

What Do You Do When the Scores Come Through?

By: Earle G. Bidwell, Assistant Executive Director

“What do you do when the scores come through?” is a question principals are asking themselves with increasing frequency in this age of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation.

Do you rail against the injustice of a flawed system that expects all students to perform at some ever-changing arbitrary level? Do you wonder at a plan that, according to the *Education Commission of the States*,¹ ranks Texas ahead of Connecticut in its progress to leave no child behind? And what about the validity of NCLB reporting requirements that tolerate apparent abuses like the following? “In 2001-02, Texas schools enrolled 364,270 freshmen -- and 225,756 seniors. The state's official annual dropout rate: 1 percent.”² That leaves one hundred thirty-odd thousand unaccounted for. Do you suppose they all transferred to private schools, “graduated” to the workforce or welfare rolls or perhaps moved to Connecticut? By the way, where would you want to educate your own children, in Waco or Wethersfield, San Antonio or Stamford?

Do you perhaps second-guess the decision to bring back that out-placed student who made the difference in the “students with disabilities” sub-group? Do you wonder what to make of large subgroups of economically disadvantaged or English language learners in your district, a fact over which you have no control?

Well, I suppose that some of the time, we all entertain some of these, or similar, thoughts. However, the reality is that such negative thinking is counter-productive. Leave responding to these issues to others like Editor Chris Powell, who wrote eloquently and succinctly on the topic in the *Journal Inquirer* on September 6, 2003, “No Child Left Behind Tells Connecticut Nothing,” or to Congressman Rob Simmons who has addressed some of the more onerous portions of the legislation with U.S. Education Secretary Rod Page. Also consider the work of distinguished national leaders such as Gerald Tirozzi from NASSP, Sue Swaim of NMSA and Vincent Ferrandino from NAESP, who are spearheading efforts in Washington to address shortcomings in the law and regulations. At the local level, no matter how much one protests and defends one’s self from criticism, the likelihood of changing NCLB is slim to none, and the likelihood of not making AYP another year is great.

However, there are several things that principals can do at the local level when faced with lack of AYP. Here are some steps to consider.

- Be proactive. Write and speak tirelessly on the subject of No Child Left Behind. If you don’t, others will! Openly share your findings with the board of education, parents, media and community. In most cases, failure to make AYP is the result of missing the goal by a few points or one sub-group not making the cut. While acknowledging shortcomings, be sure to celebrate successes. Also, you know where the deficiencies are; you know what is possible to remediate and what is beyond the scope of your school. Remember, you are the educational expert. Your voice carries the weight of your position, background, training and commitment. If you don’t speak out, there will be an information vacuum, and others less knowledgeable will fill it.
- Don’t go it alone. Solutions are more likely to occur when teams of educators are involved. It goes without saying that meaningful progress will come only with the combined efforts of the administration and the faculty. Involve teachers in the analysis of the problem, brainstorming solutions and implementing an improvement plan.
- Inform all constituents about resources needed to make AYP. Is assistance needed from people who speak another language? Is there a need for food and clothing for disadvantaged students? How about lower teacher/student ratios? Help the community to understand that societal, as well as educational issues, impact successful schooling, and community members can play a significant part in educational progress. Even if you are not able to reach your goal next year, you will have gained valuable support from those who will now have a greater stake in your success.
- Develop and widely publicize your improvement plan. As you create your plan, focus resources on those areas that stand the best chance for success. For example, your chances of raising all-school

reading scores a couple of points may be greater than succeeding with students with disabilities. If this is the case, devote maximum time and energy in this direction. Make sure that all constituents are aware of your plan. Exemplary schools literature indicates that success is far more likely when administrators, teachers, students and parents work toward a common goal.

- Project the most likely outcomes for next year. Be realistic. If you need to raise the percentage of math students meeting the goal by 10%, it might be more realistic to predict a 5% improvement for next year and additional percentage for the following year. While you may still not make AYP, improvement will tend to increase your credibility in the community and gather supporters.
- Stay focused. Determine the most important improvement you need to make in the next school year and work toward it. Don't be sidetracked by the new hot issue or next mini-crisis. Ultimately your success as an educational leader is determined more by the academic success of your students than by satisfying peripheral needs of parents, school board members or the community.

The bottom line is that when it comes to NCLB, you have little chance of changing legislation or the accompanying regulations. However, you have a wonderful opportunity to establish yourself more firmly as an educational expert, to raise community awareness about educational issues and to rally support for needed change. Choose wisely.

¹. Education Commission of the States <http://nclb.ecs.org/nclb/>

² By Joshua Benton , *The Dallas Morning News*

<http://www.dallasnews.com/localnews/education/columnists/jbenton/stories/090103dnmetedcol.f699.html>