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2004 Elections Project
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POLICY BRIEF ■ EDUCATION

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EARLY TRENDS OF THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT FOR UPPER MIDWESTERN STATES

The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has helped stimulate improvements in some Midwestern schools and districts, while, at the same time, producing controversies similar to those in other parts of the country. Compared to the rest of the nation, a much lower percentage of public schools in four of the five Upper Midwestern states have been designated as needing improvement (South Dakota is the exception). This policy brief describes how five Upper Midwestern states (Iowa, Minnesota, North and South Dakota, and Wisconsin) have responded to the NCLB legislation, contrasting the results to date and describing the diverse approaches of the region's states.

Targeting schools

Although some would say that every public school could be improved, NCLB requires states to identify public schools as "needs improvement" when they fail to meet stipulated scores and/or when they fail to show sufficient progress toward state standards, as measured by performance on state-developed tests. In particular, schools are assigned the "needs improvement" label when students in the school or students in a subgroup of that school (defined, for instance, by income [low], English speaking ability [limited], or race [e.g., African American]) do not score high enough on tests developed by the state or are not making sufficient progress on these tests. The label also may be applied when attendance or graduation rates in high school fall below defined levels.

Failure to make sufficient progress triggers a series of actions with significant financial implications. The first year the school is put on a "watch list." If there is not sufficient progress in the second year, families are notified that they may transfer their children to another public school that has not been identified as "needs improvement." Another consequence of continued failure to improve enough is that schools with federal Title I funds must offer and pay for tutoring services for their students. Families can select from tutoring services provided by their schools or other organizations. If students decide to transfer from a school failing to make adequate progress, that school must pay transportation costs.

[1] Officials and researchers use various methods to calculate high school graduation rates. This can make cross-state comparisons difficult. This paper uses the graduation rates published by the national, respected publication *Education Week*. That paper used a study by Jay Greene and others at the Manhattan Institute. Greene's study examined what percentage of students entered 9th grade and subsequently graduated from high school four years later. The method of figuring graduation can have a major impact on the figure reported. For example, Wisconsin reported a high school graduation rate of 90.83% for 2002, well above the figure that Greene reported for that state.

Success in the Upper Midwest

Traditionally, Upper Midwestern states have been distinguished by strong academic performance by their students and schools. Table 1 shows one example: high school graduation rates in the Upper Midwest have ranked well above the national average. (Upper Midwestern states have enjoyed similar success in college entrance exams.)

Table 1: 2002 High School Graduation Rate in Percentages

National	70%
Iowa	85%
Minnesota	80%
North Dakota	89%
South Dakota	85%
Wisconsin[1]	81%

Source: *Education Week*

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The strong academic performance of Upper Midwestern schools has meant that relatively few of them have been designated as not making adequate annual progress (which happens in the first year) or been designated as a "needs improvement" school (this happens if one or more of the school's subgroups does not make adequate progress two years in a row). A January 2004 report showed that about 28% of the nation's 91,380 public schools were placed on the "watch list" last year (Center on Education Policy). These schools will have to improve or face the consequences outlined above.

By contrast, state department of education records show that four of the five Upper Midwestern states have a much lower percentage of their schools on this list. Table 2 shows that only 9.5% of Iowa public schools have been designated as not making satisfactory progress under NCLB, followed by 9% of North Dakota schools, 8% of Minnesota schools, and a mere 5% of Wisconsin schools. The only exception to this pattern of superior performance in the Upper Midwest is South Dakota, where one-third of its schools have not made satisfactory progress for the last school year.

Table 2: Number of Midwestern and National Schools Not Making Satisfactory Progress Under No Child Left Behind Standards

State	# of Schools That Missed AYP* for One Year	# of Schools Placed on "Needs Improvement" List in 2nd Year	% of Schools	# of Schools	% of Schools
IA	1,519	145	9.5%	11	0.8%
MN	1,835	144	8%	37	2%
ND	497	47	9%	23	5%
SD	749	238	32%	32	4%
WI [2]	2,208	106	5%	68	3%
US	91,380	25,982	28%	5,506	6%

*Adequate Yearly Progress

Sources: (Cahill: Iowa, Gallagher: North Dakota, Thompson: Wisconsin, and Walsh: Minnesota, *Education Week*, Center on Education Policy).

State approaches vary in measuring student progress

Upper Midwestern states vary widely in their response to the mandates of NCLB. For example, some states are spending millions of dollars to create new tests, while Iowa is using tests that have been available for many years. States also are phasing in new tests at different rates, with Minnesota implementing statewide tests for many students in grades 3–8 more rapidly than other states in the region.

[2] Wisconsin helps illustrate various ways that schools can be placed on the "needs improvement" list. Of the 68 Wisconsin schools that have not made AYP for the second year in the 2002–2003 school year, 11 missed AYP for two consecutive years, 14 made AYP for one year after having missed it for two consecutive years, five missed AYP for three consecutive years, 31 made AYP for one year after having missed for three consecutive years, and seven missed AYP for four years in a row.

Upper Midwestern states are taking very different approaches to setting the standards students must meet, developing the tests to determine whether students reach these standards, and phasing in use of the tests. For example:

- **IOWA** districts are measuring student progress with tests that have been available for many years: the Iowa Test of Basic Skills for grades 3–8 and the Iowa Test of Educational Development for high school students. Iowa has not spent any funds developing new tests and does not intend to do so. (Cahill)
- Prior to the NCLB legislation, **MINNESOTA** already had developed statewide tests for students in grades 3, 5, and 8. New tests are being developed to meet the federal legislation requirements that all students be tested in reading and math in grades 3–8, plus in certain areas while in high school. Bill Walsh, director of communications for the Minnesota State Department of Education, estimates that developing new math and reading tests costs approximately $1.3 million per grade level. The reading and math tests for grades 3, 5, 7, and 8 have been implemented for the 2003–2004 school year. Tests for grades 4 and 6 will be implemented in the 2005–2006 school year. (Walsh)
- **NORTH DAKOTA** already had developed state tests for students in grades 4, 8, and 12. The state has contracted with McGraw Hill, a national test publisher, to help create standards and new tests. The state expects the tests to be ready for the 2005–2006 school year. (Gallagher)
- **WISCONSIN** joined with 10 other states to obtain a federal grant that will fund production of new English language proficiency tests that state officials intend to begin using in spring 2005. The multi-state consortium, titled Enhancement Assessment Instruments for Limited English Proficient Students, is designed in part to help promote English language acquisition and academic achievement via technology. Prior to NCLB, Wisconsin had statewide assessments in reading and math at grades 4, 8, and 10. New tests are being developed to meet the federal requirements that all students in grades 3–8 be tested in reading and math by 2005–2006. (Thompson)

Controversies accompany opportunities for innovation

A recent St. Paul newspaper article explained both the encouragement and frustrations some educators and students feel about NCLB. The article described an elementary school that had low test scores during the 2002–2003 school year. About 68% of the school's students are low income and about 38% do not speak English as their native language. The article quotes educators determined to improve. Some of the same educators also wonder whether it is possible to improve students' skills fast enough to get off the "needs improvement" list (Welbes).

While relatively few Minnesota schools have been placed on the "needs improvement" list thus far, a February 2004 report by the state's non-partisan Office of Legislative Auditor predicted that this could change. The report suggested that by 2014, when virtually all students are expected to meet state

standards, between 80% and 100% of Minnesota's elementary schools could be placed on the state's "needs improvement" list unless changes are made (Office of Legislative Auditor). Commissioner of Education Cheri Pierson Yecke responded that she thought such a prediction was much too high (Yecke).

Some schools clearly are making considerable progress. The Center for School Change, with assistance from the Cargill Corporation, is working with North Star and Cooper elementary schools to improve student outcomes. Some of the changes described below were begun before NCLB—but NCLB has encouraged these schools to pursue improvements.

The first major change in these schools involved retraining faculty to use more research-based approaches to teaching. The second involved greater outreach and training programs for families, so they could help their youngsters learn reading and math.

North Star, a Minneapolis public elementary school, serves 525 students. More than 90% of North Star's student body comes from low-income families and all of them are from minority communities (approximately 50% Hmong and 50% African American). Thirty percent do not speak English at home. Cooper Elementary, another Minneapolis elementary school, serves about 200 students. Eighty-five percent of its students are from low-income families and 37% are considered English language learners. Table 3 shows that the percentage of students passing Minnesota math and reading tests at North Star and Cooper increased two to seven fold over the past few years.

These gains are especially impressive because of the students served by these two schools. Between 1999 and 2003, the percentage of students from low-income families increased at Cooper from 86% to 88%. At North Star, the percentage of low-income students increased from 92% to 94%.

Table 3: Percentage of Students Passing Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments in Math

School	3rd Graders 1999	3rd Graders 2003	5th Graders 1999	5th Graders 2003
Cooper	26%	75%	9%	65%
North Star	33%	77%	27%	37%

Table 4: Percentage of Students Passing Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments in Reading

School	3rd Graders 1999	3rd Graders 2003	5th Graders 1999	5th Graders 2003
Cooper	27%	60%	20%	41%
North Star	32%	63%	20%	49%

Looking ahead

Voters in the Upper Midwest are looking for evidence that the time, effort, and significant expenditures required by NCLB will produce significant progress. The key issues are:

- Has student learning and performance improved as a result of NCLB?
- Can most schools serving low-income and limited English speaking students match the progress of schools like Cooper and North Star?
- What will happen over time to the percentage of schools deemed "needs improvement?"

NCLB has created a stir in the Upper Midwest. As with the rest of the country, educators are listening to the U.S. Department of Education and looking ahead to the coming election, wondering what, if any, modifications will be made.

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