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NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT

States Face Challenges Measuring Academic Growth

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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-06-948T, a testimony before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce

Why GAO Did This Study

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA) requires that states improve academic performance so that all students reach proficiency in reading and mathematics by 2014 and that achievement gaps close among student groups. States set annual proficiency targets using an approach known as a status model, which calculates test scores 1 year at a time. Some states have interest in using growth models that measure changes in test scores over time to determine if schools are meeting proficiency targets.

The Chairman of the Committee on Education and the Workforce asked GAO to testify on its recent report on measuring academic growth. Specifically, this testimony discusses (1) how many states are using growth models and for what purposes, (2) how growth models can measure progress toward achieving key NCLBA goals, and (3) what challenges states face in using growth models especially to meet the law's key goals.

While growth models may be defined as tracking the same students over time, GAO used a definition that also included tracking the performance of schools and groups of students. In comments on the report, Education said that this definition could be confusing. GAO used this definition of growth to reflect the variety of approaches states were taking.

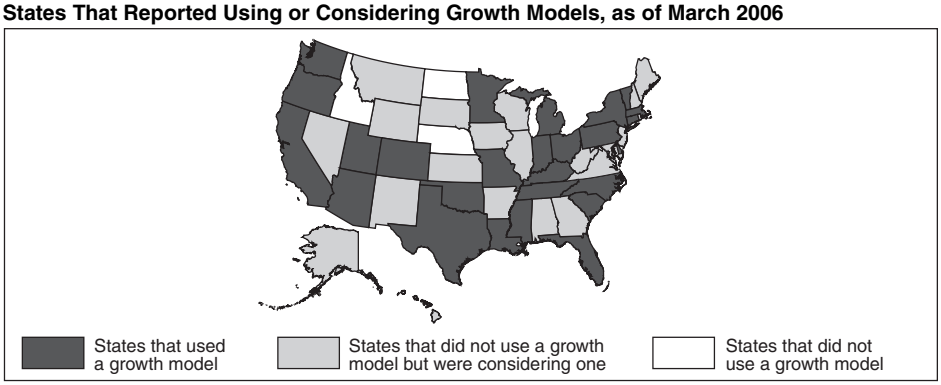
www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-948T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Marnie S. Shaul (202) 512-7215 or shaulm@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Nearly all states were using or considering growth models for a variety of purposes in addition to their status models as of March 2006. Twenty-six states were using growth models, and another 22 were either considering or in the process of implementing them. Most states using growth models measured progress for schools and for student groups, and 7 also measured growth for individual students. States used growth models to target resources for students that need extra help or award teachers bonuses based on their school's performance.

States That Reported Using or Considering Growth Models, as of March 2006



Source: GAO analysis.

Certain growth models are capable of tracking progress toward the goals of universal proficiency by 2014 and closing achievement gaps. For example, Massachusetts uses its model to set targets based on the growth that it expects from schools and their student groups. Schools can make adequate yearly progress (AYP) if they reach these targets, even if they fall short of reaching the statewide proficiency targets set with the state's status model. Tennessee designed a model that projects students' test scores and whether they will be proficient in the future. In this model, if 79 percent of a school's students are predicted to be proficient in 3 years, the school would reach the state's 79 percent proficiency target for the current school year (2005-2006).

States face challenges measuring academic growth, such as creating data and assessment systems to support growth models and having personnel to analyze and communicate results. The use of growth models to determine AYP may also challenge states to make sure that students in low-performing schools receive needed assistance. U.S. Department of Education (Education) initiatives may help states address these challenges. Education started a pilot project for states to use growth models that meet the department's specific criteria, including models that track progress of individual students, to determine AYP. Education also provided grants to states to track individual test scores over time.