



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
OFFICE OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY

JAN 8 2009

The Honorable June St. Clair Atkinson
Superintendent of Public Instruction
North Carolina Department of Public Instruction
Education Building
301 North Wilmington Street
Raleigh, North Carolina 27601-2825

Dear Superintendent Atkinson:

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 North Carolina. 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 rate 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 North Carolina'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'm pleased to note that North Carolina is participating in several of these endeavors.
 - Growth Model: The Department approved North Carolina to use its growth model in making AYP determinations for the 2007–08 school year and on December 22, 2008 granted a four year extension for use of the growth model through 2011–12.
 - Reversing Choice and SES: North Carolina was approved to offer Supplemental Educational Services (SES) in the first year of school improvement.

400 MARYLAND AVE. S.W., WASHINGTON, DC 20202
www.ed.gov

- Districts in need of improvement: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools is participating in this pilot, which allows districts that are in need of improvement to provide supplemental educational services.
- In 2005, North Carolina received an Enhanced Assessment Grant of \$1,671,666.
- In 2007, North Carolina received a Statewide Longitudinal Data System Grant of \$6,000,000.
- Teacher Incentive Fund Grants:
 - Guilford County Schools, Total: \$5,030,433, Year 1: \$1,790,060, Year 2: \$1,450,376, Year 3: \$1,789,997
 - Community Training & Assistance Center, Total: \$4,893,601, Year 1: \$1,987,589, Year 2: \$2,906,012
 - Cumberland County Schools, Total: \$1,839,488, Year 1: \$1,174,176, Year 2: \$665,312
- Finally, I'd like to take this opportunity to remind you of recent concerns that we have raised regarding the alignment to grade level content of the high school alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards (AA-MAAS).

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 North Carolina. 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 Michael Easley
Lou Fabrizio

Assessment System

Your assessment system met the requirements to be considered *Fully Approved with Recommendations*. This means that North Carolina'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 North Carolina in meeting the statutory or regulatory requirements or as you consider changes to your current assessment system.

- North Carolina'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. North Carolina has 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 North Carolina 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.
 - North Carolina was approved in 2007-08 to include the results from the alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards (AA-MAAS) for students with certain disabilities that the state is developing. I know that North Carolina submitted evidence regarding your alternate assessments based on modified achievement standards for review from October 25 through November 2. We have discussed some of the issues with the high school assessment briefly, and my staff will be sharing the peer notes and formal feedback as soon as possible.

Accountability System

- Minimum group size (the state-defined minimum number of students necessary to have valid and reliable AYP determinations): North Carolina's minimum group size is the larger of 40 or one percent of students in the school. (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: North Carolina's goal for this year is 43 percent of students scoring proficient in grades 3-8 and 39 percent in high school in reading/language arts and 77 percent for grades 3-8 and 68 percent for high school in mathematics.
 - AMO type: North Carolina set its AMOs consistent with the statutory requirements, using a stair-step method. This means that AMOs increase in equal increments every two, then three years until 100 percent.
- Confidence interval: The state uses a confidence interval of 95 percent.
- Full academic year definition (for purposes of determining whether a student's score must be included in AYP determinations): In North Carolina, a student must be enrolled for 140 days in order to be included in AYP determinations.
- Graduation rate:
 - Currently, North Carolina is using a graduation rate that can be described as a longitudinal cohort rate, which means that North Carolina divides the number of students who graduated with a regular diploma by the number of 1st-time entering 9th graders four years previously, accounting for transfers in and out and deaths.
 - 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 North Carolina requires for the district or school to make AYP is 80 percent or 0.1% improvement from the previous year.
- According to the National Governor's Association 2008 report *Implementing Graduation Counts: State Progress to Date, 2008*, North Carolina had the capability of calculating the 4-year rate in 2006.