

# No Child Left Behind and the Definition of Proficient: What Should School Leaders in California Know About the Definition of Proficient?

Cheryl James-Ward  
San Diego State University

With the enactment of No Child Left Behind, districts across the country have been consumed with ensuring that students are proficient in math and reading. However, by the very nature of the law, the definition of “proficient” varies from state to state as well as within states. Since countless resources are being poured into this endeavor and since there are extreme sanctions for schools and districts that are not meeting the Annual Measurable Objective (AMO), which dictates the percentage of students that must be proficient each year, the definition should be clear.

## Introduction

The California Department of Education (2006–2007) reported that 45% of the State’s children were proficient in reading and 48% of the states students were proficient in math. In contrast, the U.S. Department of Education (2007) reported that only 23% of California’s 4th graders were proficient readers and 30% of California’s 4th graders were proficient in math. The U.S. Department of Education gauges student performance using The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) which presents a comprehensive view of what students in the United States know and can do in the areas of reading and math. The tests are administered in grades four and eight. Scale scores ranges from 0 to 500 for both content areas.

## Background

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), ratified December 12, 2001, stated that all public schools receiving Title 1 Funds must make *adequate yearly progress* (AYP) and that by the year 2014, all students must be *proficient*. Section 1001 of the NCLB Act, stated, “The purpose of this title (Title 1) is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency in challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (NCLB Act of 2001, 2002, p. 17).

By participating in Title I states agree to commit themselves to bringing

all students to proficiency in language arts and math by 2014. In order to determine if schools and districts are on-track to meet this goal, the NCLB law mandates that each state set benchmark goals to measure whether schools and districts are making “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP) toward teaching all students what they need to know (Ed Trust West, 2003).

Schools and districts across the nation that fail to make adequate yearly progress are subject to a number of sanctions, including letters home to parents informing them of the students’ performance and choice options, community advisory groups, curriculum and instruction mandates, reconstitution, state takeover and removal of principal and/or teachers. These same schools are also entitled to support services and resources in the form of external assistance teams and improvement grants.

School leaders are spending millions of dollars and focusing endless hours on reading and math skills in the hopes that children will be proficient (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). But what does it really mean to be proficient? Educators in California lack a common understanding of the term. The purpose of this article is to clarify the definition and to provide educational leaders a resource to inform decisions related to how they use their time to prepare children for the future.

## Proficiency in California

NCLB mandates every state to create an accountability system, each with its own set of standards and aligned benchmark assessments. In California, educators apply a five tier configuration: Far Below Basic, Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, and Advanced, to classify a student’s performance level on the California Standards Tests for both the Academic Performance Index (API) and the AYP. Attached to each tier are *cut points* ranging from 150 to 600. The cut point for proficiency on the California Standards Tests in both English language arts (ELA) and mathematics is 350 for grades 2 through 8. The number and percentage of items students must answer correctly to reach 350 varies from subject to subject and grade to grade. The Annual Performance Index summarizes a school’s academic performance based on the number of students who move from one cut point to another (California Department of Education, 2006–2007).

For the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE), students are considered proficient for the AYP if their cut scale score is at 380 or higher for either ELA or mathematics. For API, a scale score of 350 or higher is considered proficient for either the English language arts or math section of the CAHSEE (California Department of Education, Technical Questions and Answers, 2006–07).

In addition to using the proficiency levels and cut points to determine proficiency within the state, various education entities have slightly different definitions for the term proficient. The California Department of Education further defined proficiency as: At 10th grade students are to be on track for passing the California High School Exit Exam (California State

Board of Education Meeting Minutes, January 7, 2003). The State Board of Education asserted that proficient means that students are performing at mastery/grade level (The Sacramento County Office of Education, Reading Lions Center, 2006). According to Ed Trust West (The ABCs of AYP, Raising Achievement for all Students, 2003) proficient means that students are on grade level and have passed the *tests*.

### The Problem

Inconsistencies in the definition result in an inaccurate view of proficiency. The 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores revealed that 23% of students in California performed at or above the NAEP *Proficient* level in reading as compared with 31% nationally. The percentage of students in California who performed at or above the NAEP *Proficient* level in math was 30% in 2007 in comparison to 38% nationally (The Nation's Report Card, Math, 2007). Of the 50 states and other jurisdictions that participated in the 2007 fourth-grade reading NAEP assessment, students' average scale score in California was higher than that in one jurisdiction, not significantly different from those in five jurisdictions, and lower than those in 45 jurisdictions (The Nation's Report Card, Reading, 2007). "Jurisdictions" refers to the states and the District of Columbia and the Department of Defense Education Activity Schools. Of the 50 states and other jurisdictions that participated in the 2007 fourth-grade NAEP math assessment, students' average scale score in California was lower than those in 44 jurisdictions (The Nation's Report Card, Math, 2007). According to the California Department of Education (Adequate Yearly Progress State Report, 2006–2007), 45.5% of the students in California were proficient in reading and 48.5% were proficient in math. These findings contradict those of the NAEP and suggest that setting state proficiency levels at 350 for ELA and math may be misleading.

Part of the problem with the definition may be that children need only score 350 or higher on the state content standards test to be proficient. Since the range of the test is from 150–600, it could be argued that proficient amounts to surprisingly basic levels of performance. If the California Department of Education is reporting to districts and parents that their children are proficient, then the rigor of the exams should at least match those of the NAEP. Consistency in assessment rigor is necessary to ensure that students who are proficient in California are prepared at minimum to meet challenging achievement standards across the nation.

The California High School Exam is comprised of two parts: mathematics and English Language Arts (ELA). The math component addresses academic content standards in math for Grades 6, 7, and Algebra I. The ELA section covers two standards from Grade 8 and standards for Grades 9 and 10 in both reading and writing. To pass the English Language Arts section, a student must score 60% correct. The California Department of Education maintains that high school students demonstrate proficiency according to

their readiness to pass the California High School Exit Exam in Grade 10. Yet, the California High School Exit Exam could be considered a minimum competency test (Wise, 2004). Students are deemed proficient at Grade 10 merely by passing the exam, even as California's accountability system sets the performance standard for grade level proficiency at or above the cut score of 380 or 75% correct in ELA and 73% correct in math.

To further complicate matters, by their very nature standards-based assessments have limitations. The characteristics of the tests themselves can make the process murky with variations in the difficulty of items and the mix of item formats (Boudett, et. al., 2007). It was not until October, 2007, that descriptors were provided for the California state standards. These descriptors tie the standards to grade level equivalents, providing the means to determine grade level mastery.

The levels at which performance standards are set depend on multiple factors, including the judgment of the panels assembled to set them and the particular method used to do so. (Boudett, et. al., 2007). In California, the performance levels, or cut scaled scores, for the state content standards assessments were determined by a group of teachers, school/district administrators, county office educators and university professors. According to members of this group, cut-scores for proficient were determined based on an agreement reached by group consensus. If every state developed proficiency levels accordingly, not only would there be a minimum of 50 different definitions of proficient, but also the proficiency levels in some states could be deemed irrelevant.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress proficiency numbers illustrate that students performance levels vary dramatically from state to state. This suggest that each state's definition of proficient may be different and some possibly insignificant.

Additional issues lie within the NCLB mandates that define proficiency in the narrow terms of ELA and mathematics, requiring states to develop standards and benchmarks to assess students' progress toward mastering standards in these specific content areas. To avoid *Program Improvement status*, many inner city schools have opted to give up art, writing, music, and language curricula. In California, Program Improvement (PI) is the formal designation for Title I funded schools and Local Education Agencies that fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress for two consecutive years. The hope is that by spending the majority of the school's day on reading and math, children will be able to score proficient on the California Standards Tests. Unfortunately, by doing so it is possible that students are losing out on other important curricula areas in favor of preparing students to reach a cut scaled score of 350.

## Conclusion

Although national and state accountability systems clearly delineate the numerical targets necessary to earn Adequate Yearly Progress, the per-

formance standards upon which these targets are based remain unclear. In addition to the 50 definitions of proficient created across states, major educational agencies in the State of California cannot agree on a concise, consistent definition. The California Department of Education's primary definition of proficient is based on a state-defined formula of cut points and scale scores which appear to have been arbitrarily chosen. To be proficient a student need only score 350 on state content standards tests ranging from 150–600. When California's definition of proficient is measured against that of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, its definition of proficient falls short. Moreover, in the State of California, proficiency does not appear to be associated with any future endeavor beyond 10th grade, at which point it is tied to the California High School Exit Exam. This exam might also be considered a minimum competency test (Wise et al., 2000).

The NCLB Act places extreme importance on a narrow yet confounded definition of proficiency, using it to establish the ultimate goal of reforms, sanctions and rewards. Unfortunately, the definition of proficient varies widely across states and can be redefined by each individual state. The Act punishes schools in one state for achievement levels that are defined as great successes in another. The national and state variations in academic rigor result in a false sense of proficiency for many students. The repercussions are even more serious in inner city schools where resources and time may be focused on passing the test, thereby reducing instructional minutes directed toward developing critical thinking skills, well-roundedness, innovativeness, creativity, and multilingualism (K. P. Boudett, et. al., 2007).

Since schools face harsh sanctions for not having adequate numbers of students who are proficient, and because many inner city schools spend an inordinate amount of time to ensure that kids are proficient in reading and math at the expense of all other subjects, the definition of this mandate should be clear. It is incumbent upon policy makers in California to revisit the definition of proficient and consider, at minimum, the following questions:

1. Does proficient mean that students have mastered a minimum percentage of the grade level content?
2. Does proficient mean that students are on track for passing the CAHSEE?
3. Does proficient mean that students have basic mastery of grade level skills?
4. Does proficient mean that students are on track for a four year university?
5. Does proficient mean that students can compete on a state or national academic level?
6. Does proficient mean that students are on track to have the skills and competencies to successfully compete in a global economy?
7. What is the end result of being proficient?

Friedman (2005) asserted that in order to compete in a world in which the playing field is leveling, individuals must be multilingual, innovative, and have a global awareness. In essence, students must not only master English language arts and math, but they must be well-rounded, creative and divergent thinkers, who are inquisitive and passionate about learning.

No one would argue with the spirit of No Child Left Behind. All children should have a fair, equal and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency in challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments (NCLB, 2001). To ensure this, the definition of proficient must be revisited on numerous levels.

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