

Most of NCLB's 'Failing' Schools Were Not Targeted the Following Year

Waivers that gave states more flexibility in accountability cut the number of failing schools by 33 percent

Most of the schools that were deemed as failing under the sweeping education law known as No Child Left Behind were no longer identified as such one year later, once several states received waivers that increased their flexibility in developing school accountability systems.

In a new report from the New America Foundation, released Tuesday, Policy Analyst Anne Hyslop analyzed data from more than 20,000 schools in 16 states that received NCLB waivers for the 2012-13 school year. On average, two-thirds of the schools identified for improvement under NCLB for the 2011-12 school year were not identified once waivers allowed states to develop accountability systems that ranked schools on a relative basis of school performance, rather than an absolute basis.

"It's kind of like grading on a curve," Hyslop says.

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Under NCLB, formally called the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, if a school failed to make a pre-determined "adequate yearly progress" on student performance, it would be identified for improvement. And each year a school failed to make that AYP benchmark, it would fall into a different level of federal intervention. But with NCLB waivers, individual schools are being compared to others within the same state.

"Maybe a school doesn't meet its targets or maybe they don't have the best performance on an absolute standard, but they did better than most of the other schools in the state," Hyslop says. "We're really focusing school improvement on the bottom 15 percent of Title I schools."

But because school accountability systems vary so widely from state to state, it's hard to determine if the "right" schools are making the cut into that 15 percent. And because NCLB is long overdue for reauthorization, with no sign that process will happen any time soon, waivers have become the new norm, Hyslop says, so getting it right is crucial.

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, says the report shows there are "very weak links" between how schools are identified as low-performing, different improvement strategies, and "the resources they need to reverse course," a sentiment echoed by Hyslop.

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"Parents, educators and students know that while focusing on student learning is important, the obeisance in America to testing, test preparation and sanctions has been counterproductive," Weingarten said in a statement to U.S. News. "Ultimately, we need a comprehensive redesign of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. We need to implement evidence-based practices, not test-based punishments, to improve our schools and reclaim the promise of higher education."

That 15 percent is divided even further to help states better target improvement efforts. Priority schools fall into the bottom 5 percent – essentially the bottom of the bottom – while the remaining 10 percent are classified as focus schools.

Although the Department of Education implemented some safeguards to help guide which schools should fall into that category, those were suggestions that some states chose not to follow.

The department suggested, for example, that [schools receiving School Improvement Grant awards](#) and high schools with graduation rates lower than 60 percent be identified as focus or priority schools.

And while some states automatically identified all of their SIG schools as priority schools, similar schools were not identified at all in other states.

"It could be that they were no longer a Title I school, so they weren't included as a priority school. It could be that because the schools in the SIG program were already receiving a lot of supports and interventions ... that the state instead chose to use its priority slots on other schools," Hyslop says. "But frankly, I don't think that makes very much sense."

That's because the factors that qualify a school to be in the SIG program almost always also place them in the bottom 5 percent of schools in a state.

In other situations, a large percentage of the schools in the most dire category of NCLB improvement, called "restructuring," were not identified as schools for improvement the next year. A school that did not meet its AYP for six consecutive years was placed into restructuring.

In Arizona, Massachusetts, Nevada, Rhode Island and South Carolina, at least 50 percent of the schools removed from improvement were in corrective action or restructuring under NCLB, the report says.

But according to Hyslop, such a large percentage of those schools were removed once their state waivers kicked in because those states had higher-than-average shares of those types of schools to begin with. It could also be the case that states added more holistic factors to their accountability systems, such as college and career readiness indicators or student growth measures, which make student performance look much better than before.

Moving forward, Hyslop says both individual states and the Department of Education need to work to collect more extensive data looking into what changes states have made to their accountability systems to determine whether the right schools are making the cut.

And such data could be particularly useful as 34 states and the District of Columbia [begin their waiver renewal processes](#) in January and February 2014, although that data is not explicitly required.

But Hyslop says it's unlikely that such data will be available in time.

"Just the sheer numbers of how many schools aren't identified are pretty terrifying ... but I think the more important question is asking whether those are the right schools," Hyslop says. "So I hope that states start to focus more on which schools are identified and whether they're the right ones, and we actually have data and evidence to show that they are."

Source: <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2013/12/17/most-of-nclbs-failing-schools-were-not-targeted-the-following-year>