the school. Parents can choose the services their child needs from a list of approved providers.
- **Four years:** the district must implement certain corrective actions to improve the school, such as replacing certain staff or fully

<sup>1</sup> Minnesota state law does not restrict transfer to the same district. Students are allowed to transfer to a school outside their "residence" district.





implementing a new curriculum, while continuing to offer public school choice and pay for supplemental services.

- **Five years:** then the school will be identified for restructuring. The school must develop a plan and make the necessary arrangements to implement significant alternative governance actions, such as state takeover, the hiring of a private management contractor, converting to a charter school, or significant staff restructuring.

## Unsafe Schools

Another new provision in the *No Child Left Behind Act* addresses school safety and violence. According to the legislation, states receiving any funds under the Act must establish and implement a statewide policy requiring that a student be provided with the opportunity to attend a “safe” public elementary or secondary school within the local education agency, including a public charter school. If a student attends an unsafe public elementary or secondary school, as determined by the state in consultation with a representative sample of local educational agencies, that student has the right to transfer to a safe school. If a student becomes a victim of a violent criminal offense, as determined by state law, while in or on the grounds of a public elementary or secondary school that the student attends, the school would then be considered unsafe, and students would be eligible for transfer to a safe school. States must certify in writing to the Secretary of Education that they are in compliance with this provision as a condition of receiving funds under federal legislation.

The Administration also argues that the Act protects teachers, so that they can teach and maintain order in schools. According to the Administration, “the problem of discipline has been compounded by the increased incidence of lawsuits, which impairs the ability of teachers to maintain discipline and enforce the rules. The *No Child Left Behind Act* protects teachers, principals, and other school professionals from frivolous litigation when they take reasonable actions to maintain order and discipline in the classroom” (<http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov>).

One of the concerns with this legislation is that schools will set unrealistic definitions of “unsafe” so as to avoid being identified. Therefore, there is the possibility that this provision may make schools more tolerant of dangerous and violent situations, rather than reducing the number of incidents in the school. There is also question about how this provision will be enforced, and whether schools and districts will report problems.

## Teacher Quality and Licensure

Whether or not students are being taught by qualified teachers is another issue addressed in the *No Child Left Behind Act*. The Administration is requiring stricter licensing and qualification guidelines for teachers across the country in school districts receiving Title I funds. The legislation





defines “highly qualified” teachers as those who not only possess full state certification, but also have solid content knowledge of the subjects they teach.

Beginning in Fall 2002, all new elementary school teachers will have to pass tests in subject knowledge and teaching skills in mathematics, reading, and writing. New middle school and high school teachers must pass rigorous subject matter tests or have the equivalent of an undergraduate major, graduate degree or advanced certification in their respective fields. States must ensure that by the end of the 2005–06 school year, all teachers of core academic subjects must be highly qualified (Paige, “Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge,” <http://www.title2.org/secReport>).

It is important to note that although federal legislation holds charter schools accountable for the same standards and achievement for students, it allows states to set different teacher qualifications for charter and non-charter schools.

The quality guidelines also include paraprofessionals in schools. The *No Child Left Behind* Act requires higher academic qualifications for paraprofessionals hired with Title I funds than for those not paid with Title I monies.

## Minnesota’s Accountability System and Recommendations for the Future

With the passage of the *No Child Left Behind* Act in January 2002, Minnesota’s accountability system is facing numerous changes. Minnesota has met some federal requirements already, but will have a fair amount of work to do to accommodate all the requirements of the Act. This work includes, but is not limited to, resolving issues surrounding statewide standards; adding statewide tests; extending the AYP process to non-Title I schools as well as Title I schools; and revising state and district report cards. Most of it can be accomplished by extension and modification of existing procedures.

### Standards

Educational standards can be divided into two types: content standards and performance standards (referred to as “academic achievement standards” in the *No Child Left Behind* Act). Content standards state what students are expected to know and be able to do. Performance standards state how well students are expected to know the content. For instance, the content standard might say that students must be able to perform one-





and two-digit arithmetic, while the performance standard might say that the minimum passing level is 75% correct on a test of one- and two-digit arithmetic. While Minnesota can rely heavily on prior work to develop its state standards, it must revisit both the issues of content standards and performance standards in order to comply with federal legislation.

In Minnesota, content standards refer to the Graduation Standards and the Profile of Learning. Minnesota's Graduation Standards are currently made up of two components: the Basic Standards and the Preparatory and High Standards. The Basic Standards, measured by the *Basic Skills Tests (BSTs)*, are designed to ensure that all students have mastered the basics in reading, mathematics, and writing before graduating from a Minnesota public high school. The Preparatory and High Standards define what students should know, understand, and be able to do to demonstrate an advanced level of learning. The Preparatory Standards apply to grades 1–8 in preparation for high school. The High Standards apply to grades 9–12. Preparatory and High Standards are assessed by a combination of the *Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs)* and locally developed performance assessments contained in the Profile of Learning.

Minnesota's rigorous statewide standards are contained in the Preparatory and High Standards of the Graduation Rule's Profile of Learning. The Preparatory Standards for reading and mathematics have already been approved by the USDE, although the High Standards have yet to be reviewed. In addition to the Preparatory and High Standards, the Profile of Learning also contains sets of performance assessments that can be used by teachers to assess attainment of the standards. While the *No Child Left Behind* Act requires rigorous statewide standards in mathematics, reading, and science, the performance assessments are less relevant to compliance with provisions in the Act. Of the standards, those in reading, mathematics, and science are most critical.

According to state legislation, districts must continue to implement the Profile of Learning by providing learning opportunities for all students in all preparatory content standards in nine learning areas. It is important to note the difference between the performance assessments and the standards in the Profile of Learning. It is the *standards* that are critical to compliance with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), not the performance assessments.

Currently, it is only Title I schools that are required by federal legislation to adopt state standards. With the new federal legislation, all schools in districts that accept Title I funds must adopt the standards. As previously stated, in Minnesota, this refers to virtually all public schools since virtually all districts accept some Title I funding. The *No Child Left Behind* Act requires that all annual assessments be aligned with these state standards for all students. The Preparatory and High Standards in reading / language arts, mathematics, and science (or some equivalent standards) must be in place in order to comply with provisions of the federal legislation.





In addition to reading and mathematics, Minnesota will also have to have statewide standards in science for grades 3–8 by the school year 2005. While Minnesota has Preparatory and High Standards in reading, mathematics, and science, the state will need to revise those for reading and mathematics to more clearly articulate the specific standards for each grade level. Further, it must make the standards mandatory for all schools in districts receiving Title I funds.

**RECOMMENDATION 1. With some revision and elaboration as described below, Minnesota should build on and elaborate its existing standards as a way to fulfill the federal standards requirements with particular attention to those in reading, mathematics, and science.**

- Minnesota has Preparatory and High Standards in its Profile of Learning that can meet the requirements of the *No Child Left Behind* Act for reading, mathematics, and science standards. The Preparatory Standards in reading and mathematics have already received federal approval. However, to satisfy the federal requirements, these standards in reading and mathematics must be required of all students, not simply left as a district option.
- Although Minnesota’s Preparatory Standards have been approved by the USDE, and the High Standards seem likely to be approved, they have been criticized by some as being rather vague and general (see “A Better Balance,” *Education Week* XX, 2001). Rather than revising the standards, however, we favor creating supporting documents that contain greater specificity for readers who need it. The standards themselves provide a concise statement of what students need to know and be able to do. Supporting documents can provide any necessary elaboration.
- In grades 3–8, the annual testing required by the *No Child Left Behind* Act will require a careful specification of the reading and mathematics curriculum standards, grade by grade. Currently, the Profile of Learning states the standards in grade spans: e.g., grades 1–3, grades 4–6, etc. The existing standards, or possibly the supporting documents, must be refined to elaborate on the reading and mathematics standards for successive grades. Standards, documentation, and assessments must display a clear sequence of progressively more-challenging knowledge and skills from one grade level to the next. In the process of specifying the grade-by-grade standards, consideration should be given to the proper balance between calculation and applied problem solving content in mathematics.
- Given the current concern about the preparation of students for higher education, the high standards (for grades 9–12) should be reviewed to ensure that they include essential preparation for higher education (Minnesota State Colleges & Universities, 2001).





**RECOMMENDATION 2. As in the past, we continue to support efforts to simplify the standards and to reduce the number of required standards, particularly at the high school level. We recommend retaining the standards, but combining the process areas (Inquiry, Resource Management, and Decision Making) with the content areas to reduce the number of areas to six: Reading, Viewing and Listening; Writing and Speaking; Math Concepts and Applications; Scientific Concepts and Applications; Social Studies; and Arts and Literature.**

- In an earlier report, we proposed folding the process areas of Inquiry, Resource Management, and Decision Making into the content areas to reduce the number of standards. Students can demonstrate mastery of the process areas within a content area, making it unnecessary to assess the process and the content separately. For instance, a student could demonstrate mastery of Inquiry Skills in Science or in the Social Sciences. If the process areas were folded into the content areas, this would leave one optional area (Foreign Language) and six required areas: Reading, Viewing, and Listening; Writing and Speaking; Math Applications; Scientific Applications; Social Science (now called People and Cultures); and Literature and the Arts (Davison, et al., 1999). Such a reduction would increase student options for electives.
- Except for the inclusion of Literature and the Arts, this recommendation is very similar to an earlier one by the Graduation Standards Advisory Committee (Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning, 1998). Both our recommendation and that of the Graduation Standards Advisory Committee leave in place the standards in reading, mathematics, and science required by the *No Child Left Behind Act*.

**RECOMMENDATION 3. In reading and mathematics, in grades 3–8 and in the high school grades, Minnesota will need to establish a performance standard which represents a level of attainment expected of *all students*. One of the recognized standard setting processes should be employed for this purpose. If the result is a performance standard near one of the existing cuts (e.g., between MCA Level I and Level II), the state should adopt one of the existing levels as that expected of all students, to avoid unnecessarily complicating the existing set of performance levels.**

- For purposes of identifying schools failing to make adequate yearly progress, the *No Child Left Behind Act* requires each state to establish a proficient level of achievement at each grade and in reading and mathematics. At the end of twelve years (by academic year 2013–14), all students must be achieving at or above this “proficient” level.

By requiring that all students meet this performance standard, the legislation makes it sound like a minimum competency level. However,







labeling the performance standard as “proficient” makes the standard sound much higher than minimum competency. This poses a dilemma for states: how to reconcile the expectation that *all* students are expected to meet the performance standard at the high level of attainment implied by the term “proficient”? In our reading of the legislation and the uses to which the performance standard will be put, the emphasis is on the performance standard *as an expectation for all students*.

The state should consider setting the standard at a point where students who reach the standard in the lower grades are on track to meet the high school Basic Standards in reading and mathematics by the end of 8<sup>th</sup> (or possibly 9<sup>th</sup>) grade. While there is no data on this issue, the need for early completion of the Basic Standards may be inferred from the expectations placed on students in the high school grades. Many Minnesota high schools start at the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Students who cannot meet the Basic Standard in reading may struggle to comprehend high school textbooks. Furthermore, many Minnesota students take algebra in 9<sup>th</sup> grade or before. Students who have not mastered basic arithmetic are probably not adequately prepared to enter algebra.

**RECOMMENDATION 4. The *No Child Left Behind Act* requires that graduation rate be included as an indicator for high schools. In his 1999 State of the Union address, President Bush proposed a 90% graduation rate, and Ohio has adopted such a standard. We recommend using a three-year graduation rate of 90% as a standard.**

- Given that many of Minnesota’s high schools are three-year high schools, it may be wise to use a three-year (rather than four-year) graduation rate for purposes of holding high schools accountable.

**RECOMMENDATION 5. At the elementary level, the *No Child Left Behind Act* requires at least one other indicator beyond achievement. Because of its association with both achievement and graduation, we suggest that attendance be a required indicator at both the elementary and secondary levels and that the school expectation be set at an average attendance rate of 95%.**

- In one form or another, many states and districts seem to have established an expectation of between 93% and 97% for attendance. For instance, Minneapolis expects 75% of students to have a 95% attendance rate or better (Minneapolis Public School District, 2001). Texas requires that the average attendance rate for a school be 97% at the elementary level, 96% at the intermediate level, and 95% at the high school level (see <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/account/2002/manual/sec04.html>). Tennessee has an expectation of 95% attendance at the elementary level and 93% at the secondary level (e.g., grades 7–12). Ohio has set an attendance expectation of 93% (see [http://www.ode.state.oh.us/reportcard/state\\_report\\_card/2002StateReportCard.pdf](http://www.ode.state.oh.us/reportcard/state_report_card/2002StateReportCard.pdf)), and Maryland requires an attendance





rate of at least 94% (see <http://www.mdk12.org/data/course/m1w2/pr2/standards3.ppt>).

- Average attendance rates tend to be lower in the secondary than in the elementary grades (Davison, et al., 2000; Davison, et al., 2001). For that reason, Tennessee and Texas have adopted a lower expectation for secondary schools. Because we know of no reason why attendance is less important in high school, we do not favor setting separate attendance standards for elementary and secondary schools.

## Assessments

According to the Department of Children, Families & Learning (CFL), some of the most significant changes for Minnesota will come in the area of assessments. Currently, Minnesota schools administer annual tests in reading and mathematics in grades 3, 5, and 8, with a 7<sup>th</sup> grade test in development. Federal legislation requires that the assessments be aligned with federally approved state standards, and all of the required assessments must be in effect by school year 2005–06. The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade tests, along with the future 7<sup>th</sup> grade test, are *Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs)*, which are aligned with the Preparatory Standards; but the 8<sup>th</sup> grade tests are *Basic Skills Tests (BSTs)*, aligned with the Basic Standards. Currently, only the Preparatory Standards are federally approved, although the High Standards are likely to be approved. The Basic Standards, on the other hand, are minimal competencies—not the type of rigorous standards envisioned by the USDE. Minnesota’s *Basic Skills Tests* are therefore unlikely to become USDE certified.

**RECOMMENDATION 6. Minnesota should develop new annual assessments in reading and mathematics in grades 4, 6, and 8. In addition, the 7<sup>th</sup> grade reading and mathematics tests that are currently being developed will need to be completed, and the 11<sup>th</sup> grade math test that was piloted last year will have to be revamped to align with state standards and federal requirements.**

- The current 8<sup>th</sup> grade *BSTs* should be replaced by assessments tied to the Preparatory Standards, as required by the federal legislation.
- The 11<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics exam is designed to give students choices as to what sections of the test they complete, based on the areas of mathematics they have studied. Federal legislation requires that all students take the same test for AYP purposes. Although there are common sections for all students, these sections are not long enough to meet the federal and technical requirements; therefore, this test will not meet federal requirements.





**RECOMMENDATION 7. Minnesota needs to find a way to ensure that students do not need to take two tests in order to meet both federal accountability requirements and the state Graduation Rule. Assuming that new 8<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics and reading tests are developed, those tests should provide the opportunity for students to demonstrate that they have met the basic high school graduation requirement. The content of the new tests should be aligned with the Preparatory and High Standards, so that the tests themselves meet the federal content guidelines. The passing score should represent the basic level of achievement expected of all students before high school graduation. Students who score above that level will have met the basic standard.**

- This recommendation leads to a question. If students do not meet the passing score on the new 8<sup>th</sup> grade *MCA*, what test will they take in later grades to demonstrate having met the Basic Standards in mathematics and reading? One possibility would be to continue to administer the *BSTs* (in addition to the *MCAs*), and require that students who do not meet the high school graduation requirement through performance on the *MCAs* as 8<sup>th</sup> graders would take a *BST* in future years. This would be a costly approach, because it would mean continuing to pay for the *BST* testing program on top of the *MCAs*. Furthermore, field testing new *BST* items currently relies on data from the administration of the *BSTs* to 8<sup>th</sup> graders. Because of cost and difficulty of field testing new items, we make the following recommendation:

**RECOMMENDATION 8. When the new 8<sup>th</sup> grade *MCA* becomes operational, CFL should consider dropping the *BSTs* as a separate testing program. If a student does not initially meet the Basic Standards in mathematics and reading through performance on the *MCA* as an 8<sup>th</sup> grader, the student could then have additional opportunities to demonstrate mastery of the Basic Standards by taking the 8<sup>th</sup> grade *MCA* in future years, or by taking a test composed of items from the *MCA* testing program that cover basic content.**

**RECOMMENDATION 9. Tests in science will have to be developed.**

- According to federal legislation, science tests must be administered at least once in each of the following grade spans by 2007: grades 3–5, 6–9, and 10–12.

**RECOMMENDATION 10. With the addition of several new assessments, we recommend that the new assessments be customized, norm-referenced tests so that they can be tied to national percentile rankings. As existing tests are revised, CFL should also consider providing national norm information along with those tests, although it is not essential that students receive such information at every grade.**

- If the state tests are developed so as to provide students and





parents with national norm information, districts may be relieved of the need to give a commercially published norm-referenced test in addition to the state tests. Eliminating the need for these additional commercial tests would limit the additional student testing time and the loss of instructional time that are probable consequences of the federal legislation.

**RECOMMENDATION 11. Rather than adopting commercial, off-the-shelf tests, we recommend that CFL continue developing the *Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments* in ways that combine the advantages of a state-constructed test with many of the advantages associated with commercial, off-the-shelf tests.**

- On the surface, there seem to be two ways to comply with the annual testing provisions of the *No Child Left Behind* Act: either administer commercially published, norm-referenced tests each year; or administer annual state-developed tests, such as the existing *Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments*, to students in the required grades. The first approach, using a commercially published norm-referenced test, has several appealing features. First, it would provide national norms (and, therefore, information about how Minnesota students compare to other students across the nation). Second, the first approach would avoid the lengthy and costly process of test development. Finally, because such tests are all multiple choice, results can be returned to students rapidly.
- Upon consideration, we would argue that state-developed tests have more advantages and are more likely to be approved by the USDE. First, federal regulations require tests aligned with state standards. State tests, specifically designed for Minnesota, would more closely align with state standards than commercial tests, which were not developed with Minnesota standards in mind. Second, federal requirements call for multiple measures, which, in practice, seems to mean a mix of multiple-choice and open-ended questions. However, the most widely used commercial, norm-referenced tests are composed solely of multiple-choice questions. Third, federal regulations require broad participation in the testing, including accommodations for students with disabilities and translations for students with limited English proficiency (for tests in subjects other than the language arts). Commercial, standardized tests do not necessarily provide such accommodations or translations. Fourth, many commercial standardized tests do not have the level of test security provided by Minnesota's current state testing programs. In light of previous federal rulings regarding state proposals to use off-the-shelf commercial tests, we think it highly unlikely that any such test, by itself, will be deemed adequate to meet the federal requirements. Finally, some advantages inherent in commercially published tests could be built into state-developed tests.





**RECOMMENDATION 12.** As it develops new tests, CFL should make every reasonable effort to speed up the turnaround of results. To do so, it should eventually move toward computerized administration of state tests. If final scores on essay and short-answer questions cannot be provided immediately, students should be provided with preliminary estimates of their scores, either through computer scoring of essays and short answers or through classroom teacher scoring of those responses before they are sent for final rating.

- It is crucial that the results from assessments are returned in a timely manner. In order for educators to effectively learn from and use the results of these assessments for instruction, they must receive them in time to implement changes. This requires a much quicker turnaround time than is currently in place. Results of multiple-choice items can be returned to students almost instantaneously if the testing is computerized. Various researchers have worked on computerized scoring of essays and short-answer responses that may be useful in providing students with an instantaneous (if only preliminary) evaluation of their performance on written responses that would ultimately be scored by human raters (Page, 1994; Page and Peterson, 1995). Alternatively, after students have completed essay or open-ended responses, teachers could grade responses to provide preliminary results to students.
- Students need to be prepared for computerized test administration, and steps must be taken to ensure that computerized versions of tests are effectively equivalent to paper and pencil versions. For adequate test security, all students in a given grade may have to be tested simultaneously. Most schools, however, do not yet have enough computers to test all students in a grade at one time. Nor do schools have personnel trained to administer tests by computer. Computerized administration should be viewed as a long-term goal. Once the testing has become computerized, however, certain practical tasks can be greatly simplified or eliminated (e.g., shipping, storing, and returning thousands of test booklets and answer sheets statewide).

**RECOMMENDATION 13.** As it develops annual tests in reading and mathematics for grades 3–8, CFL should design the tests to measure the improvement in student achievement from grade to grade for purposes of including growth indicators in the statewide accountability system.

- In our opinion, the real measure of what is occurring in a school with respect to achievement is not the overall level of achievement in the school, but rather the amount that student achievement improves from one grade to the next. That is, the real measure of achievement effectiveness is how much Johnny and his schoolmates *improved* their reading (math, science, etc.)





from last year to this year. Such measures of individual student improvement are called “value added” measures by some and “growth” measures by others (Sanders, Saxton, and Horn, 1997; North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction, 2001).

- Incorporation of value-added or growth measures requires that, from grade to grade, the tests follow a sequence of increasingly challenging content. Further, it requires that a developmental scoring system be created. Such a scoring system places a child’s performance in succeeding grades on a scale that permits comparison of one year’s score to another year’s score, such that the amount of improvement in math or reading skill can be quantified for each child.

**RECOMMENDATION 14. Wherever possible, Minnesota should try to improve the usefulness of test information for curriculum planning and, to the extent feasible, for the instruction of individual students.**

- Large-scale assessments (both state-constructed tests and commercially published tests) have often been criticized because they do not sufficiently inform instruction. Information about the average performance of students in a classroom, school, or district can help in designing the curriculum for students in that classroom, school, or district. Because any test provides no more than a snapshot of students at one point in time, test results cannot be used by themselves to make decisions about individual students. However, the information can be usefully combined with other sources of information about that student.
- As the pool of available items permit, CFL may be able to release some test items to schools, parents, and teachers. If the agency does so, it should also release information about the difficulty of each item. Instruction is more efficient when it concentrates on material not yet mastered by students, and item pass rates can show which material has yet to be mastered by the majority of students. CFL should also release information about the proportion of students choosing each incorrect answer so that students, parents, and teachers can see the kinds of mistakes commonly made by students.
- As the high school tests continue to be developed (10<sup>th</sup> grade reading, 10<sup>th</sup> grade writing, and 11<sup>th</sup> grade math), they should incorporate information calculated to help students gauge their readiness for higher education. Further, if such information is placed on high school transcripts, it may also be useful to higher education institutions as they evaluate the student’s readiness, with the goal of reducing the need for remedial education in our higher education institutions.





- CFL has begun to improve the interpretive material accompanying test results. One improvement has been the inclusion of item maps that show the types of tasks students can perform at various ability levels. Such interpretive assistance should also be included with tests currently being developed.
- Currently, tests are sometimes returned after instructional decisions for the following year have been made. Speeding up turnaround time for results would make test information more useful to teachers, students, and parents.

## Accountability and Adequate Yearly Progress

Accountability systems include a number of educational indicators. While Adequate Yearly Progress is often seen as synonymous with accountability systems, it makes up only a portion of the entire system. The system also includes things such as teacher qualifications, school safety, and school improvement.

Prior to recent legislation, Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) identification was limited to Title I schools. The *No Child Left Behind* Act requires that *all* public and charter schools be included in the identification process. Not only will all schools need to be included in the AYP process, but the method of identification will also be different. Currently, Minnesota's AYP is based on the school's average scale score, but beginning in the 2002 school year, AYP will have to be defined as the percentage of students meeting or exceeding an expected performance level (to be determined by the state). Additionally, schools had been identified by subject and grade, but the new process must identify schools by subject area, and data will be *combined across grades*. This formula will include all students, not just students at Title I schools.

In addition to test scores, AYP will also include graduation rates for secondary education and another indicator (to be determined by the state) for elementary education. These indicators will be used to identify schools "in need of improvement." States may choose to use additional indicators in their school accountability system as well. However, these additional indicators may not be used to remove a school from in need of improvement status only to add more schools to the list.

Finally, the state accountability system should be incorporated into local district systems, but local systems should go beyond that of the state. Accountability can be defined as a system for determining whether desired educational goals are being met. The state system is fashioned around goals common across the state. But each district and each school has its own, unique goals. Local district and school accountability systems should extend beyond that of the state to encompass goals specific to their particular system.



## Schools in Need of Improvement

**RECOMMENDATION 15.** Minnesota should work through the political process with other states to change federal regulations and the way in which schools are identified “in need of improvement” for school accountability purposes.

- Minnesota’s experience with the federal Adequate Yearly Progress system and the experience of other states suggests that it largely serves to identify schools with large percentages of low income children, children with disabilities, and children from homes where English is not the primary language. Figures 1 and 2 profile the student composition of Minnesota schools currently identified

Figure 1. Percentage of Third Grade Students Eligible for Free /Reduced-Price Lunch, in Special Education, and with Limited English Proficiency (LEP)

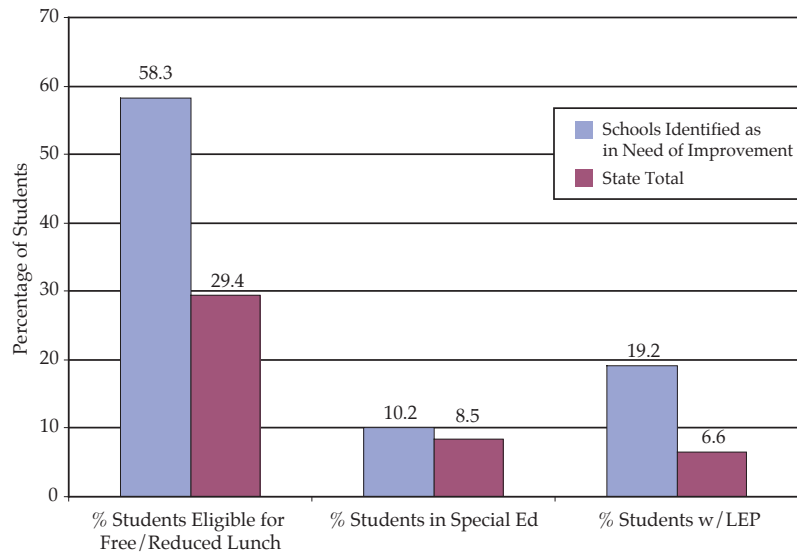
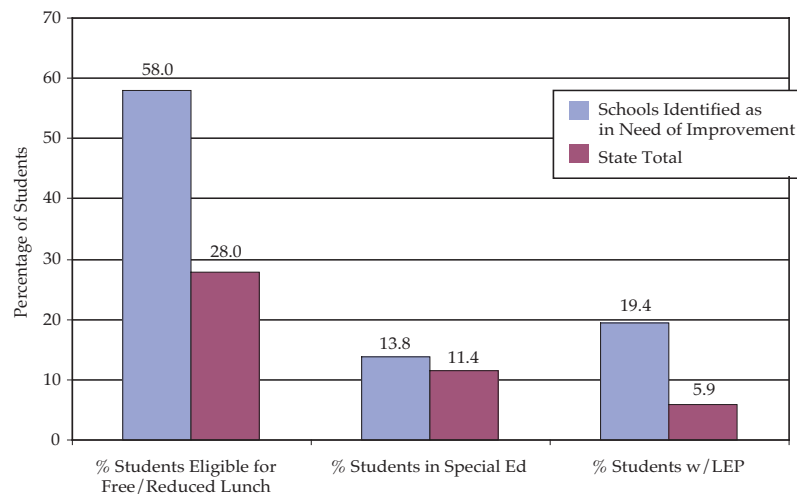


Figure 2. Percentage of Fifth Grade Students Eligible for Free /Reduced-Price Lunch, in Special Education, and with Limited English Proficiency (LEP)







as being in need of improvement compared to schools overall in the state for 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade. They show that the percentage of students eligible for free/reduced-price lunch in identified schools is nearly double the corresponding percentage in Minnesota schools overall, and the percentage of LEP students is nearly triple.

- Individual student growth from grade to grade should serve as the primary achievement indicator for determining whether schools should be identified as in need of improvement. Schools should be considered effective in the achievement area if student growth from grade to grade is sufficiently rapid to bring them up to expected levels at the end of certain benchmark grades (e.g., by the end of high school [12<sup>th</sup> grade], by the end of junior high [9<sup>th</sup> grade]). Such a use of growth indicators is standards based and designed to leave no child below the standards.
- If the federal guidelines are implemented, schools will be identified as in need of improvement if they fall short of state expectations in only one of the several areas discussed in this section. However, no school is perfect, and most—even most good schools—will fall short of the expectations in at least one area. To call such shortcomings to a school’s attention is appropriate, but it is inappropriate to label a school as “failing” simply because it falls short in just one area. Overidentification of schools serves no purpose and thwarts efforts to target school improvement at the schools in greatest need of help.
- Federal legislation requires that “all” students reach the expectation. A school should not be considered “failing” just because a single student falls below the achievement expectation.

While we believe that great efforts should be made to change the federal regulations, if the proposed federal regulations remain in place Minnesota legislators and education agencies will have to do what they can to maintain the integrity of Minnesota’s accountability system while ensuring that it meets reasonable federal standards. Elements of the system should be developed to take advantage of possible future improvements in the legislation and regulations.

**RECOMMENDATION 16. Based on its standards in reading, mathematics (and eventually science), its statewide assessments, and its definition of expected performance on those examinations, Minnesota should establish a system identifying schools in need of improvement, consistent with federal guidelines.<sup>2</sup>**

- If a school’s achievement level is not up to the state-established expected level and if that achievement level is not improving from year to year at a rate that would bring it up to the expected level by academic year 2013–14, then the school should be identified

<sup>2</sup> Refer to the Standards section of this report (beginning on p. 7) for further details.





as one in need of improvement. The actions to be taken with respect to such schools are identified in federal legislation and summarized in the beginning of this report. We would prefer that the identification be based on student growth from year to year, but the current federal legislation and regulations seem to limit the use of growth indicators.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Minnesota statute calls for the inclusion of growth indicators in the statewide accountability system, and several school districts in Minnesota already do so. Federal regulations seem to preclude use of growth indicators in the initial identification of schools. While we are not sure why, there are at least two possibilities. First, some uses of student growth are inconsistent with the “No Child Left Behind” theme, in which each child is expected to make “a year’s worth of growth.” This approach is inconsistent with standards based education. If each child is expected to make one year’s worth of academic progress, one must answer the question of whether one year’s worth of growth will or will not bring the child up to the expected standards. If a child is initially behind, it takes *more* than one year’s worth of progress to bring that child to the expected grade level. Second, some students are excluded from the accountability system. Unless a child was tested for two successive years, we cannot measure improvement; and therefore, we cannot include that data in computing the school’s average growth. These problems can be overcome, in part, if students’ growth rate is expected to bring them to the standard by some benchmark grade (rather than simply requiring “one year’s growth”).

- Schools should also be identified as in need of improvement if their attendance rate or their graduation rate (high schools only) falls below state established expectations and is not improving at a rate that would bring it up to the state expectation by 2013–14. These expectations should apply to the school as a whole and to the subgroups identified in the federal legislation.

### High Performing Schools

At the state level, accountability should be oriented around (1) identifying schools in need of improvement, and (2) rewarding high performing schools. Federal legislation requires identification of schools in need of improvement. But focusing only on poorly performing schools leads to an accent on the negative, fails to reward good performance, and misses an opportunity to identify the practices that create successful schools.

The system for identifying high performing schools should serve not only to reward excellent schools, but also to identify best practices for the benefit of other schools and for the improvement of teacher and administrator education programs. Rather than devising a new system for identifying high performing schools, it may be possible to revise an existing program to serve this function. New guidelines for identifying Blue Ribbon Schools are similar, in some respects, to our suggestions below and it may be possible to combine the process of identifying high performing schools with the Blue Ribbon Schools award process.

Federal guidelines greatly restrict the process that Minnesota must use to identify schools in need of improvement and the actions that must be taken with respect to those schools. However, federal legislation does not restrict the process used to identify high performing schools. Most importantly, we have the freedom to go beyond the use of achievement tests as the basis for choosing the high performing schools. We also have more freedom in deciding what action to take in recognition of those schools. Therefore, Minnesota can fashion its own process for identifying these schools.

**RECOMMENDATION 17. Minnesota should recognize high performing schools and, in the process, identify the best practices that distinguish those schools.**

- We recommend a two-stage process. First, eligibility for application would be based on exemplary attendance, graduation rates (if a high school), and achievement (either grade-to-grade





gains in achievement or average achievement). Eligible schools would make application based on evidence of best practices in areas such as those used in the current school improvement program (a) curriculum, (b) instruction, (c) assessment, (d) professional development, (e) parent and community involvement, (f) leadership, (g) governance, and (h) use of resources.

- Demand for enrollment by students outside the school's boundaries may also be a factor considered in the selection of distinguished schools. In the application process, schools must demonstrate use of best practices that can improve other schools.
- High performing schools should receive high profile, public recognition statewide and in their local communities. To the extent that school capacity permits, such recognition can sometimes bring more tangible rewards in the form of increased enrollment. The state may also wish to consider financial programs that directly reward the school or increase the number of children served by distinguished schools (e.g., transportation to such schools, building expansion).

## School Improvement

**RECOMMENDATION 18. Both CFL and the individual districts should continue to develop their school improvement processes. At the state level, the program may need to be revised to encompass intermediate and secondary grades. Factors such as attendance, graduation rate, school safety, and teacher qualifications need to be incorporated into the program.**

- Schools identified as in need of improvement need technical assistance in trying to make necessary improvements, including funds to support those improvements. Minnesota has such a program in place, although it is relatively new and likely to undergo revision based on early experience.
- As the accountability system expands to the high school level, the program will need to be enhanced to encompass the improvement of high school program. Increasingly, the program may need to encompass factors such as student attendance, graduation rates, teacher qualifications, and school safety.

## School Report Cards

Starting with the 2002–03 school year, state test results will be reported to the public in order to hold schools accountable for improving the academic achievement of each and every one of their students. The following information will be on the report card (pending final regulations):

- Student academic achievement on statewide tests, disaggregated





by subgroup (gender, migrant status, LEP status, special education status, ethnicity, and free/reduced-price lunch eligibility)

- A comparison of students at basic, proficient, and advanced levels of academic achievement (these levels are determined by the state.)
- High school graduation rates (how many students drop out of school)
- The number and names of schools identified for improvement
- The professional qualifications of teachers
- The percentages of students not tested, disaggregated
- Two-year trend data by subject, by grade tested

School districts must prepare annual reports for parents and the public on the academic achievement of all schools combined and of each individual school. The school district report cards will include the same information in the state report card. In the case of an individual school, the report card will include whether it has been identified for school improvement and how its students performed on the state test compared to the school district and state as a whole.

**RECOMMENDATION 19. The school report card requirements in the *No Child Left Behind Act* can be met by revising existing information systems to include the required information.**

- These information systems include the CFL website, local district websites, and printed materials distributed by schools and districts to their local communities. CFL should work through various education organizations (e.g., school boards, superintendents, and principals' associations) to inform districts and schools of the required information.

**Unsafe Schools**

One approach to compliance with the unsafe schools provisions of the *No Child Left Behind Act* is to have schools report serious misbehaviors (e.g., suspensions and expulsions) to the state. If the number of serious misbehaviors rises above a specified threshold, the school would be declared an unsafe school.

Because this approach relies on schools reporting their own incidence of misbehaviors, it has some drawbacks. It can encourage schools to protect themselves by under-reporting serious offenses. Schools may under-report by placing serious offenses in less serious categories. If serious offenses are treated less seriously, the actions taken by the school may not fit the offense. Conceivably, an inappropriately light response to serious offenses could make a school *less safe*, contrary to the intent of the legislation. In our review





of the data, the possibility of under-reporting and under-response to serious behavior is sufficiently serious that we recommend a different approach. Schools and districts should report on the frequency of serious disciplinary incidents to the public and CFL, but such reports may not form the best basis for identifying unsafe schools.

**RECOMMENDATION 20. All Minnesota schools are currently required to have a zero tolerance policy toward violence. Schools should also be required to adopt a zero tolerance policy toward drugs and weapons.**

- Each year, an administrative officer for the school should be required to certify a form that explains the policy in writing, with a copy kept on file by the district for public inspection. Should there be a substantial (e.g., non-frivolous) allegation of an incident in which the policy was not upheld, or should there be a felony involving violence, drugs, or weapons on school grounds, and should attempts to resolve the issue within the district fail, a board composed of parents and educators from outside the district should be appointed by CFL. This board would rule upon the question of whether the school failed to uphold its zero tolerance policy in connection with the alleged incident or felony. If the board rules that the policy has not been properly upheld in connection with the incident, the school will be declared an “unsafe” school. The school would be publicly identified as having failed to uphold its policy of zero tolerance. Parents of students attending the school would be notified by letter that the school had been identified as having failed to uphold its zero tolerance policy and, in that same letter, parents would be reminded that, under Minnesota law, their child has the opportunity to attend another school.
- Neighborhoods and local law enforcement agencies also have an important role to play in keeping schools safe. By keeping the neighborhoods around schools safe, community members and law enforcement officials improve not only our schools, but also the routes traveled by students to and from school.

## Teacher Qualifications and Licensure

The *No Child Left Behind* Act defines “highly qualified” teachers as teachers who not only possess full state certification, but also are knowledgeable in their subject area—as if being knowledgeable in the subject area were something over and above the qualifications for licensure. However, knowledge of the subject area(s) taught has always been one of the qualifications for licensure in Minnesota. Broadly speaking, to qualify for licensure, a teacher must be (a) broadly well educated, (b) knowledgeable about teaching methods and student development, and (c) knowledgeable about the subject area(s) that they teach.

According to the Department of Children, Families and Learning, 95% of





Minnesota teachers currently meet the federal definition of highly qualified (Department of Children, Families & Learning, June 2, 2002). In Minnesota, a combination of educational attainment and licensure testing are used to assure these qualifications. Applicants must demonstrate a broad educational background through completion of an accredited baccalaureate (or higher) degree and by successfully passing a licensure test (the Praxis) in basic reading, mathematics, and writing skills (Dwyer, 1993). Much of the coursework for the baccalaureate degree is completed in college or university arts and sciences courses (rather than in education courses) and must be completed at a level of performance that satisfies the requirements set by the faculty in those departments of arts and sciences.

As of 2001, secondary school teachers must also demonstrate knowledge of subject matter by passing a licensure test (the *Praxis*) in their subject area.<sup>4</sup> Applicants for licensure must demonstrate knowledge of subject matter and teaching methods through a combination of higher education coursework and test performance (*Praxis*). Thus, licensure policies would seem to be in place to assure that classroom teachers are highly qualified in the sense that (a) they are broadly and liberally educated, (b) familiar with teaching methods and student development, (c) and knowledgeable in their subject areas.

**RECOMMENDATION 21. Licensure requirements in Minnesota should be maintained at levels that ensure that every classroom in Minnesota is staffed by a highly qualified teacher. High qualifications should be a requirement for licensure, not something over and above licensure.**

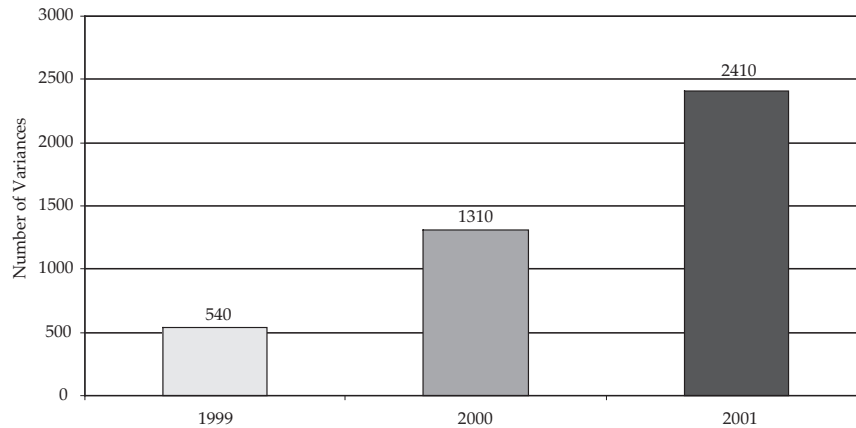
- If there are causes for concern, they stem from implementation of policy, not policy per se. Figure 3 (p. 25) shows the number of teachers with some form of variance from licensure requirements for the past three years. That number is on the rise. While the increases may be due, in part, to better reporting, it still means that Minnesota may be making greater use of staff not fully certified than previously thought. The quality of Minnesota's education system depends heavily on a well-educated, knowledgeable teaching staff (Darling-Hammond, *Educational Leadership*, 1998; Darling-Hammond, *Educational Researcher*, 1998; Walsh, 2001; Laczko-Kerr and Berliner, 2002). The Board of Teaching should review its procedures for the granting of licensure variances to ensure that the granting of such variances does not violate the *No Child Left Behind Act's* intent: to ensure that every classroom is staffed by a highly qualified teacher.
- In higher education, both the departments of arts and sciences and of education have important roles to play in ensuring that Minnesota's K-12 classrooms are staffed by highly qualified teachers. While there has been less discussion of this phenomenon

<sup>4</sup> In some fields, such as vocational education or physical education, some of the subject matter coursework might be taken in departments other than departments of arts and sciences. Also, there are differences between elementary and secondary education. Elementary school teachers take more coursework in educational methods and less coursework in arts and sciences departments.





Figure 3. Number of Reported Teacher Licensure Variances for Academic Years 1999-01



lately, higher education has experienced grade inflation in the past (Kuh and Huh, 1999). Particularly in secondary fields, ensuring that teachers are knowledgeable in their subject areas depends heavily on standards in higher education departments of arts and sciences. Ensuring that teachers are knowledgeable about teaching methods and student development requires high standards in schools and colleges of education. When teacher education programs are reviewed by the Board of Teaching, the review should cover the standards employed both in education courses and in the arts and sciences courses that provide teachers with subject matter knowledge.

**RECOMMENDATION 22.** Recently, *The Pioneer Press and Star Tribune* reported that in a section of the *Praxis* (the teacher licensure test used in Minnesota) covering subject knowledge, the passing score in Minnesota was one of the lowest in the nation.<sup>5</sup> We know of no justification for this. In light of the literature suggesting an association between teacher knowledge and student achievement, we urge the Board of Teaching to reexamine the state’s passing score on the various sections of the *Praxis*.

**RECOMMENDATION 23.** Charter school teachers should be held to the same standards as all other public school teachers.

- Federal legislation allows states to adopt different standards for teachers in charter schools as compared to other public schools. We know of no reason why the qualifications needed by a teacher should be different simply because a public school is of the charter type.

<sup>5</sup> The Education Trust maintains a data search page on their Web site showing the distribution of well-prepared teachers, both across states and by individual state, accessed through <http://204.176.179.36/dc/edtrust/edstart.cfm> (click on the link to “The Ed Watch Interactive State and National Data Site,” then click on “Opportunity” on the menu bar at the top of the page, and choose “Well-Prepared Teachers” from the pull-down list. You can also choose various comparison options from another pulldown menu to the right of the word “Location.”

Also see: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, Office of Policy Planning and Innovation (2002). *Meeting the highly qualified teachers challenge: The secretary’s annual report on teacher quality*. Washington, DC: Author.

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## CONCLUDING REMARKS

States are working to assess and alter their accountability systems to meet the regulations set forth in the *No Child Left Behind Act*. Because Minnesota has no state Board of Education, the revisions of the state accountability system begin with the Department of Children, Families & Learning and the state legislature. With respect to each of these issues, the legislature must decide to what extent it will approve the program in broad outline while leaving the implementation details to CFL, and to what extent the legislature itself will specify details and implementation. The major issues needing the attention of CFL and the legislature jointly are as follows.

- Some provisions in the *No Child Left Behind Act* are more reasonable than others. There needs to be a coordinated effort to work for changes at the national level.
- Federal requirements state that standards must be set in place in reading and mathematics by academic year 2003, and in science by academic year 2005. Minnesota's standards exist in the Preparatory and High Standards of the Profile of Learning. These existing standards, however, must be federally approved, or revised to meet federal regulations. We recommend adoption of the existing standards along with the development of supporting materials to add clarity and grade-by-grade expectations, as necessitated by required annual testing in grades 3–8. Whether the state adopts existing standards or some revision, the standards need to be mandated statewide with a timetable for implementation. Since new tests must be aligned with state standards, the timetable for implementation of any new assessments can only be met if the standards are approved promptly. We presume that such standards will require legislative approval. The federal mandate could be satisfied by approving and mandating standards in reading/language arts, mathematics, and science without mandating standards in other areas or in the performance assessments.
- The state needs to decide whether to build on the existing system of MCAs, or adopt entirely different tests. We recommend building on the existing system, with new tests that are customized norm-referenced tests and that provide measures of student growth from grade to grade. If this path is taken, the legislature will need to approve and fund new tests in mathematics and reading in grades 4, 6, and 8. Eventually, the





legislature will also have to provide funding for the development of science tests, one in grades 3–5, one in grades 6–9, and one in grades 10–12.

- We recommend that the legislature and CFL revise the system by which students meet the basic high school graduation requirements. Currently, students do so by attaining a passing score on the *Basic Skills Test*, first administered in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Because the *BSTs* are tied to minimum competency standards, rather than the rigorous standards envisioned by the USDE, they are unlikely to be approved as meeting federal requirements. Therefore, we suggest that the *BSTs* be discontinued when the new 8<sup>th</sup> grade tests are put into place, and that 8<sup>th</sup> grade students be allowed to demonstrate mastery of basic skills through satisfactory performance on this new test. In our opinion, 8<sup>th</sup> graders should not take two tests (e.g., a *BST* and a new 8<sup>th</sup> grade test). Funds currently used to support the *BSTs* could be reallocated by the legislature to support new assessments designed to satisfy the *No Child Left Behind Act*.
- The state needs to revise its system of identifying schools in need of improvement. This means formulating and approving school expectations for achievement, graduation rate, attendance, etc.; setting a date by which schools are expected to achieve those levels (no later than 2013–14); and implementing a school improvement program for schools that have not reached and are not making adequate progress toward meeting those expectations.
- The state needs to formalize a system for recognizing distinguished schools, either through a new or existing program. Such a program must specify the criteria for the “distinguished” designation as well as the nature of the recognition.

Throughout the process of revising the state’s accountability system, it must be remembered that school accountability is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end: improving Minnesota’s educational system for all students. Improving the education system means more than just improving student achievement as measured by tests, although improving achievement is a major goal. In revising Minnesota’s state accountability system, we must keep our eye on the prize of improved education and a better future for our children. To reach that goal, we must hold the schools accountable for their part in preparing our children.





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