



# **Peeking Behind the Blue Ribbon: How the No Child Left Behind Blue-Ribbon Award Helps Conceal Accountability-Avoidance**

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## Executive Summary

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The No Child Left behind Act of 2002 (NCLB) was enacted to shine more light on student performance previously hidden by school-wide, aggregate achievement results. NCLB makes important progress toward that goal by requiring states to report the performance of various student sub-groups, including minority children, students with disabilities, and non-native English speakers. One of the country's most prestigious distinctions is to be named a U.S. Department of Education No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Blue-Ribbon School.

In 2007, only 133 public schools nationwide were honored as Blue-Ribbon Schools for scoring in the top 10 percent on state assessments. "These schools are proving that when we raise the bar our children will rise to the challenge," according to Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings.<sup>1</sup> These schools also did not enroll many students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and a closer look at these award-winning schools reveals that many of them do not live up to that touted "Blue-Ribbon" label.

On average, just 11 percent of students at those 2007 Blue-Ribbon schools came from impoverished backgrounds, three percent of students were classified with limited English proficiency (LEP), and only eight percent of students had disabilities.<sup>2</sup> The median home value in the schools' neighborhoods exceeded \$300,000 on average, and the median family income approached \$100,000. Yet at one in three of those Blue-Ribbon schools, at least 25 percent of students in at least one grade were not proficient in at least one core subject tested.

On average, more than a quarter of students in two grades scored below proficiency in two subjects on state tests at those underperforming 2007 Blue-Ribbon schools. Specifically, at underperforming award schools, the percentage of students in at least one grade who did not score proficient on state assessments ranged from 26 to 62 percent in reading, and from 26 to 56 percent in math. Many Blue-Ribbon schools that underperformed in those core subjects also had similarly poor performance in at least one grade in science.

This analysis finds many states are engaging in NCLB accountability-avoidance, unwittingly aided by the Blue-Ribbon award designation. Such avoidance is likely to increase as the 2013-2014 school year deadline for 100 percent student proficiency approaches, making a U.S. Department of Education blue ribbon an increasingly unreliable indicator of academic quality in the coming years, absent necessary reforms. Instead of piling on additional, expensive federal mandates, this analysis recommends improved public accountability through greater transparency to preserve the delicate balance between flexibility for states and accurate information for parents.

**Instead of piling on additional, expensive federal mandates, this analysis recommends improved public accountability through greater transparency to preserve the delicate balance between flexibility for states and accurate information for parents.**



Specific recommendations include reporting grade-level student proficiency in all core subjects tested as a condition for receiving federal NCLB funds. State proficiency results should also be reported alongside nationally-representative proficiency results to make declines in state standards more apparent. To ensure universally rigorous assessment, states should publicize annual passing scores on their tests and their annual student proficiency targets. The best accountability assurance of all—better than any blue ribbon—is for the U.S. Department of Education to provide parents with information that is both accurate *and* actionable, then enforce their children’s right of exit from underperforming schools.



## Introduction

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Today, education is considered one of the biggest problems facing the United States. In a recent Associated Press poll, a majority of respondents were mothers. They ranked education as a more important policy issue than the Iraq War, terrorism, health care, immigration, the environment, and a variety of social issues. The poll found that half of those surveyed think schools are doing only a fair to poor job of preparing students for college and the workforce.<sup>3</sup> It is not surprising, then, that families are paying more than ever before for homes near what they believe are good public schools.

Harvard law professor Elizabeth Warren and health-care consultant Amelia Warren Tyagi co-authored the influential 2003 book *The Two-Income Trap: Why Middle-Class Parents Are Going Broke*. “The proportion of families who are ‘house-poor’—that is, who spend more than 35 percent of their incomes on housing—has quadrupled in a single generation,” according to Warren and Tyagi.<sup>4</sup> Granite counter tops and three-car garages are not the reason for this increase. Parents spend more on their homes because “when a family buys a house, it buys much more than shelter from the rain... [it] buys a public-school system.”<sup>5</sup> “Talk with an average middle-class parent in any major metropolitan area,” say Warren and Tyagi, “and she’ll describe the time, money, and effort she devoted to finding a slot in a decent school.”<sup>6</sup> They conclude, “For most middle-class parents, ensuring that their children get a decent education means buying a home in a small subset of well-reputed school districts.”<sup>7</sup> And one of the country’s most prestigious distinctions is to be named a U.S. Department of Education No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Blue-Ribbon School.

Each year since 2003, fewer than 300 schools nationwide have been named Blue-Ribbon Schools.<sup>8</sup> Competition for this coveted distinction is stiff, and only 287 schools nationwide were named Blue-Ribbon Schools in 2007.<sup>9</sup> The program recognizes public and private elementary, middle, and high schools that are either academically superior in their states or that demonstrate dramatic gains to high levels in reading (referred to in some states as language arts or English) and mathematics.<sup>10</sup> Schools must meet one of two eligibility criteria. They must enroll at least 40 percent of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and dramatically improve academic performance on state tests to high levels, or they must score in the top 10 percent on state assessments, regardless of student demographics.<sup>11</sup> This analysis examines a subset of this latter group of schools.

Of the Blue-Ribbon public schools scoring in the top 10 percent on state assessments for the 2007 award cycle, 133 enrolled less than 40 percent of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>12</sup> These public schools varied in size from 56 to 3,044 students, and averaged only 11 percent of students in poverty and three percent of students classified with limited English proficiency (LEP).<sup>13</sup> “These schools are proving that when we raise the bar our children will rise to the challenge,” according to Secretary of Education Margaret



Spellings.<sup>14</sup> A closer look at grade-level student achievement in core academic subjects, however, may cause some parents to rethink the Blue-Ribbon bumper sticker on the back of their family car.



## Identifying Underperforming Blue-Ribbon Schools

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Thirty states altogether, including the District of Columbia, had 133 Blue-Ribbon public schools scoring in the top 10 percent on state assessments in 2007 that enrolled less than 40 percent of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Only 28 of those states reported grade-level assessment data in all core subjects tested for the corresponding 2006-07 school year.<sup>15</sup> Removing the Blue-Ribbon schools with incomplete data leaves 130 Blue-Ribbon schools. At one-third of those schools (43), 25 percent or more of students scored below proficiency in at least one grade in a core subject assessed on their states' standards tests: reading, math, science, social studies, and writing.

This analysis goes beyond the NCLB Blue-Ribbon criteria of superior performance in reading and math, because such narrow focus on these two core subjects gives parents an incomplete picture of how well their children's schools are doing overall, including instruction in the other core subjects of science, social studies, and writing. Some might object that expecting Blue-Ribbon schools to perform well across all core subjects is an unduly high standard. Grade-level proficiency results, however, indicate that at most underperforming Blue-Ribbon schools—those where at least 25 percent of students tested below grade-level proficiency in the core subject tested—students overwhelmingly struggled with reading.

In fact, of the 91 instances in which 25 percent or more of students scored below grade-level proficiency in at least one subject, nearly half of those instances (49.5 percent) were in reading—nearly twice as many as in math (25 instances), and more than twice as many as in science (19 instances). At underperforming Blue-Ribbon schools where students struggled with reading, fully one out of three students on average failed to score “proficient” on their states' tests. More incredibly still, at those same schools less than seven percent of students were classified as limited English proficient (LEP).

Among the underperforming Blue-Ribbon schools, there was just one, Evergreen High School in Colorado, where at least a quarter of students in one grade did not achieve proficiency in writing, but this school also underperformed in math. Just 10 Blue-Ribbon schools were identified as underperforming solely because 25 percent or more students in at least one grade were not proficient in science (nine schools) or social studies (one school, Highlands High School in Fort Thomas, Kentucky). Even if those schools were omitted from the analysis, one in four low-poverty Blue-Ribbon schools would still be underperforming.

Given the growing public concern over students' mastery of these additional core subjects, there is very good reason not to let these Blue-Ribbon schools off the hook. So great is the concern over U.S. students' international competitiveness in science that Bill and Melinda Gates, whose foundation contributed more than \$265 million to educational improvement initiatives in 2007 alone, recently appeared on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* to





discuss the problem and its implications.<sup>16</sup> High college remediation rates, employers' dissatisfaction with high school and college graduates' communication skills—especially written skills—along with intensifying alarm about declining civic literacy among American students, make science, social studies, and writing as important as reading and math.<sup>17</sup> Table 1 summarizes the number of 2007 Blue-Ribbon Schools by state, both performing and underperforming.

**Table 1: Number of 2007 Blue-Ribbon Schools by State**

ALPHABETICAL ORDER				RANK ORDER			
State	# Blue-Ribbon Schools: Total	# Blue-Ribbon-Schools: 25%+ Not Proficient	% Blue-Ribbon Schools: 25%+ Not Proficient	State	# Blue-Ribbon Schools: Total	# Blue-Ribbon-Schools: 25%+ Not Proficient	% Blue-Ribbon Schools: 25%+ Not Proficient
AL	2	0	0.0%	OH	9	0	0.0%
AR	1	1	100.0%	TX	8	0	0.0%
AZ	2	0	0.0%	NJ	5	0	0.0%
CA	21	19	90.5%	MD	4	0	0.0%
CO	2	2	100.0%	MN	4	0	0.0%
DC	2	*	*	WI	4	0	0.0%
FL	11	7	63.6%	GA	3	0	0.0%
GA	3	0	0.0%	VA	3	0	0.0%
IA	3	1	33.3%	AL	2	0	0.0%
IL	9	1	11.1%	MA	2	0	0.0%
IN	5	1	20.0%	NC	2	0	0.0%
KY	2	1	50.0%	TN	2	0	0.0%
MA	2	0	0.0%	SD	1	0	0.0%
MD	4	0	0.0%	WV	1	0	0.0%
MN	4	0	0.0%	WY	1	0	0.0%
MO	3	3	100.0%	AZ	2	0	0.0%
NC	2	0	0.0%	IL	9	1	11.1%
NJ	5	0	0.0%	NY	15	2	13.3%
NY	15	2	13.3%	IN	5	1	20.0%
OH	9	0	0.0%	IA	3	1	33.3%
OK	2	*	*	KY	2	1	50.0%
SC	2	1	50.0%	SC	2	1	50.0%
SD	1	0	0.0%	FL	11	7	63.6%
TN	2	0	0.0%	CA	21	19	90.5%
TX	8	0	0.0%	AR	1	1	100.0%
VA	3	0	0.0%	CO	2	2	100.0%
WA	2	2	100.0%	WA	2	2	100.0%
WI	4	0	0.0%	MO	3	3	100.0%
WV	1	0	0.0%	OK	2	*	*
WY	1	0	0.0%	DC	2	*	*



**Sources:** Author's table based on proficiency data for the 2006-07 school year reported by state departments of education and GreatSchools.net.

**Notes:**

1. The District of Columbia and Oklahoma do not report grade-level proficiency data. See endnote 15.
2. Author's analysis of grade-level proficiency included reading (referred to as language arts or English in some states), math, science, social studies, and writing for all grades tested by the respective states.

As summarized in Table 2, the average underperforming Blue-Ribbon school had two grades in which at least one quarter of students were not proficient in two core subjects assessed on annual state standards tests. Rounding out the top 10 for the most grades where at least one in four students was not proficient in a core subject tested were nine California Blue-Ribbon schools and one Missouri Blue-Ribbon school. Blue-Ribbon schools in those states also had the most subjects in which at least a quarter of students across grades were testing below state proficiency standards.

**Table 2: 2007 Blue-Ribbon Schools Where 25% or More Students in at Least One Grade-Level Do Not Score Proficient or Better in Core Subjects Tested, by State**

2007 BLUE-RIBBON SCHOOLS				PERFORMANCE	
State	School Name	District	City	# Grades 25%+ Not Proficient	# Subjects
AR	Bentonville HS	Bentonville	Bentonville	1	1
CA	Arroyo ES	Tustin Unified	Santa Ana	1	1
CA	Beechwood ES	Fullerton Elementary	Fullerton	3	3
CA	Blandford ES	Rowland Unified	Rowland Heights	3	1
CA	Cosumnes River ES	Elk Grove Unified	Sloughhouse	3	2
CA	Country Springs ES	Chino Valley Unified	Chino Hills	2	2
CA	Deerfield ES	Irvine Unified	Irvine	1	1
CA	Empire Oaks ES	Folsom-Cordova Unified	Folsom	1	1
CA	Encinal ES	Menlo Park City Elementary	Menlo Park-Atherton	1	1
CA	Fairmont ES	Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified	Yorba Linda	3	2
CA	Gettysburg ES	Clovis Unified	Clovis	4	3
CA	Liberty School	Liberty Elementary	Petaluma	1	1
CA	Mariners ES	Newport-Mesa Unified	Newport Beach	1	3
CA	McNear ES	Petaluma City Elementary	Petaluma	5	3
CA	Mission Estancia ES	Encinitas Union Elementary	Carlsbad	2	2
CA	Olinda ES	Brea-Olinda Unified	Brea	2	2
CA	Quail Summit ES	Walnut Valley Unified	Diamond Bar	2	2
CA	Tularcitos ES	Carmel Unified	Carmel Valley	3	2
CA	Tustin Memorial ES	Tustin Unified	Santa Ana	1	1
CA	Leonard B. Westhoff ES	Walnut Valley Unified	Walnut	1	1
CA	Wood Ranch ES	Simi Valley Unified	Simi Valley	3	3



2007 BLUE-RIBBON SCHOOLS				PERFORMANCE	
State	School Name	District	City	# Grades 25%+ Not Proficient	# Subjects
CO	Cheyenne Mountain HS	Cheyenne Mountain 12	Colorado Springs	2	2
CO	Evergreen HS	Jefferson County R-1	Evergreen	2	2
FL	Design & Architectural Senior High	Dade County	Miami	2	2
FL	Eagle Point ES	Broward County	Weston	1	1
FL	Pensacola Beach ES	Escambia County	Pensacola Beach	1	1
FL	The Sanibel School	Lee County	Sanibel	1	1
FL	Seaside Neighborhood School	Walton County	Santa Rosa Beach	1	1
IL	Adolph Link ES	Schaumburg CCSD 54	Elk Grove Village	1	1
IN	Burriss Laboratory School	Burriss Laboratory School	Muncie	1	1
IA	John Glenn ES	North Scott Comm. School	Donahue	1	1
KY	Highlands HS	Fort Thomas Independent	Ft. Thomas	1	1
MO	Conway ES	Ladue	St. Louis	3	2
MO	Bessie Ellison Accelerated School	St. Joseph	St. Joseph	2	2
MO	Westchester ES	Kirkwood R-VII	Kirkwood	3	2
NY	P.S. 184Q Flushing Manor School	NYC Geographic District #25	Whitestone	1	1
NY	South Bay ES	West Babylon Union Free	West Babylon	2	1
SC	Jennie Moore ES	Charleston County	Mt. Pleasant	1	1
WA	Inglemoor Senior HS	Northshore	Kenmore	1	1
WA	South Whidbey HS	South Whidbey	Langley	1	2
<b>Avg</b>				<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>

**Sources:** Author's table based on proficiency data for the 2006-07 school year reported by state departments of education and GreatSchools.net. Demographic data comes from the National Center for Educational Achievement's Just-for-the-Kids state affiliates and the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics.

**Notes:**

1. The District of Columbia and Oklahoma do not report grade-level proficiency data. See endnote 15.
2. Author's analysis of grade-level proficiency included reading (referred to as language arts or English in some states), math, science, social studies, and writing for all grades tested by the respective states.
4. "ES" stands for elementary school, and "HS" stands for high school.
5. For additional demographic data on schools in this table, see Appendix A.

Such performance turns conventional wisdom about school performance on its head for several reasons. Most students at the underperforming Blue-Ribbon schools were not poor. Few students enrolled at those schools were classified as having limited English proficiency or disabilities. Moreover, the average median family income in those schools' neighborhoods in 2007 was \$93,000, and the median home value was \$330,000 (see Appendix Table A).



## Accountability-Avoidance under NCLB

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Parents with children in Blue-Ribbon schools not identified as underperforming in this analysis should not feel reassured. Education Sector released two withering analyses in 2006 and 2007 detailing states' efforts to circumvent NCLB requirements intended to give parents and the public accurate information about how well their children and their schools are really performing.

Education Sector singled out Alabama, with no underperforming Blue-Ribbon schools in 2007, as one of the country's worst offenders. "When policymakers in the White House and Congress wrote the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001," writes Education Sector Research and Policy Manager Kevin Carey, "they undoubtedly had places like Birmingham, Alabama, in mind." Carey continues:

Less than 40 percent of Birmingham students graduate from high school on time...Test scores still lag the rest of the state; there are still large achievement gaps between black and white children...But you wouldn't know it by asking the Alabama Department of Education. It says everything is fine. ...The serious consequences and strong interventions that NCLB's authors envisioned for chronically underperforming districts like Birmingham are nowhere to be found. The reason is simple: While NCLB was designed to raise achievement standards every year until 2014, when 100 percent of students are required to be "proficient," the Alabama Department of Education has lowered standards annually, to the point where even abjectly failing districts like Birmingham make the grade. And it's not alone—every one of the accountability-avoidance gambits used in Alabama has been adopted in many other states.<sup>18</sup>

Those states include Oklahoma, which does not even report grade-level student proficiency, and Wisconsin. Education Sector developed an index in 2006 that ranks states according to how much they inflate their performance standards under NCLB. They dubbed it "The Pangloss Index" after the character in Voltaire's *Candide* who advocated optimism despite all evidence to the contrary. States' rankings on the Pangloss Index "are driven less by real-world education success," explains Carey, "than by the penchant of some states to misuse their standard-setting flexibility under NCLB to define and report performance data that are contradicted by objective measures."<sup>19</sup>

Table 3 is based on Education Sector's Pangloss rankings, with #1 representing the most NCLB accountability-avoidance or most lax state standards and #51 the least. Wisconsin, with no underperforming 2007 Blue-Ribbon schools, is ranked first by Education Sector for most NCLB accountability-avoidance, tied with Iowa. A single 2007



Iowa Blue-Ribbon school, John Glenn Elementary School in Donahue, just made the underperforming list because 30 percent of its sixth graders were not proficient in math.

**Table 3: 2007 Blue-Ribbon-School States Ranked by NCLB Accountability-Avoidance**

ALPHABETICAL ORDER				RANK ORDER			
State	# Blue-Ribbon Schools: Total	# Blue-Ribbon-Schools: 25%+ Not Proficient	Pangloss Rank 2007	State	# Blue-Ribbon Schools: Total	# Blue-Ribbon-Schools: 25%+ Not Proficient	Pangloss Rank 2007
AL	2	0	5	IA	3	1	1
AR	1	1	35	WI	4	0	1
AZ	2	0	36	AL	2	0	5
CA	21	19	39	SD	1	0	5
CO	2	2	23	VA	3	0	7
DC	2	*	51	TN	2	0	8
FL	11	7	48	IN	5	1	11
GA	3	0	21	WV	1	0	12
IA	3	1	1	NJ	5	0	13
IL	9	1	20	OK	2	*	13
IN	5	1	11	TX	8	0	18
KY	2	1	47	IL	9	1	20
MA	2	0	46	GA	3	0	21
MD	4	0	49	MN	4	0	22
MN	4	0	22	CO	2	2	23
MO	3	3	40	OH	9	0	25
NC	2	0	31	NC	2	0	31
NJ	5	0	13	WA	2	2	33
NY	15	2	37	AR	1	1	35
OH	9	0	25	AZ	2	0	36
OK	2	*	13	NY	15	2	37
SC	2	1	46	CA	21	19	39
SD	1	0	5	MO	3	3	40
TN	2	0	8	WY	1	0	42
TX	8	0	18	MA	2	0	46
VA	3	0	7	SC	2	1	46
WA	2	2	33	KY	2	1	47
WI	4	0	1	FL	11	7	48
WV	1	0	12	MD	4	0	49
WY	1	0	42	DC	2	*	51

**Sources:** Author's table based on Education Sector 2006 and 2007 Pangloss Indices, and on proficiency data for the 2006-07 school year reported by state departments of education and GreatSchools.net.

**Notes:**

1. The District of Columbia and Oklahoma do not report grade-level proficiency data. See endnote 15.
2. A #1 ranking indicates the greatest NCLB accountability-avoidance and a #51 ranking the least.



Based on Education Sector's 2006 Pangloss Index rankings, not shown here, NCLB accountability-avoidance is increasing at two-thirds of the states with no underperforming Blue-Ribbon schools (11 out of 14), compared to one-third of the states with at least one underperforming Blue-Ribbon school (four out of 12).

Thus, depending on where they live, parents whose children do not attend an underperforming 2007 Blue-Ribbon school need to consider how dedicated their states are to leaving no child behind academically. This is especially true for parents who live in states that rank in the top half of the Pangloss Index, including Alabama, Georgia, Minnesota, New Jersey, Ohio, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, top-ranked Wisconsin, and West Virginia. In contrast, parents in Maryland, Massachusetts, and Wyoming with no underperforming 2007 Blue-Ribbon schools may have greater confidence because those states rank closest to the bottom half of the Pangloss Index. Additional factors, however, must inform such confidence.

The following sections consider in greater detail some of the leading ways many states mislead parents and the public about actual student and school performance—and why the No Child Left Behind Blue-Ribbon designation is likely to be an increasingly unreliable indicator of academic quality in the coming years, absent improved transparency. As opposed to piling on additional expensive federal mandates, improved public accountability through greater transparency requirements would preserve the delicate balance between flexibility for states and accurate information for parents.

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## Proficiency Deficiencies in the States

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Some state standards are more rigorous than others. States with Blue-Ribbon schools in 2007 with the highest reading and math standards include California, Massachusetts, and South Carolina, according to researchers from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Colorado and Wisconsin have some of the lowest reading standards, joined by Illinois, which also has some of the lowest math standards.<sup>20</sup> Increasingly, however, many states are lowering their standards. As education experts Paul E. Peterson and Frederick M. Hess explain,

While No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requires all students to be “proficient” in math and reading by 2014, the precedent-setting 2002 federal law also allows each state to determine its own level of proficiency. It’s an odd discordance at best. It has led to the bizarre situation in which some states achieve handsome proficiency results by grading their students against low standards, while other states suffer poor proficiency ratings only because they have high standards.<sup>21</sup>

Peterson and Hess measure state definitions of proficiency against fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math proficiency as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), commonly referred to as the Nation’s Report Card. Since the early 1970s, the U.S. Department of Education has administered the NAEP assessment to a nationally-representative sample of students in grades four, eight, and 12 to assess academic progress in math, reading, and science.<sup>22</sup> Today, NAEP is administered in every state as well as to a nationally representative sample of students, and it is considered the most widely respected K-12 assessment among education experts.<sup>23</sup> As the only nationally-representative assessment, it enables multi-state comparisons. Peterson and Hess gauge the rigor of states’ proficiency standards by comparing the percentage of students scoring “proficient” on state tests to the percentage of students scoring “proficient” on NAEP, and give grades of A to F to reflect the rigor of a state’s proficiency standards.

Three states with 2007 Blue-Ribbon schools earn ‘A’s for what Peterson and Hess call their “world-class” proficiency standards: Massachusetts, South Carolina, and Missouri. At no Blue-Ribbon school in Massachusetts are 25 percent or more of students below grade-level proficiency in any subject tested, in contrast to one of two South Carolina Blue-Ribbon schools (in one grade, one subject) and all three of Missouri’s Blue-Ribbon schools (each with two or more grades in two subjects). The Fordham Institute also cites California as having high standards. At nearly all of its Blue-Ribbon schools, 20 out of 21, a quarter or more of students scored below grade-level proficiency in at least one subject tested (ranging from one to five grades per school, and one to three subjects tested per school).



Other states like Colorado and Texas have notably improved their proficiency standards since 2003, according to Peterson and Hess, but Colorado’s superior improvement from a D to a B- seems at first to be overshadowed by the fact that at both of its Blue-Ribbon schools, more than 25 percent of students in two grades are not proficient in two subjects. In contrast, Texas appears to have the academic advantage, since not one of its eight Blue-Ribbon schools has a single grade where 25 percent or more of students are below grade-level proficiency in core subjects tested. Yet in spite of the improvement Texas has made since 2003 in strengthening its proficiency standards, as noted by Peterson and Hess, its D+ in 2007 pales in comparison to Colorado’s B-. This means that students deemed proficient in Texas likely would not meet the higher proficiency standards in Colorado.

Despite some notable improvements in recent years, Peterson and Hess conclude that most states’ proficiency standards “are well off that mark—in some cases to a laughable degree,” including many states with 2007 Blue-Ribbon schools.<sup>24</sup> Arizona, Illinois, and Wyoming, for example have lowered their standards so much since 2003 that they have slipped a full letter grade or more each, to Cs and even a D- in Illinois. This means it is easier to have more students scoring proficient in core subjects tested in those states, and therefore easier to be deemed a Blue-Ribbon school. In fact, the overwhelming majority of students at Blue-Ribbon schools in Arizona and Wyoming, which ranked highest on the Pangloss Index for accountability-avoidance, score “proficient” across grades and subjects on their state’s standards tests. Among Illinois’ nine Blue-Ribbon schools, just one managed to slip onto the underperforming school list, Adolph Link Elementary School in Elk Grove Village, with 26 percent of fifth graders scoring below grade-level proficiency in reading.

Arizona, Illinois, and Wyoming, however, are not alone when it comes to weak proficiency standards. They join solid D states like Alabama, North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia, as well as chronic F states Georgia, Oklahoma, and Tennessee. In all of those states’ Blue-Ribbon schools, the overwhelming majority of students across grades tested “proficient” or higher on their standards tests.

**Table 4: State Proficiency Standards Grades, 2003, 2005, and 2007**

State	2003	2005	2007	Average Grade	Change
AL	*	D-	D-	D-	▶
AR	C+	B	C+	B	▶
AZ	B-	D+	C-	C	▼
CA	B-	B	B	B-	▲
CO	D	D	B-	C-	▲
DC	*	C	*	C	▶
FL	C+	C	C+	C+	▶
GA	D-	D-	F	D-	▼
IA	*	D+	C-	C-	▲
IL	C+	C	D-	C-	▼
IN	C-	C-	C	C-	▲





State	2003	2005	2007	Average Grade	Change
KY	B-	C+	C	C+	▼
MA	A	A	A	A	►
MD	C+	C	C	C	▼
MN	*	*	B-	B-	►
MO	A	A	A	A	►
NC	D-	D-	D+	D-	▲
NJ	C	C	C	C	►
NY	C	C	C+	C	▲
OH	C+	C	C-	C	▼
OK	F	D-	F	F	►
SC	A	A	A	A	►
SD	C-	D	C-	D+	►
TN	F	F	F	F	►
TX	F	D+	D+	D	▲
VA	D+	D+	D+	D+	▲
WA	C+	C	B-	D+	▲
WI	D	C-	C-	D+	▲
WV	*	D-	D-	D-	►
WY	A	A	C	B+	▼
Averages	C	C	C	C	►

**Source:** Author's table based on Paul E. Peterson and Frederick M. Hess' "Strength of State Proficiency Standards, 2007" (Table 1 in "Few States Set World-Class Standards," *Education Next*, Summer 2008).

**Notes:**

1. Grades represent the overall strength of grade 4 and 8 math and reading standards.
2. An "\*" indicates the states that did not have a standards test in place that year.
3. A "▲" represents grade improvement, a "▼" represents grade decline, and a "►" represents no change.

By rewarding schools equally with blue ribbons regardless of whether their states have weak or strong standards, the federal government lulls parents into a false sense of complacency about how well their children are doing. It also encourages policy makers to water down their states' standards to appear more nationally competitive.

What such wild inconsistencies among proficiency standards mean for parents is that some Blue-Ribbon schools are preparing students better than others. The proficiency difference between a fourth grader in Tennessee and one in Massachusetts, for example, amounts to four whole grade levels.<sup>25</sup> By rewarding schools equally with blue ribbons regardless of whether their states have weak or strong standards, the federal government lulls parents into a false sense of complacency about how well their children are doing. It also encourages policy makers to water down their states' standards to appear more nationally competitive. In so doing, state legislators hurt students' competitiveness in national and global job markets years from now by not holding them to high standards today.



## Student Success or Statistical Shenanigans? States Playing with Passing Scores

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Under NCLB, all students must be deemed proficient in reading and math as of the 2013-2014 school year, or states risk losing substantial portions of their federal education funding. This mandate puts powerful pressure on states to increase the number of students who are deemed proficient, whether they really are or not.

Researchers from the University of Chicago, for example, found evidence that “academically disadvantaged students in large cities are currently being left behind because the use of proficiency counts in NCLB does not provide strong incentives for schools to direct more attention toward them.”<sup>26</sup> They cite one anonymous middle-school teacher who recounted that at her school, “We were told to cross off the kids who would never pass. We were told to cross off the kids who, if we handed them the test tomorrow, they would pass. And then the kids who were left over, those were the kids we were supposed to focus on.”<sup>27</sup> Researchers at the Fordham Institute concur, explaining, “Evidence is emerging that the accountability metrics used for No Child Left Behind may encourage schools to focus their improvement efforts on the relatively small numbers of students who perform near the proficiency bar on the state test.”<sup>28</sup>

To help inflate the number of students deemed proficient, many states are lowering the number of questions students must answer correctly on annual standards tests. As part of what the Fordham researcher call states’ “triage” strategy, many states are lowering their tests’ passing scores, also called cut scores, to raise the number of students deemed proficient. Authors of a recent Fordham Institute report explain that

...setting low cut scores would be like saying a high school baseball player is proficient only if he can hit against Major League pitcher Roger Clemens...but then requiring batters to get only one hit out of 50 pitches to meet that standard.... Instead of a .300 [batting average], they’re aiming for .020.<sup>29</sup>

The Fordham Institute authors also question whether proficiency improvements in recent years are really due to improved student learning. They suggest as much as 70 percent of the reported math gains and about half of the reading gains are instead due to states’ lowering the passing scores.<sup>30</sup> “The findings of this inquiry are sobering, indeed alarming,” concludes Fordham Institute’s Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Michael J. Petrilli, who explain:

We see, with more precision than previous studies, that “proficiency” varies wildly from state to state, with “passing scores” ranging from the 6th percentile to the 77th. Over the past few years, twice as many states have

**To help inflate the number of students deemed proficient, many states are lowering the number of questions students must answer correctly on annual standards tests.**



seen their tests become easier in at least two grades as have seen their tests become more difficult. (Though we note, with some relief, that most state tests have maintained their level of difficulty—such as it is—over this period.) And, only a handful of states peg proficiency expectations consistently across the grades, with the vast majority setting thousands of [students] up to fail by middle school by aiming precipitously low in elementary school.<sup>31</sup>

Analyses of individual states' passing scores confirm this assessment. Arizona is a case in point. Goldwater Institute vice president Matthew Ladner found that, between 2003 and 2005,

Arizona standards suffered the biggest decline in the nation. The main culprit, although not necessarily the only one, in this dummied down of the AIMS test [Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards] was a lowering of the cut-scores, the percentage of questions a student must answer correctly to pass.<sup>32</sup>

In eighth-grade reading for example, students were expected to answer 73 percent of the questions correctly to be deemed proficient. Just two years later, eighth graders were considered “proficient” in reading if they answered only 59 percent of the reading questions correctly. With such a lowering of standards, it is not surprising that no Arizona Blue-Ribbon school was found underperforming in 2007.

Multi-state comparisons of passing scores, however, are difficult for several reasons. One is that many states do not make information about scores readily available. In fact, around 40 percent of states do not make this information readily available to the public.<sup>33</sup> Another difficulty is that passing scores must be evaluated in relation to how difficult a state's test actually is. As Liam Julian, Stanford University Hoover Institution research fellow, sums up: “America is awash in achievement ‘data,’ yet the truth about our educational performance is far from transparent and trustworthy.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, parents can easily be misled into believing their children know more than they actually do. A recent example reported by the *Washington Post* is instructive.

Potomac Senior High School student Charonda Godette struggled with geometry but passed Virginia's standards test, which in 2007 required students to answer only 27 out of 45 questions correctly. As the *Washington Post's* Ian Shapira reported, “To her mother, getting 60 percent of the questions correct, even if it is technically passing, is not acceptable. ‘I guess you'd be happy your child passed, but now what? Does she know anything more than before took she took the course?’”<sup>35</sup>



## Low Annual Proficiency Targets Leave Many Children Behind

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Under NLCB, states must ensure that their schools are making adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward the goal of 100 percent student proficiency in reading and math as of the 2013-2014 school year. One of the federal conditions for making AYP is that states have annual proficiency targets toward that goal, called annual measurable objectives (AMOs). These targets annually increase the percentage of students states deem proficient, so that states will be on track to meet the 100 percent proficiency goal in 2014.

The 2007-08 school year marks the midway point toward that goal, and evidence is mounting that many states are unlikely to attain it. Half the states, including the District of Columbia, have planned steady annual increases in the percentages of students deemed proficient until the 2013-2014 school-year deadline.<sup>36</sup> These states use a steady, incremental AMO trajectory to reach 100 percent proficiency, which would require that student achievement rise roughly 20 percentage points every three years on average. Florida and Kansas use a blended AMO trajectory, in which proficiency percentages increase steadily in some years and remain constant in others.

The remaining states (23) have opted for a backloaded trajectory instead. States like California that started off with very low annual proficiency targets will have to increase student proficiency about 10 percentage points annually beginning in the 2007-2008 school year to attain the 100 percent proficiency goal in 2014. Other backloaded states are waiting until 2010 and 2011 to begin ratcheting up their AMOs. As the Center for Education Policy explains, “A 2003 report from the National Education Association speculated that states were backloading large increases after the law’s scheduled reauthorization, in the hope that the 100 percent proficiency goal would be relaxed.”<sup>37</sup>

Education Sector’s Kevin Carey likens those states’ backloaded proficiency timelines to short-term, adjustable mortgages. “They thought Congress would come along and refinance it for them,” Carey told *Education Week* reporter David Hoff in a recent interview. Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA) intended to hear the NCLB reauthorization bill in the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee that he chairs after it stalled in another committee last year. Sen. Kennedy’s recent diagnosis of brain cancer, however, means the reauthorization bill’s fate is uncertain. Thus, backloading states hoping to avoid the goal of 100 percent proficiency “are just setting themselves up for failure,” Carey concluded.<sup>38</sup>

States with backloaded AMOs will be under growing pressure to weaken standards in the coming years. Even states with high standards that have adopted steadier incremental annual proficiency targets may also feel pressure to lower standards. The other alternative is that states may increasingly use an NCLB escape-hatch provision referred to as “safe harbor.” Schools that do not meet their states’ AMOs will not be penalized if they make



progress in other areas and improve the number of students deemed proficient by 10 percent over the previous year.<sup>39</sup>

**Table 5: Annual Proficiency Targets in States  
with 2007 Blue-Ribbon Schools<sup>40</sup>**

% STUDENTS WHO MUST BE PROFICIENT: 2006-07 SCHOOL YEAR					AMO TRAJECTORY
State	Reading	Rank	Math	Rank	
AL	54	18	61	9	Backloaded
AR	41	24	46	19	Incremental
AZ	55	17	45	21	Backloaded
CA	24	26	27	25	Backloaded
CO	83	2	71	3	Incremental
FL	51	19	56	14	Blended
GA	76	4	64	6	Backloaded
IA	70	9	68	5	Backloaded
IL	48	21	48	17	Incremental
IN	66	12	64	7	Backloaded
KY	45	23	30	24	Backloaded
MD	65	13	54	15	Incremental
MN	68	10	59	12	Incremental
MO	35	25	27	26	Incremental
NC	56	16	76	2	Incremental
NJ	73	5	58	13	Incremental
OH	72	7	60	10	Backloaded
SC	49	20	46	20	Incremental
SD	77	3	60	11	Backloaded
TN	87	1	77	1	Incremental
TX	60	14	50	16	Incremental
VA	73	6	71	4	Incremental
WA	58	15	43	22	Incremental
WI	68	11	48	18	Backloaded
WV	72	8	63	8	Backloaded
WY	48	22	40	23	Backloaded

**Sources:** Author's table based on AMO data from state departments of education, annual Consolidated State Application Accountability Workbooks submitted to the U.S. Department of Education, and the Center for Education Policy, 2008.

**Notes:**

1. Ranks closer to #1 indicate high current AMO proficiency targets. Ranks closer to #26, the lowest rank, indicate low current AMO proficiency targets.
2. Most recent editions and data used.
3. Percentages represent averages for all grades tested in each subject.
4. Massachusetts, New York, and Oklahoma use their own academic performance indexes instead of percentages of students proficient, therefore they cannot be compared to the other states. See endnote 40 for more information. Massachusetts and New York use incremental AMO trajectories, while Oklahoma's is backloaded.
5. The District of Columbia did not list its AMO data on the District or U.S. Department of Education websites. Author's August 9, 2008, request for this data went unfulfilled. The District does, however, use an incremental AMO trajectory.



As the Center for Education Policy explains, “States with backloaded trajectories are likely to have more difficulty meeting their AMOs than those that took an incremental approach, although states with incremental trajectories will probably have difficulty, too.” It cites a recent report to Congress which concluded that only 24 percent to 38 percent of the states would not meet the 100 percent proficiency goal in 2014 based on their current AMO proficiency targets. The Congressional report also concluded that states with lower standards are more likely to meet the goal of 100 percent proficiency.<sup>41</sup> This suggests that most states will not make the 2014 goal of 100 percent student proficiency unless they water down their standards.

As Table 5 shows, most Blue-Ribbon states have adopted an incremental AMO trajectory. Tennessee, for example, ranked first for the highest current AMO proficiency averages in reading and math; however, worst-ranked Missouri has also adopted an incremental AMO trajectory. These states represent extreme possible scenarios. Tennessee, which has weak proficiency standards, is more likely to meet the 100 percent student proficiency goal in 2013-2014, and can therefore set very high AMO proficiency targets. Meanwhile, one worst-ranked AMO state, Missouri, which has strong proficiency standards, will feel increased pressure either to lower those standards or to increasingly let its schools use the NCLB safe-harbor provision. Likewise, the other worst-ranked AMO state, California, also has high proficiency standards; however, it has opted to backload its annual proficiency trajectory, which introduces even more intense pressure to lower standards or use the proficiency safe-harbor escape hatch.

Whether states fiddle with their AMOs or become increasingly reliant on the NCLB safe-harbor exemption, it will become more difficult for parents to know whether student proficiency gains at their children’s schools are based on actual student learning or on statistical sleights of hand—further diminishing the Blue-Ribbon distinction.



## Conclusion and Recommendations

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States have many ways to mislead parents and the public about actual student and school performance under NCLB. Absent common sense steps toward greater transparency, the NCLB Blue-Ribbon award will serve more to conceal states' accountability-avoidance than to shed light on truly exemplary performance—especially with the looming 2014 100 percent student proficiency deadline. To preserve the delicate balance between flexibility for states and accurate information for parents, this analysis makes four recommendations for greater accountability through transparency, not additional expensive federal mandates.

**#1 Publicize Grade-Level Proficiency Results.** School-wide performance averages tell parents little about what matters most: how well students in their own children's grades are doing. While not all states, including the District of Columbia and Oklahoma, publicly report this information, they do have it available. As a condition of receiving federal NCLB funding, states should be required to post this information publicly online in a readily-accessible, user-friendly format.

Absent common sense steps toward greater transparency, the NCLB Blue-Ribbon award will serve more to conceal states' accountability-avoidance than to shed light on truly exemplary performance—especially with the looming 2014 100 percent student proficiency deadline.

**#2 Report State Proficiency Results Alongside Nationally-Representative Results.** Parents need to know how their child and their school's performance compare nationally. Given the current and likely growing propensity of states to water down proficiency standards as the 2014 100 percent student proficiency deadline approaches, states should be required to post their annual NAEP proficiency results alongside their state grade-level proficiency results. This comparison would help reveal disparities between how many students states say are proficient in core subjects by their standards, and how many of those same students a nationally-representative assessment says are proficient against standards that are less susceptible to politicization. Such transparency would help slow the downward spiral in state proficiency standards and hold state elected officials accountable for weakening them.

**#3 Post Required Passing Scores with Proficiency Scores.** Evidence is growing that proficiency gains in recent years have less to do with improved student learning and more to do with states lowering the number of questions students must answer correctly to be considered proficient. Yet around 40 percent of states do not make this information readily available to the public by posting it online. To ensure universally rigorous assessment even in states with high academic standards, states should publicize annual passing scores on their tests. The methodology should be comprehensible to a



lay audience, any changes from one year to the next should be publicly reported, and the rationale for such changes—especially if passing scores are lowered—should be explained in a straightforward, comprehensible way.

**#4: Publicize Annual Proficiency Targets.** To further ensure universally rigorous standards assessments, states should publicize their annual measurable objectives (AMOs), the incrementally increasing targets states set for the percentage of students required to score “proficient” each year until 2014, when all students must be proficient. Schools that do not make state-mandated annual proficiency targets and are granted a “safe-harbor” exemption should also be clearly posted, and parents’ rights under NCLB to move their children to better schools should be enforced.

The best accountability assurance of all—better than any blue ribbon—is for the U.S. Department of Education to provide parents with information that is both accurate *and* actionable, then enforce their children’s right to exit from underperforming schools.







# Appendix A

State	2007 Blue-Ribbon Schools				Student Performance			School Data		Demographic Data	
	School Name	District	City	Grade	Subject	% Proficient	% LEP	% IEP	Median Family Income \$	Median Home Value \$	
AR	Bentonville HS	Bentonville	Bentonville	11	R	71	3.6	10.7	56,872	111,257	
CA	Arroyo ES	Tustin Unified	Santa Ana	2	R	72	1.6	10.3	88,216	453,335	
CA	Beechwood ES	Fullerton Elementary	Fullerton	3	R	53	9.4	9.8	100,502	387,111	
				5	M	74					
				5	SCI	69					
				7	M	44					
CA	Blandford ES	Rowland Unified	Rowland Heights	3	R	61	28.7	10.4	68,494	259,117	
				5	R	73					
				6	R	71					
CA	Cosumnes River ES	Elk Grove Unified	Sloughhouse	2	R	69	7.6	8.8	107,809	301,621	
				5	R	65					
				5	SCI	61					
				6	R	73					
CA	Country Springs ES	Chino Valley Unified	Chino Hills	3	R	65	5.5	9.4	101,753	292,109	
				4	SCI	62					
CA	Deerfield ES	Irvine Unified	Irvine	6	M	68	13.8	9.7	100,867	336,299	
CA	Empire Oaks ES	Folsom-Cordova Unified	Folsom	3	R	74	6.0	14.1	102,843	275,493	
CA	Encinal ES	Menlo Park City Elementary	Menlo Park-n Atherto	3	R	70	6.3	11.9	248,911	1,204,078	
CA	Fairmont ES	Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified	Yorba Linda	2	R	70	4.7	11.2	110,067	373,745	
				3	R	63					
				5	SCI	61					

State	School Name	District	City	Grade	Subject	% Proficient	% LEP	% IEP	Median Family Income \$	Median Home Value \$
CA	Gettysburg ES	Clovis Unified	Clovis	3	M	69	12.1	7.9	86,150	184,465
				3	R	56				
				4	R	74				
				5	R	71				
				5	SCI	49				
				6	M	72				
				6	R	72				
CA	Liberty School	Liberty Elementary	Petaluma	6	M	71	9.5	5.6	82,193	413,841
CA	Mariners ES	Newport-Mesa Unified	Newport Beach	3	R	71	5.6	10.6	152,818	776,268
CA	McNear ES	Petaluma City Elementary	Petaluma	2	M	62	13.3	17.4	82,193	413,841
				2	R	38				
				3	M	61				
				3	R	49				
				4	M	65				
				5	M	61				
				5	R	66				
				5	SCI	69				
				6	M	70				
				6	R	71				
CA	Mission Estancia ES	Encinitas Union Elementary	Carlsbad	5	SCI	70	4.4	9.8	108,794	428,290
				6	M	73				
CA	Olinda ES	Brea-Olinda Unified	Brea	3	R	65	12.0	10.6	80,047	382,896
				6	R	74				





State	School Name	District	City	Grade	Subject	% Proficient	% LEP	% IEP	Median Family Income \$	Median Home Value \$
CA	Quail Summit ES	Walnut Valley Unified	Diamond Bar	3	R	56	11.8	6.9	90,745	294,156
CA	Tularcitos ES	Carmel Unified	Carmel Valley	2	R	72	6.1	9.4	107,676	578,318
				3	R	63				
				5	R	72				
				5	SCI	66				
CA	Tustin Memorial ES	Tustin Unified	Santa Ana	3	R	65	3.1	10.3	88,216	453,335
CA	Leonard B. Westhoff ES	Walnut Valley Unified	Walnut	5	SCI	67	8.2	6.9	97,252	331,362
CA	Wood Ranch ES	Simi Valley Unified	Simi Valley	3	R	65	1.3	10.4	95,970	291,266
				5	SCI	71				
				6	M	56				
				6	R	71				
CO	Cheyenne Mountain HS	Cheyenne Mountain 12	Colorado Springs	9	M	61	4.1	4.9	65,735	220,828
				10	M	66				
				10	SCI	73				
CO	Evergreen HS	Jefferson County R-1	Evergreen	9	M	63	5.8	9.8	114,759	344,607
				9	W	71				
				10	M	62				
FL	Design & Architectural Sr. HS	Dade County	Miami	10	R	74	0.2	3.7	37,039	209,871
				11	R	71				
FL	Eagle Point ES	Broward County	Weston	5	SCI	70	21.4	6.0	90,087	195,301
FL	Pensacola Beach ES	Escambia County	Pensacola Beach	5	SCI	73	0.0	0.0	77,165	180,852
FL	The Sanibel School	Lee County	Sanibel	8	SCI	74	2.6	5.9	115,065	473,443
FL	Seaside Neighborhood	Walton County	Santa Rosa Beach	8	SCI	69	0.0	2.7	63,477	194,458
IL	Adolph Link ES	Schaumburg CCSD 54	Elk Grove Village	5	R	74	7.6	15.8	89,132	228,775

State	School Name	District	City	Grade	Subject	% Proficient	% LEP	% IEP	Median Family Income \$	Median Home Value \$
IN	Burriss Laboratory School	Burriss Laboratory School	Muncie	3	R	72	1.3	17.7	51,338	53,461
IA	John Glenn ES	North Scott Comm. School	Donahue	6	M	70	11.7	0.1	71,624	117,879
KY	Highlands HS	Fort Thomas Independent	Ft. Thomas	11	SS	70	0.4	9.9	77,593	151,593
MO	Conway ES	Ladue	St. Louis	3	M	60	0.5	0.0	199,221	636,595
				3	R	60				
				4	R	73				
				5	M	70				
MO	Bessie Ellison Accelerated	St. Joseph	St. Joseph	3	R	63	0.5	0.0	52,399	79,469
				4	M	67				
				4	R	62				
MO	Westchester ES	Kirkwood R-VII	Kirkwood	3	M	66	0.6	0.0	96,897	215,048
				3	R	72				
				4	M	68				
				4	R	71				
				5	M	71				
NY	P.S. 1840 Flushing Manor School	NYC Geographic District #25	Whitestone	3	R	71	8.2	N/A	79,910	352,554
NY	South Bay ES	West Babylon Union Free	West Babylon	3	R	65	3.1	9.7	82,906	196,987
				5	R	70				
SC	Jennie Moore ES	Charleston County	Mt. Pleasant	4	SCI	73	1.1	13.3	92,087	251,411
WA	Inglemoor Senior HS	Northshore	Kenmore	10	SCI	60	2.2	7.6	89,852	296,925
WA	South Whidbey HS	South Whidbey	Langley	10	M	59	0.6	7.4	67,170	253,217
				10	SCI	32				
<b>Avg</b>							<b>6.2</b>	<b>8.4</b>	<b>94,296</b>	<b>329,887</b>





**Sources:** Author's table based on proficiency data for the 2006-07 school year, as reported by state departments of education and GreatSchools.net. Student and school data comes from the National Center for Educational Achievement's Just-for-the-Kids state affiliates and the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics. Median household income and home values are from the U.S. Census Bureau.

**Notes:**

1. The District of Columbia and Oklahoma do not report grade-level proficiency data. For more information, see endnote 15.
2. Author's analysis of grade-level proficiency included subjects tested by the states examined: reading (R), which includes language arts and English, math (M), science (SCI), social studies (SS), and writing (W) for all grades tested in the respective states.
3. "LEP" represents limited English proficient.
4. "IEP" stands for Individualized Education Plan and represents students classified with disabilities. In some cases, IEP data from NCES was used, and may overstate schools' percentages of students with disabilities because the NCES only collects district-wide data, not school-level data.
5. Median household income and home values were obtained by looking up schools' zip codes on the U.S. Census Bureau website. Data from 2000 were the latest available for all zip codes. Amounts shown represent 2000 Census figures inflation-adjusted to reflect 2007 dollars.

## Appendix B: A Closer Look at Select Underperforming Blue-Ribbon Schools<sup>42</sup>

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As noted previously, students at underperforming 2007 Blue-Ribbon schools primarily struggled with reading, followed by math—the two core subjects used to determine NCLB Blue-Ribbon winners. Such focus on these core subjects may mistakenly lead parents to believe that students in these schools are doing well in the other core subjects such as science and social studies, too. At a number of Blue-Ribbon schools where a majority of students are proficient in reading and math, however, more than a quarter of students are not proficient in those other core subjects. This section provides a narrative overview of many of the 2007 underperforming Blue-Ribbon schools across the country, starting in Arkansas.

Bentonville High School, in Bentonville, Arkansas, is home to the headquarters of the world's largest retailer, Wal-Mart. The late John Walton, son of Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton, is a notable Bentonville alumnus. At this 2007 Blue-Ribbon high school, however, nearly 30 percent of juniors are not proficient in reading, even though less than four percent of Bentonville High students are classified as English-learners.

Another underperforming 2007 Blue-Ribbon School is Encinal Elementary School in Atherton, California. This community was ranked by *Forbes Magazine* as one of the most affluent places in America in 2005, and as one of the best places to live by *Money Magazine* in 2008. Median family income in Atherton approaches \$250,000, and median home values exceed \$1.2 million. Several notable business leaders call Atherton home, including Google Chairman and CEO Eric E. Schmidt, Charles R. Schwab, eBay CEO Meg Whitman, Hewlett-Packard CEO Mark Hurd, and Robert Fischer, Gap Chairman. Yet at this Blue-Ribbon School, 30 percent of third graders were not proficient in English language arts in 2007.

McNear Elementary School is located in the northern California city of Petaluma in Sonoma County. For more than 30 years it has been a favorite film location, boasting scenes in *American Graffiti*, *Cujo*, *Basic Instinct*, and *Pleasantville*, just to name a few. Petaluma hosts the annual “World’s Ugliest Dog Contest” and has also been home to several notable philosophers, poets, architects, filmmakers, and actors, including Lloyd Bridges, Winona Ryder, and Elijah Wood. Yet in four grades at 2007 Blue-Ribbon McNear Elementary, more than a quarter of the students are not proficient in English language arts (ranging from 29 to 62 percent), in another four grades more than a quarter are not proficient in math (ranging from 29 to 39 percent), and 31 percent of fifth graders are also not proficient in science. For this poor performance, parents in Petaluma pay more than \$400,000 for the median home.

Heading south, Carmel Valley is located in Monterey, California. It is home to the Jamesburg Earth Station, the telecommunications facility NASA used during its Apollo moon landings. Leon Panetta, former White House Chief of Staff to President Bill Clinton also calls Carmel Valley home. Parents will pay well over half a million dollars for a house



here. Yet at Blue-Ribbon Tularcitos Elementary School in the Carmel Unified School District, more than one-third of fifth graders are not proficient in science and one quarter or more second, third, and fifth graders are not proficient in English language arts.

Farther south in California is the city of Carlsbad in San Diego County. It has also ranked on *Forbes Magazine's* list of most expensive zip codes, with median home values around \$430,000.

Such notable attractions as Legoland and the renowned golf and tennis resort La Costa are located in Carlsbad. The *Wall Street Journal's* annual D: All Things Digital conference is hosted in Carlsbad. Numerous companies are located here as well, including the Gemological Institute of America's headquarters, Sierra Wireless' research and development office, life science technology company Invitrogen, satellite communications company ViaSat, Inc., and computer peripherals manufacturer Razer USA Ltd. Unfortunately, the performance of 2007 Blue-Ribbon winner Mission Estancia Elementary School does not bode well for students' future employment at such companies. Thirty percent of Mission Estancia fifth graders are not proficient in science, and about the same percentage of sixth graders are not proficient in science.

In addition to these examples, there are 15 more underperforming 2007 Blue-Ribbon Schools throughout California, where median home values range from just under \$200,000 to well over three-quarters of a million dollars (see Appendix A).

Moving east to Colorado, Evergreen High School located in Evergreen, is nestled in the Rocky Mountain foothills west of Denver. This 2007 Blue-Ribbon high school boasts several distinguished alumni, including space shuttle astronaut Jeffrey Ashby, Jamin Winans, director of the independent film *11:59*, Major League Baseball player Kevin Kouzmanoff, and South Park co-creator Trey Parker. The median home value in this Colorado town is \$345,000, but in 2007 nearly one-third of Evergreen High School's freshmen and sophomores were not proficient in math, and almost 30 percent of sophomores were not proficient in math and writing—in spite of the fact that less than six percent of Evergreen students are limited English proficient.

Located in Miami's design district, Design and Architectural Senior High (DASH) is a magnet school that is considered one of the best high schools in America by *US News & World Report* and *Newsweek*. It was also *Teen People's* "Cool School of the Month" in May 2000. Median home values in this Miami community exceed \$200,000, and less than one percent of DASH's students are classified as limited English proficient (0.2 percent), but 26 percent of sophomores and nearly 30 percent of seniors were not proficient in reading at this Blue-Ribbon school in 2007. At four more Florida 2007 Blue-Ribbon schools located in Weston, Pensacola Beach, Sanibel, and Santa Rosa Beach, between 26 and 31 percent of fifth and eighth graders were not proficient in science (see Appendix A).

Northeast of Chicago is the community of Elk Grove Village, home of 2007 Blue-Ribbon elementary school Adolph Link. Elk Grove Village includes several famous natives and residents, including screenwriter Bill Kelly. Parents in this community will pay nearly \$230,000 on average for a house near Adolph Link Elementary, yet 26 percent of fifth graders at this school are not proficient in reading.



Commonly referred to as Middletown USA, Muncie, Indiana, is home to 2007 Blue-Ribbon winner Burriss Laboratory School, where students are admitted by a lottery system. The school is a division of Ball State University and is where the University's pre-service teachers practice. The Indiana Academy for Science, Mathematics, and Humanities is also hosted at Burriss Laboratory School. Notable alumni include Professor of Finance at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School Richard Herring. Nearly 30 percent of fifth graders, however, are not proficient in language arts, even though only about one percent of students are classified as English-learners.

Highland High School in Fort Thomas, Kentucky, is located in the state's Bluegrass Region along the Ohio River in Campbell County. Civil War Union General Philip Sheridan personally selected the site of the city in 1890 to house a new United States Army post. Sheridan named it Fort Thomas in honor of Union General George Henry Thomas, who won one of the most decisive battles of the Civil War when he defeated the Confederate army at the Battle of Nashville. Given Fort Thomas' rich history, it is surprising that Highland High is the only 2007 Blue-Ribbon school to underperform in social studies, with 30 percent of juniors not reaching proficiency in this core subject.

Conway Elementary School is a 2007 Blue-Ribbon school and a Missouri Gold Star School of Excellence. Conway rates a perfect parent rating of 10 out of 10. "Simply the best elementary school in the State of Missouri," writes one Conway parent. "Top national test scores." Another parent raves that Conway Elementary is "in a class by itself...Continues to show true excellence in education for a public school!"<sup>43</sup> The median home value in this St. Louis community is \$637,000, but at least a quarter of students in every grade tested score below proficiency in at least one subject. A full 40 percent of third graders score below proficient in both language arts and math at this 2007 Blue-Ribbon School. Among Conway Elementary fourth graders, 27 percent score below proficient in language arts, and 30 percent of fifth graders are not proficient in math.

Nearby Kirkwood, Missouri, is the home of another 2007 Blue-Ribbon school, Westchester Elementary. Kirkwood was the first planned suburb west of the Mississippi River, and according to the city's official website, "Kirkwood schools offer an education experience that is unmatched."<sup>44</sup> Westchester Elementary parents agree, earning the school a perfect parent rating of 10 out of 10. "I couldn't ask for a better school for my fourth grader and kindergartner," writes one parent. "We are very fortunate to have this school near our home." Another parent praises the school as "a great example of parents and teachers working together to give their children the best."<sup>45</sup> In all grades tested, however, a quarter or more of students were not proficient in math, ranging from 29 percent of fifth graders up to around 33 percent of third and fourth graders. Nearly 30 percent of Westchester third and fourth graders were also not proficient in language arts. For this kind of performance, parents pay more than \$215,000 on average for a home near this school.

Flushing Manor School (P.S. 184) is located in Whitestone, New York. Classic film stars, including Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, Harry Houdini and Rudolph Valentino once lived in the New York City Borough of Queens. Nineteenth-century transcendentalist





poet Walt Whitman is also believed to have once taught in a tiny Whitestone schoolhouse. Today nearly 30 percent of Flushing Manor third graders are not proficient in language arts, yet their parents spend more than \$350,000 on average for homes near the school.

Not far away on Long Island is 2007 Blue-Ribbon school South Bay Elementary. It is located in the community of West Babylon, once home to such famous residents as Geraldo Rivera, Major League Baseball pitcher Billy Koch, and Bravo cable television's *Top Chef* season one winner Harold Dieterle. South Bay parents pay nearly \$200,000 on average for their homes, yet in half the grades tested, a quarter or more of students are not proficient in language arts. Among third graders, 35 percent of students are not proficient, while 30 percent of fifth graders were not proficient in this core subject. Most parents give South Bay Elementary positive reviews, but one parent complains, "We pay insane taxes and have to provide over \$100 worth of supplies for [the] 'community supply box'."<sup>46</sup>

Turning to the Deep South, Jennie Moore Elementary School is located in the suburban town of Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, in Charleston County. Mount Pleasant was once an exclusive summer haven for affluent Charleston residents. Today the town of Mount Pleasant enjoys a diversified and growing economy, including technology, research and development firms, as well as advanced manufacturing and biotechnology companies.<sup>47</sup> Median home values in this magnet school's neighborhood exceed a quarter of a million dollars, yet 27 percent of fourth graders are not proficient in science.

Concluding this overview of the country's underperforming 2007 Blue-Ribbon schools are two high schools in Washington State. The first is Inglemoor Senior High School, located in the bedroom community of Kenmore on the shore of Lake Washington, where median home values approach \$300,000. More than one-third of Inglemoor students participate in its International Baccalaureate (IB) program, which, according to assistant principal John Loy, improves the academic success of all students.<sup>48</sup> Yet 40 percent of Inglemoor sophomores (the only high school year assessed in Washington) were not proficient in science. Likewise, 40 percent of sophomores at Blue-Ribbon high school South Whidbey did not test "proficient" in science—even though the district's vision statement promises parents, "Every student is a successful independent learner, empowered for life in the global society of the 21st century."<sup>49</sup> South Whidbey parents pay more than \$250,000 to live in this school's seaside community of Langley.



## Endnotes

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- 15 The District of Columbia does not release grade-level student proficiency data, according to a July 17, 2008, telephone query to the District of Columbia Public Schools Department; therefore, Blue-Ribbon award winner Ben W. Murch Elementary School was removed from the analysis. According to GreatSchools.net, “In 2006-2007 Washington, D.C. used the District of Columbia Comprehensive Assessment System (DC-CAS) to test students in reading and math in grades 3 through 8 and 10.” Only aggregate achievement scores for grades 3 through 6 are reported. In 2007, 84 percent of students overall scored “proficient” in reading, and 74 percent of students scored “proficient” in math. The District of Columbia’s Benjamin Banneker Senior High School is included in the analysis because sophomores are tested; therefore grade-level proficiency results for this Blue-Ribbon school are included in the analysis: 95 percent of students scored “proficient” in reading, and 91 percent scored “proficient” in math. See GreatSchools.net. Oklahoma is the second state that does not report grade-level student proficiency. Thus its two Blue-Ribbon ribbon schools were eliminated. According to GreatSchools.net, “In 2006-2007 Oklahoma used the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Tests (OCCT) to test students in grades 3 through 8 and in high school in several subjects. ... The OCCT is a high school graduation requirement.” However, since individual high school grades tested are not provided, Edmond North High School was excluded from the analysis. GreatSchools.net also reports that, in 2007, 85 percent of its students overall were proficient in reading, and 81 percent of students overall were proficient in math. The second Oklahoma school excluded from the analysis is Woodlands Elementary School in Ponca City. GreatSchools.net reports that, in 2007, 98 percent of students overall were proficient in reading, and 96 percent of students overall were proficient in math in 2007. Email queries sent on July 17, 2008 and August 17, 2008 to the Oklahoma Department of Education for grade-level proficiency data for these schools went unanswered.
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  - 22 Paul E. Peterson, “Little Gain in Student Achievement,” Chapter 2 of *Our Schools and Our Future: Are We Still at Risk?* Paul E. Peterson, ed. (Stanford, CA: Hoover Press, 2003), p. 40, <http://www.hoover.org/publications/books/3002506.html>.
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