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## Accountability Conflicts Vex Schools

By David J. Hoff  
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Gove Elementary School is one of Florida's "schools on the rise," according to the state accountability system, and John Glenn Middle School of International Studies is one of California's three model schools for grades 6-8.

But neither earns a passing mark under new federal accountability rules.

The contradictory experiences of the two schools on opposite coasts is common, now that states with existing accountability systems must also issue school report cards under the No Child Left Behind Act. The mixed messages, state officials say, may deflect attention from improvement, and make it hard for administrators to explain why schools receive positive and negative report cards—sometimes simultaneously.

For educators, the conflicting results can be a major headache, or a lesson in what needs to happen to reach all students.

"It's a huge investment of time in damage control," said Roger L. Marcum, the superintendent of the 3,000-student Marion County district in central Kentucky. One of the district's elementary schools met its state goal this year, but failed to make "adequate yearly progress" under the federal law.

"In a state like Kentucky, where we've been working at this for 14 years, I don't see much value added" by the federal accountability system, Mr. Marcum said.

But for the principals at Florida's Gove Elementary and California's John Glenn Middle School, the bad news on the federal report card gave them reason to pay attention to the children who haven't reached proficiency.

"Some very positive things came out of it," said Carole J. Ferraud, the principal of John Glenn Middle School, a 1,355-student magnet school in Indio, Calif., about 90 miles east of Los Angeles. "It made my staff sit back and say: 'What are we doing with our English-learner kids.' "

But many state leaders—particularly ones in states that started their own accountability systems before the federal measure became law in 2002—say they aren't happy about issuing separate grades to schools.

"The states that were ahead of the No Child Left Behind ballgame have had the most difficult time implementing this," said Jack O'Connell, California's superintendent of public instruction.

Despite such complaints, the states have been able to make the two systems work together, said one of the federal law's advocates.

"There's been a little bit of change for every state," said Chrys Dougherty, the research director for the National Center for Educational Accountability, an Austin, Texas-based group that is helping states analyze and publish accountability data.

"It's created challenges, but they are challenges that states can overcome," he said.

## **Different Philosophies**

Educational accountability rose to prominence in the 1990s. As part of Kentucky's court-ordered overhaul of its schools, the Bluegrass State devised a testing system designed to identify failing schools and successful ones.

Many states followed suit, usually choosing grading systems that reward schools for showing gains in student achievement.

The 2- year-old No Child Left Behind law, a revision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act first enacted in 1965, added a new wrinkle to accountability. The law requires schools to show adequate yearly progress—or AYP toward having all children reach proficiency in reading and mathematics by 2014. The results are based on testing students in grades 3-8 and once in high school.

Moreover, to be deemed making adequate gains, every demographic subgroup of a school's population must make progress toward proficiency. That means a school must reach students of all racial and ethnic groups, as well as students with disabilities and those learning English.

Twenty-one states are maintaining their own accountability systems while also complying with the federal law, according to an *Education Week* survey of state policies. Most are continuing to emphasize improving test scores, while also issuing separate grades based on the federal accountability requirements.

The different state and federal philosophies have led to dramatically different results.

When Florida released its state accountability results last year, it highlighted Gove Elementary, in Belle Glade, and three other elementary schools for their rapid rise under the state's system. But Gove and two others on the list didn't reach their AYP goals.

Overall, 47 percent of Florida schools received grades of A on the state system, and another 22 percent scored a B. Only 6 percent had a D or F. Yet, nearly 90 percent of the state's schools did not make AYP goals.

While the story in other states isn't as dramatic, in just about every one, a higher proportion of schools come up short under the federal rules than under the state's rules.

In Kentucky, for example, 60 percent of the state's 1,100 schools reached their federal AYP goals.

Nonetheless, 120 of the 583 schools that met the state's accountability goals failed to reach their AYP targets. Of those 120 schools, 78 were put on the AYP lists because they didn't reach the goal for just one of the subgroups.

In California last year, 78 percent of schools met the state's "academic performance index" goal of increasing test scores by 5 percent. Yet, just 55 percent of the state's schools achieved adequate progress under the federal rules.

The federal plan sets "a static bar, and I'd characterize it as arbitrary," said Mr. O'Connell, the state's elected schools chief and a former Democratic state lawmaker. "They want everybody over that bar."

"We like the growth model," he added. "We believe it is a more accurate indicator of student achievement at each school site."

### **'Watered Down'**

But the federal system has done something that most state accountability measures haven't, according to Mr. Dougherty. It has forced schools like California's John Glenn Middle School to ensure that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds are making progress toward achievement goals.

"What you've done is taken an existing accountability system and broadened it" to include all students, Mr. Dougherty said.

The hardest task for state and local officials is trying to help the public make sense of the contradictory messages. The general public sees the message that a school is failing under federal rules and may overlook other, positive data, state officials said.

"The problem is, it gets watered down to the smallest element: Did you make AYP or not?" Lou Fabrizio, the director of accountability services for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, said of the federal law. "That's where you miss a lot of information that the public needs to see."

In North Carolina, more than 90 percent of schools are meeting the state growth goals, while 47 percent of schools made AYP. Of those that failed, 283 missed the federal goal because one subgroup fell below its proficiency goal.

Mr. Fabrizio said the differences between the two accountability approaches are so complex that they are difficult to explain in a TV sound bite or even a one-page summary. He finds that members of the public understand the differences only after they've had the approaches explained and have had the chance to ask questions.

That kind of discourse is hard to accomplish, school officials say.

"The general public sees the headline and maybe reads a little bit of the story," said Mr. Marcum, the Marion County, Ky., superintendent. "But it takes more commitment and time [to understand] than they're willing to give it."

While the disparities between federal and state scores is evident now, the problem is likely to get worse, some policy experts say.

The federal rules require schools at the lowest levels to catch up to overall proficiency goals at a faster rate than those that started out ahead. That means even those that continue to show tremendous growth will still fail under AYP guidelines, said William Padia, the director of policy and evaluation for the California Department of Education. "Once you get behind in your AYP goals, it's almost impossible to catch up," he said.

But that phenomenon is bound to happen to all schools, regardless of whether they are in a state with a pre-existing accountability system, said Mr. Dougherty. "That's true for any school that starts at the bottom in any state," he said.

## **Warning Signal**

For some school principals, though, the contradictory messages from state and federal report cards aren't necessarily disturbing. If anything, they say, the differences prompt them to focus on ways to improve achievement among specific students—a central goal of the federal law.

At Gove Elementary, the federal report card has reminded educators that the work they've done to improve the school over the past several years isn't reaching all pupils, according to Anne Turner, the principal of the K-6 school in western Palm Beach County.

The school failed to make adequate yearly progress because its special education students and its children still learning English failed to score high enough on the state math test, and its special education students also scored below the proficiency level in reading.

And even though California's John Glenn Middle School narrowly missed its AYP goals—it would have passed if only one more English-language learner had scored proficient in reading—the federal report has spurred the school to action, said Ms. Ferraud.

Still, the middle school has undergone more searching reviews than the federal accountability report card, she said. It is one of three middle schools that is on the state education department's list of "California Schools to Watch."

To earn that recognition, the school was visited by a team of state evaluators that, according to Ms. Ferraud, was more thorough than any other she's seen. "If we had warts and bumps," she said, "they were going to find them."