

## MEMORANDUM

To: Superintendents of Schools and Leaders of Charter Schools  
From: Mark K. McQuillan, Deputy Commissioner of Education  
Re: Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Definitions and Clarification  
Date: November 24, 2003

This memorandum explains how Massachusetts' recently updated accountability system works and what this year's Mid-Cycle report on AYP, scheduled for release on December 4, will mean for Massachusetts schools. My purpose in writing it is to clarify the intent of these changes and identify issues that are likely to arise when explaining AYP to school committee members, staff, parents, and the public at large.

### Overview

On December 4, the Massachusetts Department of Education will release its second report on the progress that schools are making to improve student achievement under the accountability provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). This report, "Cycle III Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Determinations," uses MCAS results from May 2003 and comparable data from previous MCAS administrations. These findings are embedded within a new accountability framework that merges existing state regulations with those now required by federal law.

With the passage of NCLB, all states must now comply with the federal expectation that every student will become proficient in reading and mathematics by 2014. All educators are now held to high professional standards, and virtually every subgroup of students is expected to achieve at high levels.

The emphasis on subgroup achievement signals Congress's seriousness about overcoming the achievement gaps that have historically separated this nation's ethnic and racial groups. Ever since the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) began publishing its findings in 1967, the performance gaps between White, African-American, Hispanic, and Asian students have remained largely unchanged, with children of color performing substantially below their White counterparts. NCLB deliberately sets out to erase these gaps, as well as the gaps that separate students with disabilities from general education students. As its very title suggests, this is the essential message of No Child Left Behind.

### Purposes

The data provided in this first-of-a-kind report are intended to stimulate systemic change by requiring school leaders to look diagnostically at the achievement of all learners and to take immediate action when any subgroup does not make AYP. In this sense, each finding of not making AYP is meant to provide an early warning of possible problems in the school or district that can be addressed by focusing resources and attention to the

areas and/or groups highlighted. The planning requirements built into the law, moreover, are specifically aimed at getting school leaders to think strategically about how best to mobilize people, time, and money to bring about the improvements needed. This is why a finding of “No AYP” does not necessarily mean failure but is instead a starting point for getting better.

This mid-cycle report is fundamentally a call for effective teaching and differentiated instruction for the full spectrum of learners in our districts. Looking at the learning performances of each student population, as this report does, encourages us to analyze, in even greater depth than we have in the past, what changes in instruction will be needed to bring about improvement. Together with the diagnostic information we have from the MCAS, these AYP findings can and should point us in the direction of improved teaching.

### The NCLB Accountability System

No Child Left Behind requires us to set as a goal that all students become “proficient” in reading and mathematics by 2014. To meet this goal, all schools must meet certain performance objectives each year and schools receiving Title I funds face consequences if they fail to make “adequate yearly progress” (AYP). When a school does not make AYP for two consecutive years, parents must be given the choice of enrolling their child in another school in the district that *has* met its annual target. NCLB sanctions start with “choice,” move through “supplemental services” and “corrective action,” and culminate with a district being compelled to develop plans for “restructuring” if a school fails to make AYP for six consecutive years. Under the provisions of NCLB, “restructuring” can mean being placed under state control, reconstituted as a charter school, assigned to a private management group, or re-staffed with new teachers and administrators.

### Massachusetts’ Accountability System

Massachusetts introduced a similar system of accountability in 1999, but with different terms, timelines, and sanctions. Under state law, school districts and individual schools that do not meet certain performance expectations on MCAS exams during a two-year cycle may, depending on the nature and severity of the achievement gaps observed, be referred for state intervention. Schools with “very low” or “critically low” performance, for example, may be designated for “panel reviews” by a team of evaluation specialists. As a result of this review, a low-achieving school might be placed on “academic watch” or be declared “underperforming.”

If a declaration of underperformance is made, the school goes through a detailed process of analysis to determine the root causes of its low performance. A “fact-finding team” is appointed by the Commissioner to report to the Board of Education on the reasons for the school’s underperformance, and prospects for its improvement.

School officials then present a two-year improvement plan to the Board, outlining what they intend to do to address the low academic achievement. After two years, if the school does not live up to its improvement plan goals, the Board may declare the school to be

“chronically underperforming,” granting to the school’s principal expanded legal powers to facilitate needed reforms.

### Integrating the Two Systems: Caveats

The differences between state and federal accountability system requirements have, for the most part, been sorted out. While the two systems have been substantially integrated, Massachusetts and federal law terms and sanctions are not interchangeable. Schools that are declared to be “in need of improvement,” for example, are not “underperforming schools,” as that term is used in Massachusetts. Schools identified for “corrective action” under NCLB, moreover, may have already taken steps to comply with the new federal law. No school in Massachusetts has reached a point where it must plan for “restructuring,” no school has been declared “chronically underperforming,” and to date only eighteen schools have been formally declared to be “underperforming.”

It is important that we not improperly label a school as “failing” when, in fact, it may be at the first stage of needing to make changes to get stronger.

### Understanding Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

The misunderstanding that may surface as Massachusetts begins to incorporate NCLB into its own accountability language is a matter of genuine concern. But more immediately, everyone will need to understand what it means for a school to not make adequate yearly progress, or AYP. It is this determination, and not the sanctions per se, that will form the substance of the mid-cycle report.

AYP is a statement of whether or not a school has met its annual performance target for reading and mathematics, starting from a baseline established in 2002. Each school must make adequate yearly progress towards “proficiency” for all students in each of these subject areas. As noted earlier, progress must be made each year between now and 2014. Schools will face sanctions if progress flattens or declines for two or more consecutive years.

AYP is determined by reviewing four different sets of data. It involves analyzing students’ MCAS scores in both English language arts and mathematics, as well as two other factors; (1) the percentage of students taking each MCAS examination and (2) school attendance (for elementary schools) or graduation rate (for high schools). Each school receives performance scores on two indices of academic success; (1) whether it is performing at a level on or above the performance standard set for all schools in Massachusetts for reading and mathematics; and (2) whether it has made sufficient improvement, relative to its baseline performance, to suggest that it will eventually catch up and meet the proficiency standard by 2014 if the rate of improvement continues. A successful score on either “performance” or “improvement” will result in a finding of “Yes” on AYP, provided that satisfactory findings have also been posted for test-taking percentages, school attendance, and graduation.

The report includes AYP determinations for mathematics and English language arts for all of the subgroups that make up a school's student population—Hispanic, Asian, African-American, White, students with disabilities, students with limited English proficiency, and students in receipt of free or reduced lunches--as well as students in the aggregate. As required by NCLB, AYP determinations must be reported for each district, each school, and each subgroup for both subject areas, with the result being that each school and district will be given up to sixteen separate findings. Taken together, these findings are intended to provide a diagnosis of strengths, weaknesses, and areas in need of special attention.

### Sample Size

As a diagnostic tool, the mid-cycle AYP reports offer a fine-grained analysis of how well each subgroup has performed, as well as a broad-gauged look at the effectiveness of a school's or district's reading and/or mathematics programs. When sample size is less than 20, information on a subgroup's performance will not be reported. In such instances, blank cells will appear on the report indicating an insufficient sample size. District findings will in some cases vary from those of the district's schools. For example, there will be instances where no individual school has sufficient subgroup numbers to warrant an AYP determination. When added up for the district as a whole, the subgroups' sample size may be large enough to generate a district AYP determination.

### Staying Focused on Instruction

NCLB has staked out a very ambitious and aggressive plan for improving our nation's schools. I ask you to join me in exploring how best we can continue to improve, and how we can focus discussion on instruction rather than dwelling too long on NCLB's sanctions.

Sanctions have their place in any accountability system, but at this turning point, I believe we need to accentuate what we are doing well now and what we still must do to address the needs of all our students.

I look forward to meeting and talking further with you about these results in the weeks and months ahead.