

Who's Attending Michigan's Priority Schools?

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The Michigan Department of Education recently released its first list of schools that have not met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals for student achievement set by the state and required by the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. This list identified 216 elementary and middle schools where overall student proficiency in math or reading fell below state standards.

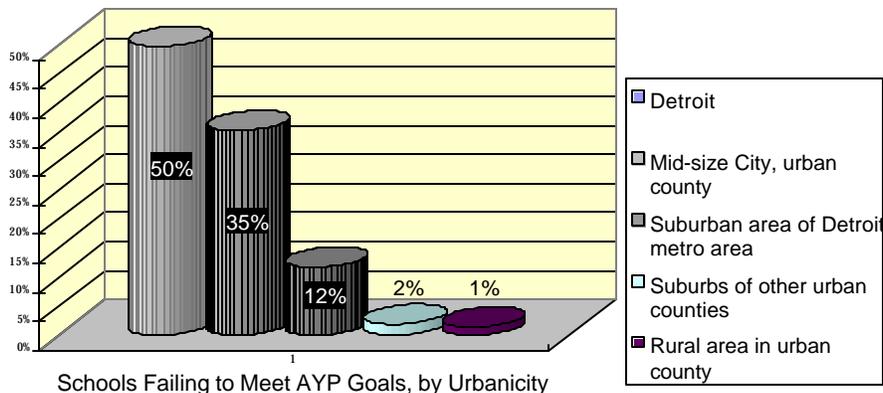
This "priority schools" list groups schools by the number of years in a row – two, three or four – that they have missed their AYP targets. Schools face state and federal sanctions if they fail to make sufficient progress toward the NCLB goal of all students showing proficiency in math and reading by the year 2014. These sanctions increase if schools do not meet performance targets over time. Some Michigan schools have failed to meet AYP targets for several years and find themselves in the fourth year of NCLB sanctions.

Our analysis of the geographic and demographic characteristics of the schools on the priority schools list provides a clearer picture of the challenge facing state and local school officials. We looked at student enrollment and free and reduced lunch data from the Michigan Department of Education's K-12 Database, and student descriptive data from the Michigan Center for Educational Performance and Information 2002 Single Record Student Database. The results are sobering even for experienced school watchers.

Location, Location, Location

Of the 216 schools on the list, 107 – nearly half of them – are part of the Detroit Public Schools district. Another 76 schools are located in mid-sized cities in urban counties, such as Flint and Grand Rapids. This means that 85 percent of the schools failing to meet AYP goals are located in urban centers. An additional 12 percent are located in low income Detroit suburbs. Only seven schools – three percent of the total – are located in other suburban or rural areas.

Location of Schools Failing to Meet AYP Goals



Who Gets Left Behind

The students in Michigan's priority schools are predominantly poor. On average, more than three-quarters of the students in these schools are eligible for the federal free or reduced lunch (FRL) program. This is more than twice the rate for students in schools (34 percent) that have met their AYP targets. In fact, 82 percent of the schools on the list have higher FRL rates than the districts in which they are located. The schools on the priority schools list serve the poorest families in Michigan's poorest school districts.

Average Percentage of Students Receiving FRL	
Non-Failing Schools	34%
Failing Schools	77%
Total	37%

The students in schools on the list are also predominantly minority. Nearly nine out of ten students in schools that fail to meet AYP targets are non-white. In contrast, only one in four students are non-white in schools that meet their AYP goals.

Average Percentage of Minority Students	
Non-Failing Schools	23%
Failing schools	86%
Total	26%

These startling differences in demographics are even more extreme for those schools that have failed to meet AYP goals for four years in a row.

Policy Implications

These data make two things clear. First, the schools on Michigan's "priority schools" list are the schools that face the greatest challenges as they seek to meet the goals of NCLB. Nearly all of them are located in low-income urban school districts. Almost 90 percent of their students are members of minority groups, and most of them are poor. These schools have failed to ensure success for their students in the past. There is little reason to believe that they will do so in the future without major changes in school, district and state policies and practices.

Second, the students in Michigan's "priority schools" are the children who are most in need of an excellent education in order to become productive and successful citizens. The disadvantages many of them face in their homes and communities are daunting. Excellent schools should be an essential part of any strategy to help them overcome these disadvantages. Failing to improve significantly the schools they now attend practically guarantees that they will be left behind.

Leaders in Michigan's education system have known for years that the schools now on the priority list are in trouble, but NCLB has forced the issue to the center of the policy stage. The key question is what we will do about it. Governor Granholm's efforts to focus attention and resources on these schools are a good start, but executive action is not enough. Without substantial follow-through from many other actors inside and outside the school system, the students in these schools will continue to be left behind—despite the good intentions of NCLB.