

# THE ACCOUNTABILITY ILLUSION

The No Child Left Behind act (NCLB) aims to hold schools accountable for ensuring that all students in grades 3 through 8 are proficient in reading and math by 2014. But many details are left up to the states – including the complex set of rules used to measure whether schools make “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) under the law. While it’s well known that these standards and rules differ greatly across states, until now it’s been difficult to judge the effect they have on results, particularly on the AYP labeling of individual schools.

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute’s latest report, *The Accountability Illusion*, sheds light on this issue. It asks: “What if a real school was measured by the NCLB rules of, say, Texas, and then that same school was plopped down in Minnesota, Illinois, New Jersey or Massachusetts and measured by their NCLB rules? Would the same school clear the AYP bar in some of these states and miss the mark in others?” The answer, in a nutshell, is yes. Analysts from the Kingsbury Center at Northwest Evaluation Association measured 36 real schools by the varying NCLB rules of some 28 states and found that a school’s label under NCLB depends as much on location as on performance.

*“This report’s crucial finding is that – contrary to what the average American likely believes – there is no common, nationwide accountability system for measuring school performance under NCLB. The AYP system is idiosyncratic, even random and opaque,” said Chester E. Finn, Jr., President of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. “Without a common standard to help determine whether a given school is successful or not, its fate under NCLB is determined by a set of arcane rules created by each state.”*

## A few key findings

“Adequate Yearly Progress” ratings vary widely, particularly for elementary schools. Almost all elementary schools in the sample fail to make AYP in some states while nearly all of these identical schools make AYP in others.

In Massachusetts – a state that ensures students have to score high in order to be considered proficient and one with relatively challenging annual targets and AYP rules – only one of 18 elementary schools was projected to make AYP. In Wisconsin, with lower proficiency standards and more lenient annual targets and rules, 17 schools were projected to do so. Same kids, same schools – different states, different rules.

In short, how a school is labeled under NCLB

depends largely on the state in which it’s located. This can demoralize educators in states with tough AYP rules while letting under-performing schools in lenient states slip under the accountability radar screen. It also creates the illusion of a national accountability system where there isn’t one.

States in which 10 or more of the 18 elementary schools examined would have made AYP: Arizona, California, Michigan, Texas and Wisconsin

States in which only one or two of the same 18 elementary schools would have made AYP: Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Massachusetts, Nevada, North Dakota, Washington and Wyoming