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Excellence Fails to Impress Feds

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Colorado rates Fairview High School as "excellent." Parents agree, judging by the school's popularity during Boulder Valley School District's open enrollment period.

But the federal government disagrees. Fairview failed to meet federal "No Child Left Behind" goals and, in doing so, captured less-than-flattering front-page headlines ("Schools fail targets," News, Nov. 19).

Three of BVSD's four other large high schools — Broomfield High, Centaurus High and Boulder High — also failed to meet the federal goals. But why did these schools fail? After all, our state has already judged them to be doing just fine, earning ratings of Average (Centaurus), High (Broomfield and Boulder) and Excellent (Fairview).

Weird, you say? The federal system suggests these schools are failing, while the state system tells us that they are doing quite well — even excelling. Perhaps the oddest aspect of this puzzle is that these starkly different ratings are based on the same test.

Students take the Colorado Student Assessment Program, or CSAP, test every year. Their scores are tallied up and compiled and then used by the state to assign ratings to schools. It's a tough system. Statewide, one-third of all schools were judged as low or unsatisfactory in 2002.

But the federal system moves beyond mere difficulty. Under the calculations required by the folks in Washington, a school like Fairview can shift from excellent to failing, even when both assessments are based on the same tests. The explanation for this lies in something called "disaggregation."

Imagine a school with 1,000 students, where 200 are Hispanic, 100 are African American, 700 are white. Imagine that 100 of the 200 Hispanic students are still learning

English. Imagine also that the school's enrollment includes 100 students with disabilities and 250 students who are low-income. At this school, each student is expected to take the CSAP test in both mathematics and reading, which count for NCLB purposes, as well as writing, which doesn't.

Now assume a target "pass rate" of 70 percent. If the school as a whole achieves a pass rate of 70 percent or better, then the school passes. This is essentially how the Colorado state system works.

But the NCLB (federal) system uses disaggregation. The idea is a noble one: it is important that a school do a good job educating all students. No subgroup of students should be "left behind." In the hypothetical school described above, the disaggregated groups would include: 1) Hispanic students, 2) African-American students, 3) white students, 4) limited-English proficient students, 5) special-education students and 6) low-income students.

Each of these groups must achieve a passing mark on the CSAP exam in both reading and math. That is, if the 100 special-education students achieve a 90-percent pass rate on reading but only a 60-percent pass rate on math (and even assuming that all other subgroups passed all the tests), then the school as a whole is found to be failing.

But that's not all. The NCLB law also requires 95-percent participation for each subgroup. And it requires that at least 1 percent of each subgroup achieve the highest level of performance, called "Advanced." As with disaggregation, there's a good reason for these rules. We want a school to be accountable for all students and to have an incentive to improve the performance of even those students who are already succeeding. But what this means is that our hypothetical school would be found to be failing if only 94 of its 100 special-education students took the exams, or if no special-education student achieved at the highest scoring level.

Why, then, did Fairview not pass? As a large school, Fairview had to hit 26 targets! This means that the school could pass 25 and miss just one, and it would still not meet federal NCLB goals. And that's exactly what happened. The Hispanic subgroup did not meet the reading proficiency rate.

Broomfield High suffered a similar fate. Disaggregation resulted in 24 targets, and it hit 23, missing on the math test for special-education students. Centaurus had 27 targets and missed on the math test for special-education students and limited-English proficient students.

Boulder High had 29 different subgroups. Limited-English proficient students failed to achieve the proficiency rate in both math and reading. Special-education students came up short in reading, and Hispanic students came up short in math. Boulder High also failed to achieve the 95-percent participation rates among its white students. This appears to be because quite a few parents exempted their children from the test, in some cases as a form of protest against the testing system. So Boulder High has six

categories of failure, all of which must be remedied in order to avoid further publicity. The state, meanwhile, continues to give this school a "High" rating.

To us, such disaggregated results mean that these schools should refocus their attention on the groups of students whose scores fell below the target proficiency rate. We applaud NCLB for highlighting these areas of need — groups of students who might have been overlooked under the state system.

While we have focused here on high-achieving, well-resourced schools like Fairview, an even harsher fate awaits those schools that serve low-income families, called "Title I schools." It's likely that in just two more years, the overwhelming majority of these schools will, because of NCLB rules, have to give up much of their federal funding targeted to serve economically disadvantaged students. On this point it's our turn to fail: We fail to see how this will result in the school improvement that, when this whole thing started, was supposed to be the goal.

The NCLB official label for schools targeted for such sanctions is "in need of improvement." Taken literally, that's true. But the punishing consequences and the label belie the helpful-sounding rhetoric.

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