

CORRECTION TO THIS ARTICLE

A March 12 Outlook article about the No Child Left Behind Act contained incorrect information about the number of subgroups that states must track under the law. The number can vary from state to state with federal government approval. Maryland tracks five racial subgroups, including Native Americans, not four.

No Reader Left Behind: A Guide to the Law

By Jay Mathews

Sunday, March 12, 2006; B04

Even award-winning principal Marjorie L. Myers was misled about the public school labeling game launched by the No Child Left Behind Act. She thought Arlington County's Key Elementary School, which she has led for 11 years, was on the "needs improvement" list, but it turns out it isn't. She missed only one reading target for one year, which a close examination of the detailed Virginia Department of Education Web site shows is not enough to land her on the dreaded watch list.

If one of the most experienced, successful educators in the Washington area can't figure out the complex law's labels, what hope is there for the rest of us?

Good question. Here are the current rules for determining if a school should be on the needs improvement list in Virginia, Maryland and the District. But be warned, this is not the end of it. With federal approval, a state or the District can still make changes.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 requires reading and math tests for all public school students in grades three through eight and once in high school. States must track the progress of all students together and in eight subgroups. The goal is near-universal proficiency in 2014. Each state uses its own tests and its own definition of proficiency, which it must submit to the U.S. Department of Education for approval.

In Maryland, Virginia and the District, schools are put on the improvement list if they have not made adequate yearly progress (AYP, the three key letters in any discussion of No Child Left Behind) for two straight years. Not making AYP means the school has not achieved its Annual Measurable Objective -- an achievement-test goal based on a complex formula -- for any subgroup in a particular subject area such as math or reading.

What are subgroups, you say? Another good question. In Maryland and the District, the school must report its test results for its students as a whole, and then in four racial categories -- Caucasian, Asian, African American and Hispanic -- and three service categories: students receiving special education services, limited English proficiency services, or free and reduced price meals. In Virginia, schools report on all students, but just three racial subgroups -- black, white and Hispanic -- as well as the three service categories.

As for what triggers the failed-to-make-AYP tripwire, I will quote precisely what Ronald Peiffer, Maryland's deputy state superintendent for academic policy, told me, since straying from the exact wording can lead to even more misunderstanding:

"The inability to achieve any one of those nine targets *for* each of reading and mathematics or the failure of an elementary or middle school to achieve targets for attendance rate overall or for high schools to reach the graduation rate target overall for the school means you did not achieve AYP."

Read it three times to make sure you got it. And keep in mind that at least 95 percent of a school's students must be tested. If any subgroup falls below 95 percent, the school also does not make AYP.

These general rules are the same in Virginia and the District, but the lesson does not end there. Remember Myers's mistaken belief that her school was on the needs improvement list? She had been told that missing AYP just one year was enough to get the label. In fact, a school must miss AYP two years in a row for that to happen, and they must miss it both years in the same subject area.

In the 2004-2005 school year, only 56 percent of Myers's students in the free and reduced lunch subgroup passed the state reading test. Their target under the state rules approved by the federal government was 65 percent. All the other subgroups met their goals in both subjects, but that one failure meant Key did not make AYP. However, it will not be put on the needs improvement list unless some subgroup this school year also fails to reach its reading target.

The consequences of being put on the list are similar in Virginia, Maryland and the District for Title I schools, those that accept federal anti-poverty funds. In its first year on the list, a Title I school must notify parents of its status and offer them the opportunity to transfer their children to another district school that is not on the list. If the school is still on the list the following year, it must pay for tutoring for low-achieving students. If it stays on the list a third year, it must take corrective action, which can include replacing school staff, introducing a new curriculum or extending the school day or year. In the years after that, more remedies come into play, including turning the school into an independent charter school. The options in Virginia and Maryland do not include a state takeover, although the D.C. State Education Agency could take over a D.C. school.

With all those changes and focus on test scores, the Democratic and Republican legislators who wrote the law said achievement for all groups should improve. Myers said she and her teachers are working to make sure that happens at Key.

"I hope we never lose sight of the fact that it is all about kids," she said, "and not these tests."

mathewsj@washpost.com

Jay Mathews covers education for The Post.

© 2006 The Washington Post Company

Ads by Google

[Jersey Shore Vacations](#)

Summer Vacation at the Jersey Shore Great Beaches & Boardwalks Come Now

www.YourPlayTherapy.com