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Alaska applies for pilot program in school accountability

The Alaska Department of Education & Early Development has applied to the U.S. Department of Education to pilot a growth model for determining students' academic progress under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

The law requires schools to demonstrate, through test results and other criteria, that they are making adequate yearly progress toward the goal of having all students proficient in language arts and math by the end of the 2013-2014 school year.

Each year under NCLB, schools are expected to meet proficiency targets. Schools also must meet targets in participation rates in taking assessments, and in attendance or graduation rates.

In school year 2004-2005, 59 percent of 495 Alaska public schools met targets for adequate yearly progress.

One of the goals of NCLB is to identify schools that need improvement, which are then required to develop improvement plans and eventually may be required to offer school choice or tutoring, and can face other consequences.

The current accountability system, which is called a status model, is based mainly on the percentage of students who are proficient in a given year. It does not give schools credit for those students who are nonproficient but are doing better and are on track for proficiency.

Growth models track individual students' achievement year to year and give schools credit for student improvement. For example, the academic performance of a school's fifth-graders on the state's standards-based assessments would be compared with that of the same students when they were fourth-graders.

"Parents and teachers want to know how the same children perform year after year. A growth model is fairer because it recognizes academic growth in individual students," said Alaska Education Commissioner Roger Sampson. "Some Alaska schools are making substantial progress, but they're listed as not making adequate yearly progress."

U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings announced in mid-November that her agency would approve up to 10 states to pilot growth models next school year. The agency will review state applications, and is expected to respond this spring.

Alaska's growth model is designed to meet federal guidelines for the pilot project. Alaska students who show academic growth and are on track to be proficient in a few years will be included with the proficient students when schools calculate what percentage of students meet academic targets.

The merit of the growth model is that it distinguishes between nonproficient students who are improving and those who are not. Without such a model, schools that are improving but not yet meeting proficiency targets might be required to make instructional changes that are not needed.

“When schools know the performance of their students based on status and growth, better school interventions can be designed,” said Les Morse, Director of Assessment & Accountability at the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development.

Following a federal requirement for the pilot projects, Alaska also will continue to use the current method of determining adequate yearly progress. The results from both methods will be reported to the public. If Alaska's pilot is approved, it will be implemented for tests taken this school year.

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