



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
OFFICE OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY

JAN 08 2009

The Honorable Joseph B. Morton
State Superintendent of Education
Alabama Department of Education
P.O. Box 302101
Montgomery, AL 36130-2101

Dear Superintendent Morton:

As we approach our seventh year of implementing the accountability provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, I want to take a moment to thank you and your colleagues for all your hard work to help realize the goals of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB), which has led to real and meaningful improvements in student achievement. These outcomes are due, in no small part, to the efforts of the dedicated educators in your state. We have seen an increased attention on high expectations for every child, an improvement in student performance across the board and a decrease in achievement gaps.

As Secretary Spellings is fond of saying, “what gets measured, gets done.” With that in mind, I want to take this opportunity to update you on the status of some NCLB cornerstones with respect to Alabama. Detailed information on specific components of your state’s assessment and accountability system is contained in an attachment to this letter.

- Assessment system: An assessment system that produces valid and reliable results is fundamental to an accountability system that holds schools and districts accountable for educating all students. Information regarding both the reading/language arts and mathematics assessment system used in determining adequate yearly progress for schools and districts in your state as well as details of the 2007–08 administration of science assessments are attached.
- Accountability components: The Department’s new Title I regulations provide for greater scrutiny to states’ accountability systems, including establishing a uniform and more accurate measure of calculating high school graduation rates that is comparable across states and requiring that states ensure that statistical measures maximize the inclusion of students and student subgroups in accountability determinations. Hence, the regulations also require that all states submit portions of their Accountability Workbook for peer review. In the attachment to this letter you will find information on Alabama’s minimum group size, annual measurable objectives, confidence interval, full academic year definition, and graduation rate.
- Departmental flexibilities: Over the past several years, the Secretary has offered several flexibilities to states, such as growth model and differentiated accountability pilots, assessing students with disabilities, and discretionary grant programs, such as the Teacher Incentive Fund, Enhanced Assessment Grants, and State Longitudinal Data System Grants. I am pleased to note that Alabama is participating in several of these endeavors.
 - Two percent transition flexibility: Alabama was approved in 2007-08 to include a proxy calculation for any school or district that did not make AYP due to the students with disabilities subgroup in grades 3-8. Alabama is eligible for this flexibility because the SEA is developing an alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards (AA-MAAS) for students with certain disabilities.

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The Department of Education’s mission is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.

- Reversing Choice and SES: Alabama was approved to offer Supplemental Educational Services (SES) to Title I schools in the first year of school improvement.
- General Supervision Enhancement Grantee: Alabama is working towards the development of an alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards. (Year 1: \$396,020; Year 2: \$297,538; and Year 3: \$198,196)

In addition, for your information, I am enclosing a file that provides information across all states on the current assessment status, participation in flexibilities offered by the Department, AYP information, and discretionary grants. I wish you continued success in raising the achievement in Alabama. NCLB has focused our attention on closing achievement gaps and increasing the awareness of those students who have often been left behind: economically disadvantaged, limited English proficient, and students with disabilities. I have enjoyed the opportunity to work with you and all your colleagues across the country on such important issues.

Sincerely,


Kerri L. Briggs, Ph.D.

Enclosures

cc: Governor Bob Riley
Gloria Turner

Assessment System

Your assessment system met the requirements to be considered *Fully Approved*. This means that Alabama's assessment system includes assessments in grades 3-8 and high school in reading/language arts and mathematics. Science assessments will soon affect this status as well. I encourage you to consider whether there are any areas in which the Department can provide or facilitate technical assistance to Alabama in meeting the statutory or regulatory requirements or as you consider changes to your current assessment system.

- Alabama's science assessments are not yet fully compliant.
 - In 2007–08, the Department required that the state meet four minimal criteria related to the content area of science: have science content standards; have a general and alternate science assessment; include all students in one of the science assessments (i.e., either the general or alternate); and report the results of the science assessments. Alabama has not yet met these requirements.
 - Beginning with the 2008-09 school year, science assessments will be included in the states' assessment status. For additional detail, please see the enclosed fact sheet. Because Alabama did not submit evidence of its science assessments for the October 2008 peer review, it must submit evidence for the March 23-27, 2009 peer review. Evidence for this review is due three weeks prior to the review.

Accountability System

- Minimum group size (the state-defined minimum number of students necessary to have valid and reliable AYP determinations): Alabama's minimum group size is 40. (The average across all states is approximately 30 students.)
- Annual measurable objectives (AMO) (the yearly target for the percentage of students required to be proficient or above for a school to make AYP):
 - 2008–09: Alabama's goals for this year are:

Subject	Grade	AMO
Math	3	74%
	4	72%
	5	71%
	6	56%
	7	57%
	8	64%
	11	77%
Reading	3	81%
	4	77%
	5	81%
	6	81%
	7	74%
	8	59%
	11	86%

- AMO type: Alabama set its AMOs consistent with the statutory requirements, using a mixed method. This means that Alabama's AMOs first increased after three years, then two years, then annually beginning in 2010–2011 through 2013–2014 to reach 100 percent proficient.
- Confidence interval: The state uses a confidence interval of 99 percent.
- Full academic year definition (for purposes of determining whether a student's score must be included in AYP determinations): In Alabama, a student must be enrolled from September 1st to the first day of testing in order to be included in AYP determinations.

- Graduation rate:
 - Currently, Alabama is using a graduation rate that can be described as a completer rate, which means Alabama divides the number of graduates by the number of graduates plus the dropouts from each of the previous four years.
 - As required by the recently issued Title I regulations, states must report graduation rate data, in the aggregate and disaggregated by subgroup, using the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate beginning with report cards providing assessment results for the 2010-11 school year.
 - The graduation rate target Alabama requires for the district or school to make AYP is 90 percent or some improvement over the previous year.
 - According to the National Governor's Association 2008 report *Implementing Graduation Counts: State Progress to Date, 2008*, Alabama should have capability to report the NGA Compact 4-year graduation rate in 2009.
- Alabama uses a performance index when calculating AYP, which provides half credit to schools and districts for any student scoring at level 2 (Partially Meets) and full credit for students scoring at Levels 3 and 4. Alabama's AMOs were not set based on this performance index.

SUMMARY OF ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE THAT ALABAMA MUST SUBMIT TO MEET ESEA REQUIREMENTS FOR SCIENCE STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENTS

2.0 - ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT STANDARDS

1. Evidence of approval of the academic achievement standards and cut scores for the general and alternate assessments.
2. A narrative describing the performance level 1 for both the general and alternate science assessments, including how the non-mastery of content components is scored and included in standards setting.
3. A list containing the names and roles of the people involved in:
 - o Drafting the science performance level descriptors (PLDs) for the general assessment; and
 - o Finalizing PLDs during standards setting for the general and alternate assessments.

4.0 - TECHNICAL QUALITY

1. Updated "Continuous Improvement Plan (CIP)" form and training materials that includes science.
2. Evidence of intended and unintended consequences.
3. Final correlation analyses pertaining to the validity of the science general assessment.
4. Final standards-setting materials, including the lists of standards-setting judges, the final standards-setting report, and the final approved cut scores.
5. Final technical manuals, including documentation that DIF analysis is being used.
6. Description and results of accommodation studies.
7. The frequency of accommodated and non-accommodated tests for the general science assessments.
8. Details of how the state ensures the consistency of the general assessment test forms over time.

5.0 - ALIGNMENT

1. For the alternate assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards, a frequency distribution for each of the complexity levels being selected across the state on each of the extended content standards.
2. Evidence that the state has taken steps to ensure alignment between challenging academic content standards and the academic achievement standards once standard setting is complete.

6.0 - INCLUSION

1. Data on the number and percentage of students enrolled on test date and number tested by disaggregated group.

7.0 - REPORTING

1. Final science reports and interpretive guides that describe what the scores mean.
2. Final science summary reports that include the number of students enrolled and percentage tested or number of students tested/not tested, and numbers for each of the required subgroups, at the school, district, and State levels.
3. Interpretive information that accompanies the reports for parents, teachers, and principals.
4. Evidence that districts are required to disseminate reports in a timely manner to parents, teachers, and principals.