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NATIONAL NEWS

3rd-Round Waiver Deadline Set, Short-Term NCLB Relief Offered

Education Week

By: Michele McNeil

February 15, 2012

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2012/02/want_more_time_to_draft_nclb_w.html

States that need more time to develop their proposal for a waiver under the No Child Left Behind Act can now request a one-year freeze in their annual achievement targets to keep the list of schools not making adequate yearly progress from growing.

The application to freeze AMOs (annual measurable objectives) is now available [online](#) from the U.S. Department of Education.

While more than two dozen states have indicated they intend to apply by the second-round Feb. 28 deadline, [others have indicated](#) they need more time. The department has set a third-round deadline of Sept. 6.

The one-year freeze in AMOs doesn't come cheap, though. There are [several strings](#) attached:

- States have to promise they will actually apply and be approved for a full-fledged waiver (or go back to abiding by NCLB).
- States must adopt college- and career-ready standards, either the common core variety or those certified by their higher education system.
- States must provide student growth data to math and reading teachers "in a manner that is timely and informs instructional programs." This is similar to what states are supposed to do anyway to comply with the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund. (Remember that \$48.6 billion state-bailout fund from the stimulus era?)
- States must report publicly on achievement gaps and graduation gaps between the "all students" group and each traditional NCLB subgroup of students.

If approved states will be able to use the same AMOs for determining AYP based on tests administered in the 2011-12 school year as they used for the previous year.

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U.S. schools' international rank gets boost

USA Today

By: Greg Toppo

February 15, 2012

<http://www.azcentral.com/news/articles/2012/02/15/20120215us-schools-international-rank-gets-boost.html>

The idea that U.S. public schools are falling behind the rest of the world is widely accepted, but a new analysis of international [data](#) suggests that using rankings to sort global winners from losers is often misguided, exaggerating tiny differences between

countries that may be producing nearly identical results.

In other words, maybe U.S. schools are not as bad as you might think.

"Sometimes, rankings can make small gaps appear big and vice versa," said researcher Tom Loveless of the Brookings Institution, whose new analysis, out today, looks at statistics showing that the U.S. in 2007 ranked 11th among 36 countries in fourth-grade math.

Taking another look at the data, he finds that the U.S. results actually placed the nation within a group of nations whose "statistically indistinguishable" scores ranked them, essentially, in fifth place worldwide. Those nations include Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands.

"Nobody ever digs that deep," Loveless said. "They just want the scores and the rankings and they don't ever really look at this part of it."

The U.S.' sagging [performance](#), compared with the rest of the industrialized world, has become a key theme among education reformers. It was front-and-center in the acclaimed education documentaries "Waiting for Superman" and "Two Million Minutes."

But Rick Hess, an education researcher at the American [Enterprise](#) Institute, a free-market Washington think tank, says the data aren't always so conclusive. For one thing, he says, it's not clear that all nations give the tests uniformly.

Hess says international comparisons deserve "the good, hard-nosed kind of skepticism and shoe-leather reporting" that Loveless is doing.

"If this were part of a voucher debate, there'd be huge questions about whether the kids in the district schools and the private schools were being given the same assessment in the same way," he said. "But that has somehow just kind of been brushed aside when we're talking about the international context."

A former educator who has taught everywhere from a Sacramento-area public school to Harvard, Loveless is a leading researcher on international education. He has served since 2004 on the general assembly of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, which administers the top two global-skills tests. Loveless has also developed a reputation as an independent-minded skeptic.

The new findings, part of Loveless' annual "Brown Center Report on Education," also include the first major challenge to the so-called Common Core standards, a proposed set of national academic benchmarks that President Barack Obama and others say will improve schools nationwide.

Loveless says the standards are unlikely to produce improvements, because states for decades have had their own "common" standards, and variability among schools within each state remains wide.

Loveless says the Common Core will likely have little effect on achievement. "The nation will have to look elsewhere for ways to improve its schools."

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Rethinking Testing in the Age of the iPad

Education Week

By: Katie Ash

February 8, 2012

<http://www.edweek.org/dd/articles/2012/02/08/02mobile.h05.html?tkn=VLXFE4ANdeHlw6ccQdJzOuwDe3lCXTrOrQ8g&cmp=clp-edweek>

In the 3,200-student East Haven schools in Connecticut, elementary teachers did their initial student reading assessments a bit differently this school year.

Instead of using paper and pencil to jot down observations about each of their students and then collecting and analyzing those notes by hand, each teacher used an iPad to collect the information and send it to a centralized database through software from the New York City-based ed-tech company [Wireless Generation](#).

"One of our primary goals was to be able to develop a system that would bring a lot of the data into one place," says Taylor Auger, a technology-integration teacher in the district who helped incorporate use of the iPads into classrooms. "Previously, the data was processed by hand, and it wasn't really being put to use effectively. I'm all for data, but that data has to drive instruction."

Moving assessments onto mobile devices may open the door to quicker feedback for students and teachers as well as richer data, but without proper management of the devices and a strong infrastructure to support them, integrating the Ors can be a challenge.

"It's great to have the technology," says Erica Forti, the district's assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, "but

once it's purchased, there is a management piece involved."

Leaders in the East Haven district decided to buy 210 iPads when the lease for desktop computers in the elementary schools' computer labs was up. Instead of replacing those computers, they decided to explore mobile technology.

"We liked the idea of having mobile computing devices, since most of the technology was fixed," or stationary, says Forti. "It opened up the doors for different types of teaching and learning."

In addition, having the data collected on the iPads allowed the information to be easily shared with parents during conferences, Forti says.

Maintaining that one-teacher-to-one-student assessment ratio through the mobile devices is also important for students, especially in the earlier grades, says Krista Curran, the general manager of assessment and intervention products for Wireless Generation.

"In the early grades, the [mobile] assessments are used by teachers with their students so it's less obtrusive, in order to make that interaction friendly to the student," she says. "The end goal is to provide that immediate access to data that informs instruction."

(Wireless Generation's founder and chief executive officer, Larry Berger, is a trustee of Editorial Projects in Education, the nonprofit corporation that publishes *Education Week Digital Directions*.)

Making iPads Work

After the East Haven elementary students were initially assessed on their reading levels, the iPads were distributed onto seven carts—one for each elementary school in the district—to be used for instruction.

From a teacher's standpoint, the iPads are an easy device to use, says Auger. "They can pick it up, turn it on, and use it how they wish," he says.

"But the ability to do that," he cautions, "requires a lot of background work from the rest of the technology team that if you do not have, it will not work."

The district also underwent an upgrade to a fiber-optic wireless network during the 2010-11 school year, which was critical to the success of the iPad implementation, says Auger.

After the initial reading assessments, he says, some teachers have continued to use the iPads for assessment by having students take screenshots of their scores on various educational apps and email the images to the teachers to be stored in the students' electronic portfolios.

"One of the greatest things about the iPad is its versatility," he says. "It can really be what you want it to be."

Similarly, the 2,000-student Lowndes County school system in Hayneville, Ala., rolled out 1,100 iPads to teachers in the district last fall with the help of [Information Transport Solutions](#), or ITS, a technology-services company in Wetumpka, Ala.

Students in the district undergo a pre- and post-test every 45 days in core subjects that helps pinpoint where students may need more support, says Lucy Long, the director of professional learning for ITS.

"We use the data from the post-test to really structure how we approach the next 45 days," she says. In between those assessments, teachers use the iPads to create their own assessments, which are pushed out to the students and then returned to the teacher for data collection, says John Loiselle, an integration technology specialist for ITS.

In addition to using mobile devices to gather observational data, teachers can use the devices to get a glimpse into the thought processes of students, says Reshan Richards, the director of educational technology at Montclair Kimberley Academy, a private school serving grades preK-12 in Montclair, N.J.

"You can gather a lot of data quickly, and you can do a lot of quick checks of understanding in a class, but I'm more interested in the deeper, more qualitative understanding that mobile might bring," Richards says.

For instance, screencasting, which records what students are doing on the display screens of their devices, allows teachers to see students work through problems without having to stand over their shoulders the whole time, he says.

That kind of assessment on a mobile device turns testing into more than just one number, Richards says. Most schools are hesitant, however, to jump into assessing with mobile devices, he says.

'Rich Feedback'

But those schools and classrooms that have embraced mobile devices have seen them as a catalyst for change in teaching, learning, and assessment, says Julie Evans, the chief executive officer of the Irvine, Calif.-based Project Tomorrow, a national education nonprofit group that promotes technology use in the classroom.

"The access of having a [mobile] device in your hand changes the way that classroom environment feels," she says. "Students are walking around with the devices, doing things to get them out of the structured environment of the traditional school."

And because students feel a sense of connection and ownership over their mobile devices, they feel "enabled to be part of the assessment process," says Evans.

Christopher Dede, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, also notes the unique relationship between students and their mobile devices. "Kids think of phones as an extension of themselves in a way that they don't think of with laptops or workstations," he says. "Part of what you have is this intellectual partnership with your cellphone where you do some of the thinking, and your cellphone does some of the thinking, and then you're smarter."

Educators are beginning to tackle how such devices can be used for assessment, taking into consideration screen size and assessment platforms, says Dede. But it's clear, he says, that mobile devices have potential as assessment tools in at least two ways: asking a question and getting an answer, and recording and capturing a process.

"We can give students some kind of thought question and look at the response they give and understand formatively where they are in their comprehension, and perhaps modify what comes next based on that kind of feedback," Dede says. "It's very rich feedback for students on how they're doing and how to get better."

Dede is also exploring how mobile devices can be used as assessment tools through "augmented reality," a process by which students interact with the real world, which is enhanced by information from a mobile device. For example, students in a science class could take mobile devices onto school grounds and use them to identify plants or trees, or students in a history class could use the GPS capabilities on their mobile devices to lead them to sites of historical importance.

Student-Owned Devices

Johnny Kissko, a math teacher for the 2,000-student Frenship High School in the Frenship Independent School District in Texas, is also interested in using augmented reality in his classes.

This school year, Frenship High has changed its policy to allow students to bring their own mobile devices into class at the discretion of the teacher, says Kissko.

Taking advantage of the new policy, Kissko has created worksheets for his classes that use QR, or quick-response, codes that pull up video solutions for the problems his students are working on. To read the QR codes, which are black-and-white barcode-type images, students download apps; when the apps are running, the students hold their devices over the codes to be linked to the website.

Around the country, the mobile devices are being used primarily for formative assessments rather than high-stakes standardized tests.

For example, in the 5,000-student Canby school district, south of Portland, Ore., teachers are using classroom sets of iPod touches to receive quick feedback on where students are in learning their subject matter, says Joe Morelock, the director of technology and innovation for the district.

"We're doing a lot of formative assessments on them," Morelock says. Using apps such as iResponse and resources like Google Documents, teachers are able to receive feedback from students and record their own observations about students' progress, he says.

Teachers have full autonomy in deciding which apps they use and how they use the mobile devices in the classroom, says Morelock. That leeway cuts down on the management load for the district's technology team.

"The teachers are updating them, syncing them, and they're finding a thousand different ways to use them," he says of the devices. "It's been really incredible, and it really has to do with the ease of using the device, and the teachers really taking the lead."

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STATE NEWS

New Hampshire Schools Embrace Competency-Based Learning

Education Week

By: Catherine Gewertz

February 8, 2012

http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/02/08/20proficiency_ep.h31.html?tkn=SNPF11Ok2E7TJxuQLwN2xELb1%2B%2BIsaYNJED6&cmp=clp-edweek

Brittany Rollins is hanging out a lot at the local animal shelter this year. Delving into the issue of pet euthanasia and writing about it will help her earn English/language arts credits toward graduation.

The 17-year-old senior at [Newfound Regional High School](#), in the rural central New Hampshire town of Bristol, is part of one of the most aggressive statewide efforts in the country to embrace competency-based learning. In New Hampshire, this means saying that accomplishment doesn't depend on how long students are in their seats, but whether they can demonstrate that they know their stuff.

It means letting students learn academic content in new ways. It means agreeing on what constitutes mastery, and holding all students to it, instead of letting some earn diplomas with weak skills. It means figuring out multifaceted ways for students to show what they know, and, ideally, it means letting them progress toward mastery at their own pace.

"Newfound is a school that is really pushing ahead on this," said Chris Sturgis, the founder of MetisNet, a Santa Fe, N.M.-based organization that consults with foundations nationally on education issues, including competency-based learning.

Embracing that approach fully, however, can be tough because it challenges such basic systems as testing and grading. Brittany Rollins' experience at Newfound Regional illustrates both how far New Hampshire has come in shaking off traditional conceptions of time-based learning, and also how far it still has to go.

'Anytime, Anywhere'

Brittany's off-campus work in an "extended learning opportunity" reflects the state's emphasis on three related ideas: "anytime, anywhere" learning, which includes out-of-school and virtual programs; personalized education, which strives to tailor studies to students' needs and interests; and competency-based learning.

New Hampshire began by piloting competency-based approaches a decade ago. But in 2005, the state gave districts a deadline: By the 2008-09 school year, high schools would have to award credit based not on seat time, but on demonstrated mastery of course-level "competencies"—the bundles of skills and knowledge that districts specify to reflect state curriculum frameworks.

New Hampshire has gone further than most states in forging the policies to enable such an approach. For instance, a few states allow districts the option of awarding credit for demonstrated proficiency rather than seat time. New Hampshire is the only state that requires districts to do so, though some districts have yet to make that change.

In Brittany's case, she'll be able to demonstrate mastery of her subject matter on her own timetable. She'll prove her knowledge and skills piece by piece, in a variety of ways, as she masters them.

She says the obligation to demonstrate proficiency in new ways has unleashed an enthusiasm she doesn't often experience in classrooms.

"I'm good at creative writing, but not as good when it comes to getting the facts, so this project is a challenge," Brittany said. "But I like setting it all up myself. And I'm so interested in this subject that I can write more easily about it. It's much better for me than having a teacher stand in front of me and tell me what to do."

Brittany has to conduct in-depth research, produce articles and papers, keep a journal documenting her process, and present her work to a panel of educators and community members this spring. It's part of New Hampshire's move toward performance assessments that gauge not only content knowledge but crosscutting skills such as building an argument and making oral presentations.

The fact that Brittany is parceling out pieces of the English/language arts assessment as the weeks unfold shows the state's time-flexible approach. She meets often with her journalism teacher, Dave Harlow, and the school's extended learning opportunity coordinator, Elizabeth Colby, to discuss her progress on the eight English/language arts competencies she has targeted for completion this year. They include knowing how to write for multiple purposes and audiences; how to speak "purposefully and articulately" and listen "attentively and critically"; and how to gather, organize, and evaluate information.

A Work in Progress

While the 425-student Newfound Regional High has made big strides with extended-learning opportunities and performance assessment, other key aspects of a competency-based system have been more elusive for the school, which is part of the Newfound Regional School District.

Its report cards, for instance, are a work in progress. Ideally, a competency-based report card would have nothing but A's and B's, and would feature a narrative description of where students are in their journey toward those designations of mastery, said Newfound's principal, Michael O'Malley. But now, the school's progress reports still carry A-to-F letter grades, with a sentence or two describing students' work habits.

The school has taken steps, though, toward the report cards it ultimately envisions: Students are rated separately for attitude and effort, so that letter grades reflect only content mastery. Next year, there will be no D's or F's, said Ms. Colby.

Newfound Regional has revised its grading policy accordingly. Its teachers are to give no student work less than a 50 percent score, to offset the downward pull of a bad score or two in averaging for an overall grade. Not all teachers abide by that policy, however, Mr. O'Malley acknowledged. But the idea behind it is to move toward the view that grades are fluid rather than fixed,

only a momentary glimpse of where students are at a given time.

It's hard to imagine dropping letter grades altogether, said Mr. O'Malley, when parents expect them and college admissions rely on grade point averages. "That untethering from a 200-year-old system is really rugged," he said.

Another key revision at Newfound has been to allow students who haven't performed well on a test to retake it after teachers "reteach" the content. This rejection of a "one-shot-and-you're-out" approach to testing, Mr. O'Malley said, reflects the idea that mastering the concepts, regardless of when that happens, is the goal.

But the unfortunate fallout, he said, is that some students have been gaming the new system by putting only halfhearted effort into tests because they know they can retake them. School officials are now discussing how to deal with the issue, he said.

Teaching itself has had to adapt to the state's new vision. The staff at Newfound Regional is working with a "culture change" team from the [Center for Secondary School Redesign](#), which is overseeing a federal Investing in Innovation, or i3, grant to 13 New England high schools working on student-led learning and performance-based assessment.

Teachers must learn to become "facilitators" instead of imparters of knowledge as students take a bigger role in shaping their own learning, and must acquire new ways of evaluating their students' work, said Joe DiMartino, the president of the Warwick, R.I.-based center.

"Most teachers didn't sign up to be facilitators," he said, "so it's not a small thing to change."

A good part of the work the center is doing with Newfound Regional, Mr. DiMartino said, is on "inter-rater reliability," or making sure that every adult who takes part in evaluating students' work—teachers, guidance counselors, administrators, community members serving as mentors—does so with a shared rubric and concept of rigor.

The Pace of Change

Even as Brittany earns some of her credits with out-of-school projects and performance assessments, she is earning others in traditional classrooms, with rows of chairs and desks, and taking multiple-choice and essay exams. Only about 15 percent of Newfound Regional's students are engaged in nontraditional coursework such as extended-learning opportunities or online courses, Mr. O'Malley said.

And whatever the competencies they've already mastered, students in New Hampshire must still take the statewide standardized tests in literacy and math every year in grades 3-8 and 11.

"If you're really in a proficiency-based system, you want to be able to take the assessment that matters around the time you engage with the material. So the systems aren't perfectly aligned," said Nicholas C. Donohue, who oversaw the early competency-based pilots as New Hampshire's commissioner of education from 2000 to 2005 and is now the president of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, of Quincy, Mass. The foundation is overseeing similar work in five New England states.

"The federal accountability system is based on a 20th-century model, and our state expectations are based on this new model," said Paul K. Leather, the state's deputy commissioner of education. He expressed hope, however, that new assessments being designed for the Common Core State Standards will help bridge those two models. Plans for those tests include some performance-based tasks.

Online learning can play a part in competency-based approaches, in part because of its potential to let students pace their coursework as they like. Students at Newfound Regional High can use New Hampshire's [Virtual Learning Academy Charter School](#), or VLACS, to take coursework online. In this rural community, where dial-up Internet service is not uncommon, students can do VLACS coursework at Newfound's computer lab, or from home if technology permits.

But while online learning facilitates the "move-on-when-ready" approach that is ideal for competency-based learning, it's not a complete solution if a state's educational vision includes real-world learning, Ms. Sturgis said.

"The ability to let kids move forward in courses and credits has to be an application of their skills, not just moving to another level of a software program or connecting with a teacher online," she said.

The idea that students can move on when they are ready—from course to course or grade to grade—is a piece of competency-based learning that is especially hard to put into practice, advocates of the approach say. A few districts, such as Colorado's Adams County School District 50, near Denver, allow students to do so. But almost everywhere else, that isn't the case.

At Newfound, students still move from one grade to the next only when they have accumulated enough credits.

"These are the 'messy middles' of the work we're doing," said James LeBaron, Newfound Regional's school redesign coordinator. "We're in the thick of it, and we've come a long way. But we're also not as far along as we'd like to be."

Coverage of "deeper learning" that will prepare students with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in a rapidly changing world is supported in part by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, at www.hewlett.org.

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North Carolina: Elementary School Students Go 'Global' With Technology

EducationNews

By: B.A. Birch

February 14, 2012

<http://www.educationnews.org/technology/elementary-school-students-go-global-with-technology/>

Elementary students in Charlotte are going "global" with a technology initiative that links them to students from around the world.

Once a week, students at the Charlotte Jewish Day School meet with teacher Rachel Moore and connect with students in classrooms worldwide in a program from kindergarten to fifth grade aimed to connect with the wider world.

Through video and an online [ePal program](#), they're able to discuss pressing issues, brainstorm solutions and [delve into the lives of their counterparts](#), writes Caroline McMillan at the Charlotte Observer.

From studying weather with French peers to natural disasters with students in New Zealand, the classes are taught in more than half a million classrooms in more than 200 countries and territories across the world.

Bonds outside of subject areas also grow out of the scheme. One fifth-grade boy spoke about his friendship with another student he's never met:

"He likes to play soccer, just like me," he said.

"And he's talkative, too."

A 21st century classroom is an important goal for Principal Mariashi Groner. And the results of the global classroom has been greater than she expected.

"You'll read about global classrooms in middle schools and high schools, but at an elementary level it takes a different kind of tone.

"It really is special, and I believe it's going to get more impressive and detailed as (Moore) explores with the students."

The key for the program relies on an enthusiastic teacher, it seems. Moore has been at the school for almost a decade and Groner says that it's her leadership and willingness to format each class based on the students' interests that got her the role.

"Children today, they don't have a lot of power over what they're going to do," said Groner.

"They're over-programmed, they're told what to study, what to do. ... In this classroom, (the students) really are in charge of their learning."

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New Mexico Granted NCLB Waiver, Federal Officials Say

Education Week

By: Michele McNeil and Sean Cavanagh

February 15, 2012

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2012/02/new_mexico_granted_nclb_waiver.html

New Mexico has been granted a waiver under the No Child Left Behind Act, federal officials announced today, less than a week after the state was the [only first-round applicant](#) for flexibility under the law to have been denied that request.

In one sense, the announcement making New Mexico the 11th state to receive a waiver should not come as a major surprise.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan had said last week that New Mexico was "very, very close" to securing a waiver, at the time he announced that the other 10 had been given that flexibility. Duncan was guarded about which aspects of the state's plan needed work, but New Mexico officials evidently have met those standards.

Of the first 10 states, three—Florida, Georgia, and Oklahoma—were given waivers on a "conditional" basis, meaning the Obama administration is requiring them to meet certain standards before they're granted leeway under the decade-old federal law.

But New Mexico's waiver approval is not conditional, a U.S. Department of Education official tells *Education Week*.

The other states that have secured waivers so far are: Colorado, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, and Tennessee. The [next deadline for states](#) to apply for NCLB flexibility is Feb. 28, and federal officials have said they will accept other applications throughout the rest of the year.

Duncan, in a statement, emphasized that he expects state officials, including Republican Gov. [Susana Martinez](#), to seek cooperation of teachers and lawmakers from both parties, in implementing the plan.

"Today, New Mexico joins the ranks of states leading the charge on education reform by protecting children, raising standards and holding themselves accountable," Duncan said. "As New Mexico implements these reforms, it is important that all stakeholders are at the table and their voices are heard. We encourage the governor and her team to work closely and in a bipartisan manner with the legislature, and to fully include educators, community, and tribal leaders and parents in the process of advancing these reforms."

New Mexico will move to an accountability system that "recognizes and rewards high-performing schools and those that are making significant gains, while targeting rigorous and comprehensive interventions for the lowest-performing schools," the Department of Education said.

Duncan has predicted that states obtaining waivers will hold more students accountable for academic gains than they do under the current version of NCLB—and department officials said they see the same benefits coming out of New Mexico's waiver plan.

New Mexico officials have estimated that their new accountability system "will include 175 more schools and 20,000 more students," than are currently counted under the NCLB law, according to federal officials.

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