

Schools adjusting to new law, but not without growing pains

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When President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act into law in 2002, educators across the country reacted with worry and protest. Many said the nationwide standards for education were unrealistic and that the federal government was overreaching its authority.

A little more than two years later, some educators still are smarting from the law and its implications on public education. Many also are realizing the law isn't going away soon, though.

While Alaska - and the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District, specifically - still are suffering some "growing pains" in the adjustment process, KPBSD Superintendent Donna Peterson said educators are doing their best to meet the federal requirements and provide the best possible education for the state's children.

"NCLB is a new layer, but it's not an overwhelming obstacle," Peterson said.

In fact, NCLB isn't even all that new. The Education and Secondary Education Act - legislation pertaining to schools and districts receiving federal funding - has always set standards for education including highly qualified teachers and student achievement. Traditionally revamped and reauthorized every six years, the ESEA became NCLB under the Bush administration in 2002.

The difference is that the new law provides strict definitions for the standards listed for schools and

now applies to all public schools in the country, rather than only those receiving certain federal funds.

"Those things aren't new; the definitions are," explained Norma Holmgaard, the KPBSD's director of small schools and alternative programs.

"We knew we needed to close the achievement gap," she said. "But until the government stepped in, everyone was out there being independent."

Now, the standards have plenty of definitions, which KPBSD educators say is both a boon and a bane.

"It has focused the conversation," Peterson said. "Good, bad or indifferent, we have tried to be everything to everyone. This focuses us to those things that are measurable.

"Is it the whole picture? No. But is it part of the picture? Yes."

Among the cornerstones of the law are several elements, outlined by federal law and adapted specifically by each state:

- Teachers must be "highly qualified," proving their expertise by holding a bachelor's degree, demonstrating subject-matter competency on a "rigorous state test" and obtaining state licensing. In Alaska, that means elementary school teachers will have to take the PRAXIS II, a nationally recognized test, to prove their qualifications, while high school teachers must have either a degree or a passing test score in each of the subjects they teach.

- Districts and individual schools must make "adequate yearly progress," AYP for short.

Editor's note: This is the first story in a five-part series examining the federal No Child Left Behind Act and its impact on the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District's smallest and most unique schools. Look for the rest of the series throughout the week:

Tuesday - Impact on rural schools

Wednesday - A look at Russian Old Believer schools

Thursday - A look at across-the-water, Native schools

Friday - Looking to the future

In Alaska, at least 95 percent of all students in a school, as well as in each of several subgroups - African American, Alaska Native, American Indian, Asian, Caucasian, Hispanic, economically disadvantaged, disabled and low-English proficiency - must take the applicable standardized tests. To pass AYP, 64.03 percent of a school's general population and each subgroup population must score "proficient" in reading, writing and language, while 54.86 must percent prove proficient in math. The passing percentages increase every three years until 100 percent of students are required to pass in 2013-14.

- A "high percentage" of students must earn a high school diploma - not GED or equivalent certificate - in a "normal amount of time," according to the national law. Under Alaska's accountability plan, that means schools with 12th-graders must have at least an 85 percent graduation rate.

- Schools that do not meet

AYP must have specific plans for corrective action, which must include providing students with supplemental services and the option of attending another school. Alaska has separate school improvement plans for Title I and non-Title I schools. (Title I schools are those receiving federal money due to high low-income populations.) In general, however, the plans call for notifying parents of the school's performance, offering additional services for students and developing a plan to turn the situation around. Repeated failure to meet AYP for several consecutive years requires restructuring, such as replacing staff, replacing curriculum or turning school operations over to the state.

Peterson - like so many other educators - said she agrees with the intent of the law: Leaving no child behind is not only an admirable goal, it is one most educators always have pursued.

Furthermore, the law, which requires extensive data-keeping on students - from their ethnicity and family income level to test scores and attendance and behavior - is helping teachers see patterns in educational successes and failures.

"At first, teachers worried the data would be used against them. Now, when they're presented with the data, they're saying, 'Let me change when I teach this item so it aligns to state standards' or 'What did I do different this year than last year?' There's a better conversation about instruction," Peterson said.

"Also, there was sometimes a tendency to say, 'There's something wrong with the student, the parent, the family, the situation' ... this is causing us to say, 'I see a pattern. What does it mean? What can I do

Glossary of Terms

No Child Left Behind Act; NCLB: George W. Bush administration's 2002 reauthorization and revamping of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, a federal law pertaining to public schools in the United States, particularly those receiving federal funding under Title I.

Adequate Yearly Progress; AYP: Accountability standards set to make certain all children are achieving according to state and federal expectations. States set their own tests and plans for reaching full student proficiency by the 2013-14 school year. In Alaska, 64.03 percent of all school populations and subgroups must score "proficient" in reading and language arts tests, while 54.86 percent must prove proficient in math. The passing percentages increase every three years until reaching 100 percent in 2013-14.

Subgroups: Accountability under NCLB applies not only to school populations as a whole, but also a number of ethnic and income-level divisions of students. In Alaska, subgroups include African American, Alaska Native, American Indian, Asian, Caucasian, Hispanic, economically disadvantaged, disabled and low-English proficiency students.

Highly qualified: A designation for teacher competency, the national law requires teachers hold a bachelor degree, obtain state licensing and demonstrate subject-matter competency on a "rigorous state test." In Alaska, all elementary school teachers will have to take the PRAXIS II (a test), while high school teachers must either hold a bachelor's degree or pass the test in each subject they teach.

School choice: Students at schools that do not meet AYP should have the opportunity to improve their education. Originally, the national law required school districts to provide transportation to other schools if families so chose. That provision has been changed for some parts of Alaska, where transportation to another school is unrealistic. In such a case, districts must provide students with supplemental educational services.

to make this better?' The highest personal potential is what this is about."

Still, the law isn't without its flaws.

In particular, Peterson said she worries about parts of the law that seem made for urban areas, without considering the nation's small, rural schools. For example,

the requirements for teacher qualifications don't take into account the fact that some teachers must teach several subjects for multiple grade levels.

"We can't argue with the premise that we want highly qualified people teaching our children, but the reality is you can't always get those," Holmgaard said.

Another looming concern is money.

In a March 2004 letter, Education Secretary Rod Paige insisted the law is not underfunded, as many have claimed.

“... (W)e still hear the chorus of ‘more money’ emanating from certain circles. That has always been and will likely always be the mantra of these organizations, for they choose to measure our commitment not by whether or not a third-grade girl can read on a third-grade level, but by how much more money we are spending on the system.”

Area educators, however, said they don't quite agree. The law has helped focus heavily on data collection, analysis and reporting - responsibilities that take training, staff and money. Those extra demands come at a time when states across the country are facing budget deficits, and those shortfalls are hitting education especially hard.

“If you start with the accountability piece, getting all the teachers and paraprofessionals qualified, you're talking about testing, course work, preparation. In addition, somebody has

to monitor all that, keep the documentation,” Holmgaard said.

“Take just the elementary teachers,” Peterson added. “The cost to us is the PRAXIS (the exam teachers must take), preparation and their (employees’) time on top of that. It's about \$200. Multiply that by 800 elementary teachers.”

Determining AYP also requires extensive record keeping of test scores, attendance, behavior patterns and personal backgrounds on each student.

“Somebody has to put that all together,” Holmgaard said. “In our district, we've had to hire a person just to deal with the data.

“(That's) been huge,” she said, especially as the district spent the last several months trying to trim \$6.7 million of its budget.

Other requirements for the law include providing transportation and services for homeless students (about \$100,000 a year in the KPBSD, Holmgaard said), issuing a district report card to the public (another data-intensive job) and setting money aside for supplementary services and school choice for schools that don't make the grade.

“NCLB, in the big picture, is

three things: accountability ... flexibility ... choice,” Holmgaard said. “None of the three things include funding.”

Yet, while some school districts and entire states have rebelled against the law - to the extent of discussing turning down federal funding to try to get around the rules - Holmgaard and Peterson said avoidance isn't the answer.

“About 10 years ago, the catchphrase was ‘All children can learn,’” Holmgaard said. “Then the nay-sayers said, ‘No, they cannot.’ If you start out saying all children can learn then give it your best shot, you'll at least get close. Before NCLB came out, there were a million reasons why it wouldn't work. Now, we're saying, ‘Let's do our best and see where we're at.’ We're working on (getting the government) to try to rethink things and recognize that some things don't fit and that we need time. But we're starting to quit with the excuses and move ahead.”

Peterson agreed.

“If we're the best show in town, we should meet (the requirements),” she said. “If we can't, then we need to have reasons why.”