

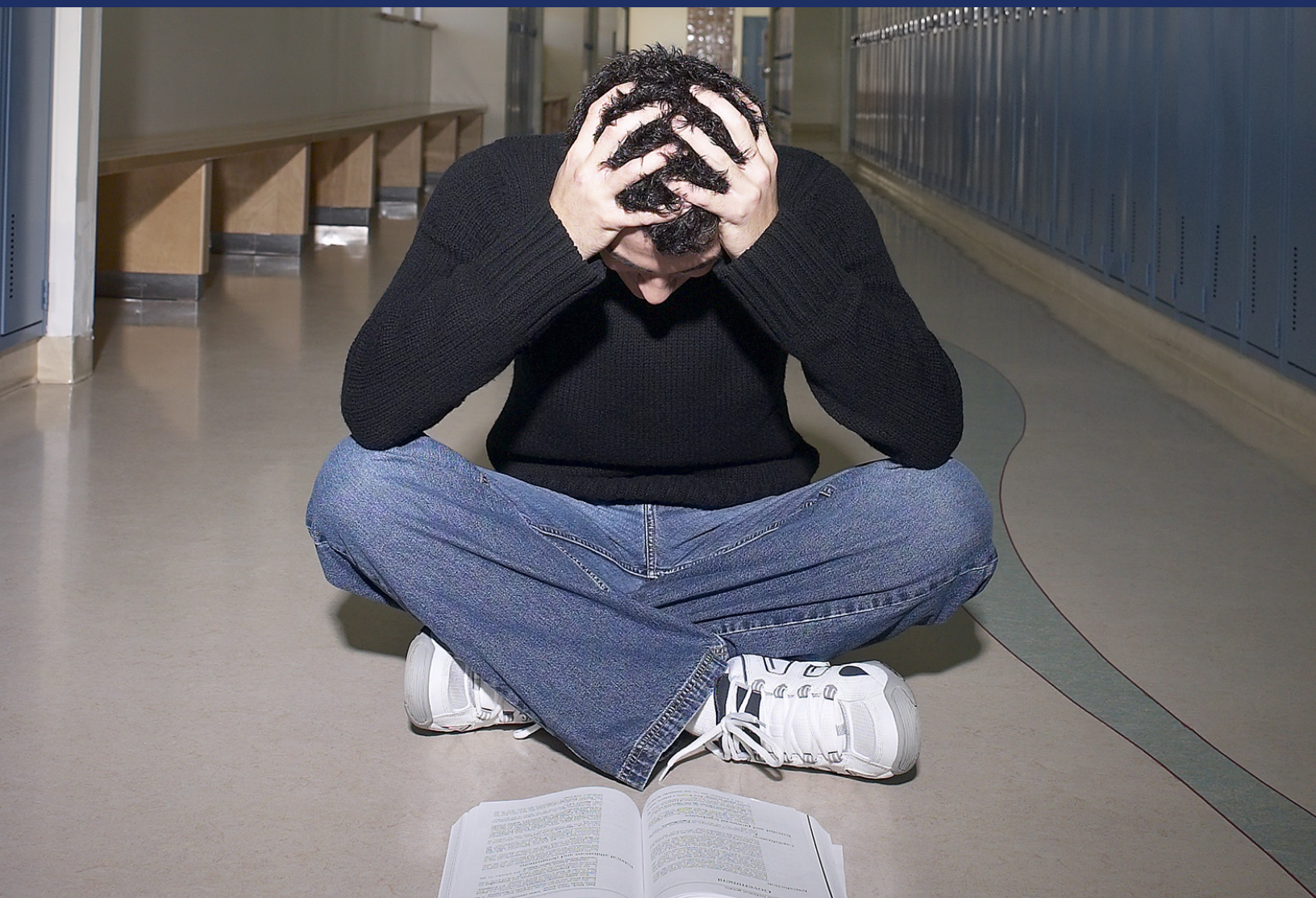
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MINNESOTA SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

SURVEYED ON “NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND”

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Minnesota 2020 Fellow

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Executive Summary

There are about 1,800 principals in Minnesota. Each oversees a school that has been affected by the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law. While NCLB was created in Washington D.C., it has permeated education down into each classroom. NCLB has forced principals to make draconian choices to meet NCLB requirements, choices made more difficult in Minnesota's atmosphere of declining funding and diminished results.

In December, 2008, Minnesota 2020 joined with the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association (MESPA) and the Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals (MASSP) to conduct a survey of principals. More than 740 MESPA and MASSP members participated in the online, opt-in poll. This survey allowed principals to give voice to their misgivings of the NCLB law, which is up for reauthorization in Congress. The survey found that:

- Almost every respondent said that NCLB's main goal – 100 percent proficiency in tests by 2014 – is unattainable. Ninety seven percent of principals say schools will not meet mandated No Child Left Behind compliance by 2014.
- NCLB forces schools to teach to the test. To improve their standardized test scores, 71 percent say they are spending more time and resources on test preparation; 40 percent say they have taken away class time from arts and other subjects; and 60 percent say they have reallocated professional development monies to focus on test subjects.
- NCLB affects community understanding of their schools. Seventy five percent say their community does not have a good idea of what Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is, yet 65 percent say AYP colors the community's perception of their school.
- NCLB's testing requirements for special education students and students who don't speak English are unrealistic and set schools up for failure. Many schools fail to make AYP because of how special education and non-English speaking students perform on the standardized test. Almost 90 percent of the principals say special education students should not be tested at grade level, while 88 percent feel the same about Limited English Proficient students.
- The NCLB test, MCA-II, is an ineffective measure of student development. Only 15.5 percent of principals say the MCA-II is an effective assessment of student achievement. More than 96 percent said that an assessment that measures student growth over many years is more useful than the MCA-II. Principals also overwhelmingly agree that the MCA-II is not an effective enough assessment to measure teacher or administrator performance.

**Will all schools meet
AYP standards
by 2014?**

**No
97.3%**

**Yes
2.7%**

Principals have a lot on their plates: The state has cut school funding 14 percent since 2003, forcing principals to join superintendents and other administrators to become cheerleaders and fundraisers in addition to educators. More than 90 percent of school districts rely on local referendums to meet basic operating needs. Economic and cultural diversity has combined with a burgeoning special education population to make the student body an entirely different institution than it was a generation ago. One half of all teachers leave their first positions within five years, making principals spend a large amount of their time hiring new teachers or working with their district's human resource officer. Principals are responsible for the safety of their students and the well-being of their faculty.

It is in this arena that NCLB creates tension. The job of an educator is difficult enough without having to work with a program that has dubious results.

“This is an extremely narrow and misguided attempt to improve education. More art! More music! More group problem solving and community service to really prepare students for the next century of work and self improvement in a vast chasm between the haves and the have nots!” one principal wrote.

What Principals are Saying

“NCLB’s goals are as unreasonable as expecting that if we all practice bowling enough we’ll all bowl 300s within a few years. I believe in high expectations, but high does not mean unreasonable or impossible.”

“The people making ridiculous decisions like ‘all students will be proficient by 2014’ are welcome to come to my school any day so that I can introduce them to each of the students who won’t be proficient by 2014, despite making individual progress and personal gains. It is a nice thought, but not at all realistic in the trenches.”

“To say a school is failing because they haven’t made AYP is just silly. Some schools are making AYP in all but one of two cells, this does not reflect an entire school population.”

“When all your time is directed to test preparation, the students lose out on problem-solving skills, critical thinking skills, creativity, multiple methods for learning, outside resources of learning, and the destruction of the desire to be a life long learner.”

“NCLB and AYP are a big joke and education needs to be changed. The expectations set forth by the federal government will never be accomplished for many schools. Governments need to look at spending money on schools for necessary items, not all of this ridiculous testing waste of time.

“If reauthorized in its current form, NCLB will show the public school system to be a failure, therefore paving the way for vouchers, internet schools, private school bailout, etc. Be careful when NCLB is redone. If the educational system of a country fails, the country usually follows suit shortly there after.”

Recommendations

It is wrong to use Title I funding – meant to help low-income students – as a punishment for not meeting NCLB guidelines. Unless Title I funding is removed as the stick for compliance, Minnesota should opt out of NCLB. NCLB has an unattainable end result. Unless the 2014 compliance requirement is changed, Minnesota should drop out of NCLB.

Tracking student achievement is a valuable goal, but the MCA-II is of limited value for this task. Because it is offered only once per year, it has become a high stakes test that forces principals to curtail some subjects in favor of others, thus perverting the very idea of a quality, well-rounded education. MCA-II should be abandoned in favor of formative assessments that measure individual student progress.

It is wrong to hold special education and non-English speaking students to the same standards as other students. These students should be tested with other students and the results should be included with the main body, but they should be tested at appropriate grade or age levels.

Teachers and administrators value and welcome transparency and accountability. The MCA-II is of limited value for transparency and accountability. It is wrong to measure student growth – and potentially teacher and administrator performance – using a single high-stakes standardized test. Until an effective measurement is created and implemented, the MCA-II should not be used as a measure of teacher or administrator effectiveness.

NCLB also has skewed the public’s perception of their schools as “failing.” NCLB needs to be replaced with an assessment system that accurately reflects school performance, not distorts it.

Introduction

The No Child Left Behind law, signed in 2001 by President George W. Bush, is the latest reauthorization of the sweeping Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 which brought reform to schools across the nation.

One of ESEA's chief reforms was Title I, which allocated money to schools that have a high percentage of students from low-income families. Title I money is used for remedial education and to hire additional teachers and classroom aides, extend learning time for students who need extra help and provide other practices tied to student achievement. Typically, a school receives Title I money if about 40 percent of students qualify for free or reduced price school lunches. About 43 percent of Minnesota schools qualified for Title I aid in 2008.

ESEA undergoes reauthorization nearly every five years. The 2001 reauthorization renamed the law No Child Left Behind and sought, among other things, to increase accountability for states, schools districts and schools. It enshrined a philosophy called "outcome based education," which assumes that high standards and measurable goals will result in improved education.

Half of Minnesota schools don't make AYP

The NCLB law requires every school to reach "100 percent achievement" by 2014, and to implement a test that shows their progress toward that goal. Test results are disaggregated into subgroups including American Indian, African-American, Asian, Hispanic, white, special education, limited English proficiency and free and reduced price lunch students. When a school shows proficiency in the test, it is said to make "adequate yearly progress." To make AYP, a percentage of each subgroup must take the test, and a percentage must show proficiency. The number of students that must show proficiency grows each year until the 2014 goal of 100 percent proficiency.

Minnesota education officials developed the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment-II (MCA-II) as their NCLB measurement. While students have done well on the test, the "rising bar" has spotlighted NCLB's failure: In 2005, 247 Minnesota schools did not meet AYP; in 2006, 483 schools came up short; in 2007, 729 failed; and in 2008, 937 of the state's 1,920 schools didn't make AYP.

Title I funds held hostage

Failure to meet AYP leads to an ever-increasing set of punishments, starting in the first year with notifying parents of the school's status; in the second year the school must offer public money to private tutors; and within five years, sanctions can lead to the complete restructuring of the school's leadership. After failing AYP, schools must pass AYP for two years in a row to remove any sanctions.

The catch is that the law is federal, and the U.S. government holds the purse strings to Title I aid. Therefore, any failure of AYP results in federal money being diverted from Title I aid. While all Minnesota schools take the MCA-II and report the results, it is only schools that receive Title I aid that undergo sanctions. Therefore, for schools in wealthier districts, NCLB is nothing more than a public relations black eye.

Yet another catch is that all subgroups must pass AYP for the school to pass AYP. This requirement was meant to help close the achievement gap between white students and minority groups. By all accounts, this goal has raised awareness of the achievement gap. However, NCLB also requires schools to test non-English speakers and special education students at grade level, when many of these students cannot perform up to these levels.

Therefore, many of the schools that do not make AYP fail only because one of these two groups didn't pass the test. This study shows that 89.5 percent of Minnesota principals say special education students should not be tested at grade level, while 87.9 percent say Limited English Proficient (LEP) students shouldn't be tested at grade level.

Previous reports spotlight NCLB flaws

This is not the first time NCLB's flaws have come to light. In 2004, Minnesota's non-partisan Office of the Legislative Auditor wrote "Even if Minnesota students' math and reading test scores improve significantly in coming years, there will likely be large increases in the number of schools failing to make AYP. ... More than 80 percent of Minnesota elementary schools would not make AYP by 2014, according to a simulation conducted for our office."

The Minnesota School Administrators Association has asked school districts to approve a resolution calling on the federal government to revise NCLB with a less punitive approach that doesn't affect at-risk students. NCLB is a mandate that creates financial stress on districts that are already horribly strapped for cash. The resolution calls for Minnesota's withdrawal from NCLB if it isn't revised by October 2010.

In 2007, Minnesota 2020 and Macalester College surveyed teachers in Eastern Carver County about their attitudes toward NCLB. The survey found that 65 percent of teachers said AYP goals do not lead to school improvement; more than 65 percent said NCLB increases teacher focus on students just under the passing score at the expense of other students; only 13 percent say NCLB sanctions improve teaching; and about 88 percent believe NCLB has caused teachers to ignore important aspects of the curriculum.

To meet the demands of NCLB, schools are compelled to reallocate resources to math and reading at the expense of other subjects, including science and civics. In this survey, 71 percent of principals said they are spending more time and resources on test preparation; 60 percent said they have reallocated development money to NCLB issues; and 40 percent said they have taken class time away from the arts and other subjects because of NCLB.

Since NCLB's inception, there have been calls for Minnesota to opt out of the law. The state receives more than \$200 million each year in federal funds that would be lost if Minnesota does not comply with NCLB guidelines. In a period when Minnesota state aid to schools has dropped at least 14 percent, education leaders are desperate to keep NCLB funds.

NCLB was up for reauthorization in 2007 but has yet to be heard in Congress.

Findings

This survey was conducted jointly by Minnesota 2020, MESPA and MASS. It was created using an on-line opt-in survey tool. An e-mail was sent to all active, employed MESPA and MASSP members on Nov. 20, 2008 inviting them to participate. 748, or 40 percent of e-mail recipients, responded before the survey closed Jan. 1, 2009. Respondents were guaranteed anonymity.

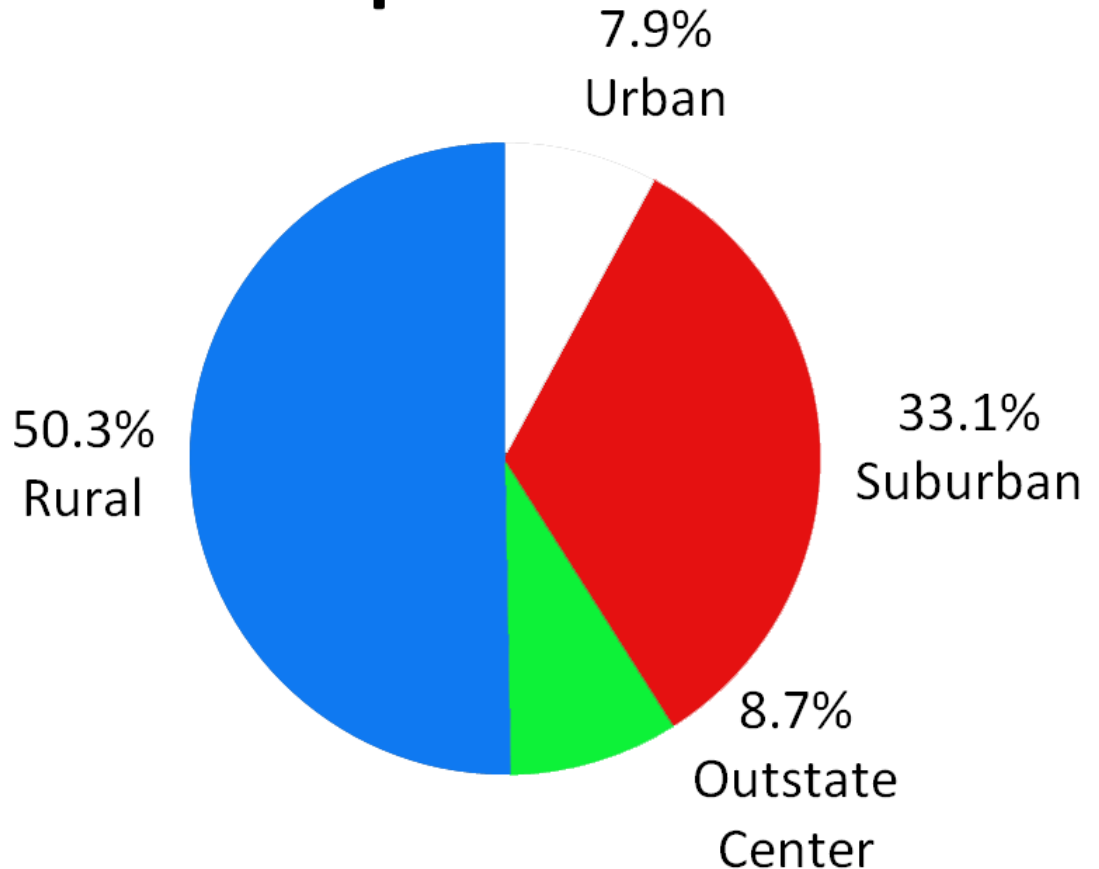
Principals were asked to describe where they worked. Nearly eight percent said they worked at urban schools, 33 percent at suburban schools, about 8 percent at outstate regional centers and approximately 50 percent in rural districts.

In addition, 42 percent are elementary school principals, 17 percent are junior high/middle school principals, 32 percent are high school principals, and 9 percent are K-12 and other school principals.

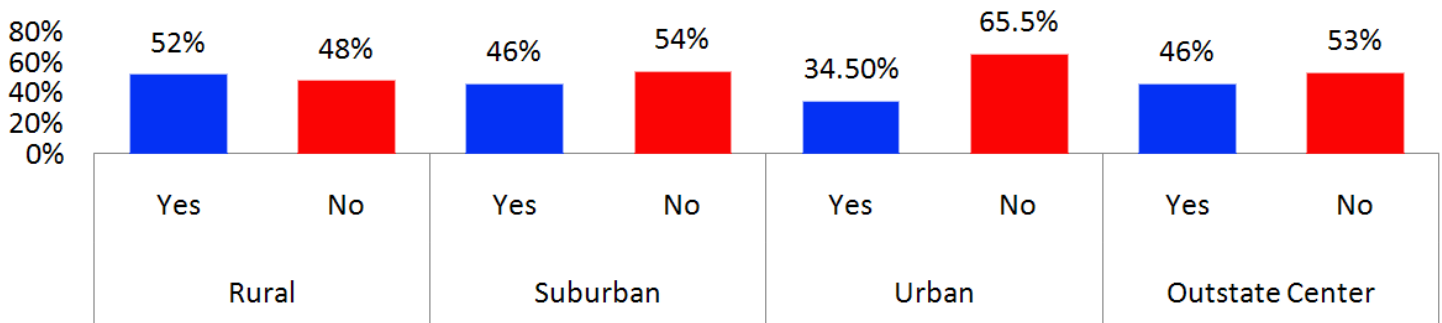
Most work in districts with fewer than 5,000 students. Approximately 27 percent said they worked in districts with fewer than

1,000 students, 36.4 percent at districts with between 1,000 and 5,000 students, 14 percent at districts with between 5,000 and 10,000 students, 10 percent at districts with between 10,000 and 20,000 students, and 12 percent at districts with more than 20,000 students.

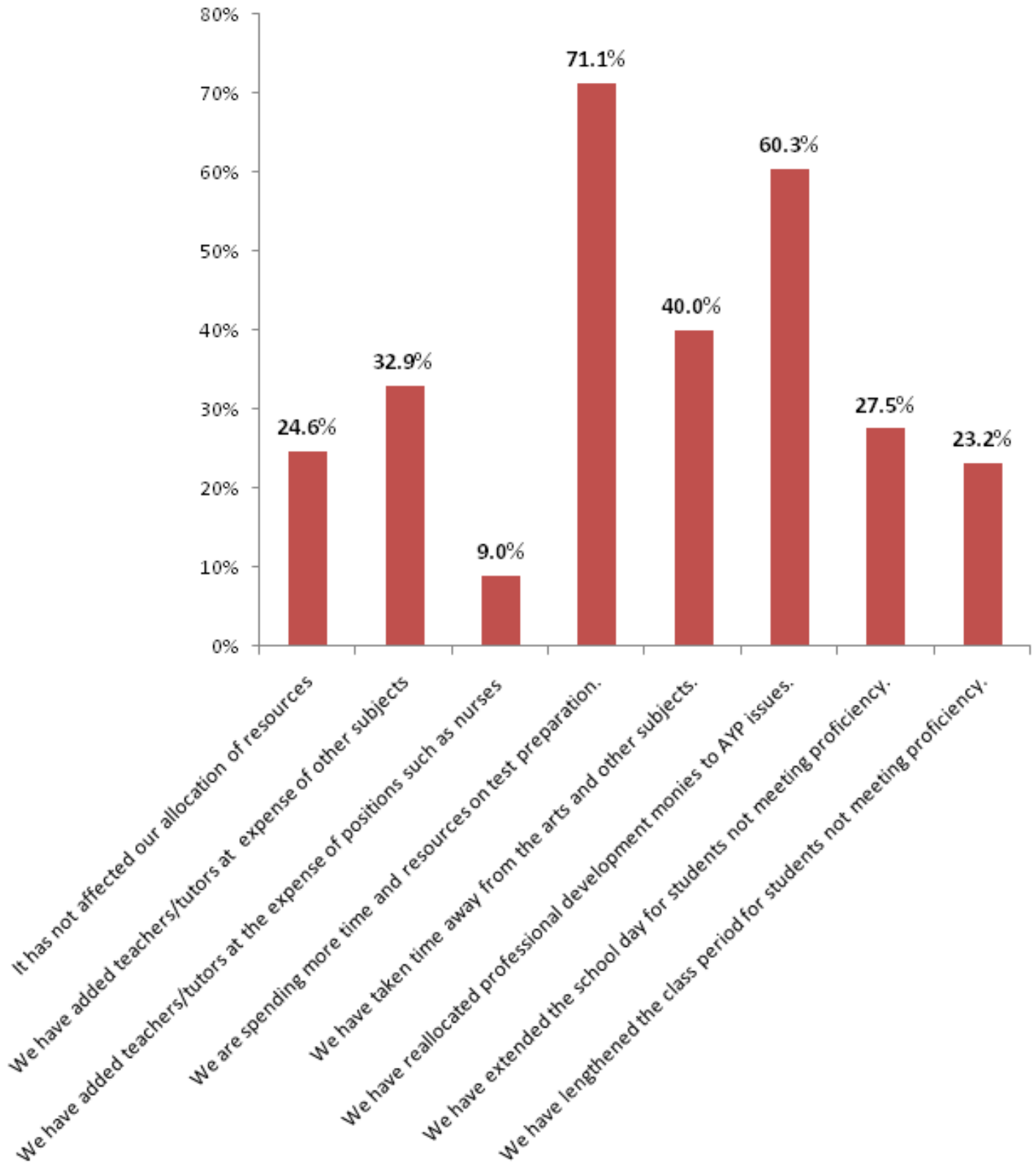
Participant Location



Did your school "make" Adequate Yearly Progress last year?



How has your AYP standing affected allocation of resources?

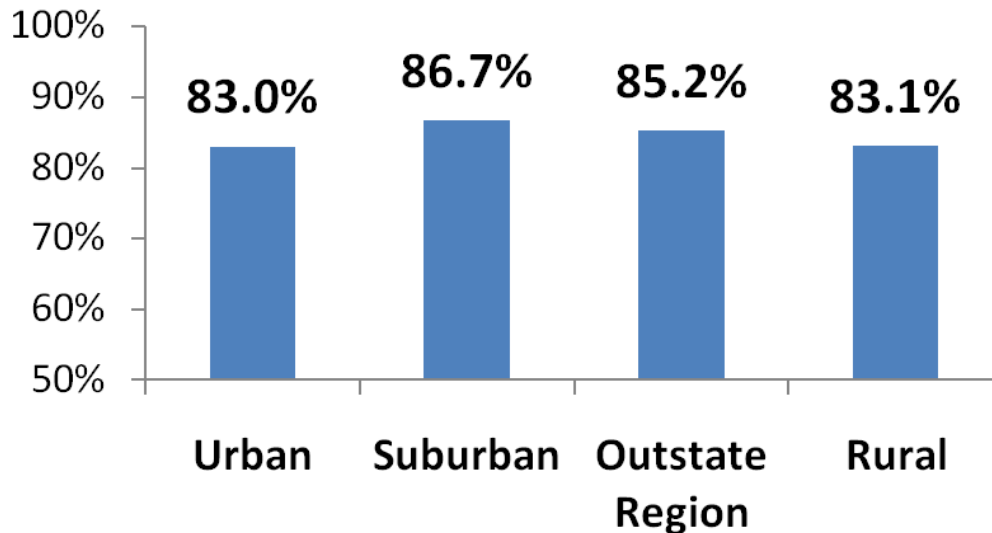


More than half the principals led schools that did not “make” Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the NCLB guidelines in 2008, that is, 48.1 percent said they made AYP, 51.9 percent said they did not. Statewide, the numbers were flipped with 51 percent passing and 48 percent failing.

Three-quarters of the principals say they don’t believe their communities have an accurate idea of what AYP means, yet nearly the same amount say AYP affects how the community perceives their school.

More than half the principals say they have diverted resources that would have gone to other needs to NCLB test preparation, adding to the claims that schools are “teaching to the test.”

Agreed: The MCA-II is not an effective gauge of student achievement



Nearly every principal agreed that NCLB’s goal of 100 percent compliance with AYP standards by 2014 is not achievable. 97.3 percent said schools will not meet this goal, while 2.7 said they would. However, only 46.9 percent said Minnesota should shelve NCLB despite the loss of the federal funds that come with it.

Minnesota’s gauge of AYP is the MCA-II test, administered every spring. Only 15.5 percent of principals said the test is an effective assessment of student achievement.

Some consideration has been given to using the MCA-II to assess the quality of each

teacher and the building’s administration. More than 70 percent said the MCA-II is not an appropriate measure of a teacher’s competence, while about 71 percent said the assessment is not an appropriate measure of a building or administrator’s competence.

When asked which type of assessment they prefer, roughly 20 percent said Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA)-type of formative assessment with immediate results, nearly 12 percent said assessments that measure individual student progress over time from year to year, and 67 percent said they want both.

More than 96 percent said that an assessment that measures student growth over a year is more useful for instructional purposes than the MCA-II. The Minnesota Department of Education is currently working on such an assessment.

With certain exceptions, special education and LEP students must test at grade level. Many schools fail to make AYP because of how special education and LEP students perform on the MCA-II. Most principals see this as a problem. Eighty nine percent said special education students should not be tested at grade level, while approximately 88 percent said LEP students shouldn’t be tested at grade level.

Conclusion

It is clear that NCLB is a broken program. Its attempt to use a high-stakes test to increase school accountability has led not to better accountability, but to an ever-growing list of schools that can't meet NCLB's unrealistic standards.

In this survey, almost every principal said schools can't meet NCLB goals by the 2014 deadline of 100 percent compliance.

NCLB affects the perception of schools within their community. Seventy-five percent of principals say that while the community doesn't have a good idea of what AYP is, 65 percent say AYP has colored the community's perception – nearly 30 percent say that perception is now worse.

Minnesota's principals believe they have been forced to adjust education to meet the demands of the NCLB test. They say they are spending more time and resources on test preparation and have reallocated professional development monies to focus on test subjects.

They say that the pressures put to special education students and those students with limited English proficiency are unrealistic.

While principals welcome and embrace accountability, high-stakes tests must give way to better assessments such as those that chart the growth of students over each year.

Assessments and their results should also treat special education and LEP students fairly. Asking them to test at grade level is not realistic. They need to show growth against previous levels, not against peers.

NCLB has become a negative public relations campaign when AYP results are released each year. Surely, throwing mud at a school is not an incentive to provide a better education for Minnesota students.

Most important, Title I funds should never be held hostage to a political program. Money that is meant to help low-income children learn how to read is not an appropriate incentive.

Accountability is a good thing, but NCLB is not. Too much time, money and effort has been wasted on a program that has shown so few results.

Accountability, yes. NCLB, no.

Data

How would you describe your district?

Answer Options	Response Frequency
Urban	7.9%
Suburban	33.1%
Outstate regional center	8.7%
Rural	50.3%

How many students are in your district (ADM)?

Answer Options	Response Frequency
Less than 1,000	27.2%
1,000-5,000	36.4%
5,000-10,000	14.1%
10,000-20,000	10.2%
More than 20,000	12.1%

Is your building

Answer Options	Response Frequency
Elementary	42.0%
Junior/Middle	17.0%
High School	31.9%
ALC	2.2%
K-8	2.2%
9-12	4.8%

Does your school qualify for Title 1 support?

Answer Options	Response Frequency
Yes	54.8%
No	45.2%

Did your school "make" Adequate Yearly Progress last year?

Answer Options	Response Frequency
Yes	48.1%
No	51.9%

Do you believe your community has a good idea of what AYP means?

Answer Options	Response Frequency
Yes	24.6%
No	75.4%

Do you believe your AYP status affects how the community perceives your school?

Answer Options	Response Frequency
Yes	67.7%
No	32.3%

How have AYP results changed the community's perception of your school?

Answer Options	Response Frequency
The perception is better	9.2%
The perception is worse	29.2%
The perception is about the same.	61.6%

How has your AYP standing affected your allocation of resources? Check all that apply.

Answer Options	Response Frequency
It has not affected our allocation of resources	24.6%
We have added reading and math teachers/tutors at the expense of other subjects	32.9%
We have added reading and math teachers/tutors at the expense of other non-educational positions such as nurses and custodians	9.0%
We are spending more time and resources on test preparation.	71.1%
We have taken time away from the arts and other subjects.	40.0%
We have reallocated professional development monies to AYP issues.	60.3%
We have extended the school day for students not meeting proficiency.	27.5%
We have lengthened the class period for reading and math for students not meeting proficiency.	23.2%

All schools must meet AYP standards by 2014. Will all schools meet this goal?

Answer Options	Response Frequency
Yes	2.7%
No	97.3%

Should Minnesota drop out of No Child Left Behind despite the loss of federal funds?

Answer Options	Response Frequency
Yes	46.9%
No	53.1%

Do you think it is appropriate to use a student's academic progress as a measure of a teacher's competence?

Answer Options	Response Frequency
Yes	29.6%
No	70.4%

Do you think it is appropriate to use a student's progress as a measure of a building's, and thus an administrator's, competence?

Answer Options	Response Frequency
Yes	28.3%
No	71.7%

Is the MCA-II an effective gauge of student academic achievement?

Answer Options	Response Frequency
Yes	15.5%
No	84.5%

Which assessment measure do you prefer?

Answer Options	Response Frequency
NWEA-type of formative assessment with immediate results.	20.6%
Assessments that measure individual student progress over time from year to year.	11.9%
Both	67.5%

Do you think an assessment which measures individual student growth over a year is more useful for instructional purposes than the MCA II?

Answer Options	Response Frequency
Yes	96.7%
No	3.3%

Many schools fail AYP because most special education students must test at grade level. Do you think special education students should be tested at grade level?

Answer Options	Response Frequency
Yes	10.5%
No	89.5%

Many schools fail AYP because many limited English proficient students can't test at grade level. Do you think limited English proficient students should be tested at grade level?

Answer Options	Response Frequency
Yes	12.1%
No	87.9%