



# Benchmarks

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**All three articles are by Marvin Pittman,  
Special Assistant to the State Superintendent,  
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NCCSR is pleased to highlight the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction in this issue of Benchmarks. North Carolina was one of the first states to begin a data-driven school reform effort. From a carefully developed accountability model to intervention teams that truly assist schools, North Carolina offers a model for states and districts across the nation.

In the following three articles, Marvin Pittman, special assistant to the state superintendent and member of NCCSR's technical working group, explains North Carolina's approach to helping all schools succeed and explores some "durable challenges" — chronically low-performing schools and the achievement gap.

## North Carolina's Accountability Model Drives School Reform

In 1995, three years before Congress established the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program, North Carolina embarked on its own comprehensive school reform effort. This effort, called the ABCs of Public Education, was spurred by the state's General Assembly and developed by the State Board of Education with guidance from many education, community and business groups. This was not the first school improvement effort for North Carolina and did not even institute new tests, but it was a first in many other ways.

The ABCs of Public Education provided the state with the first school-by-school accountability model, the first attempt to directly reward teachers and other educators for success with improving student achievement, and the first time that the state began to directly intervene with low-performing schools.

ABCs stands for accountability, emphasis on the basics and local control over how schools achieve their goals.

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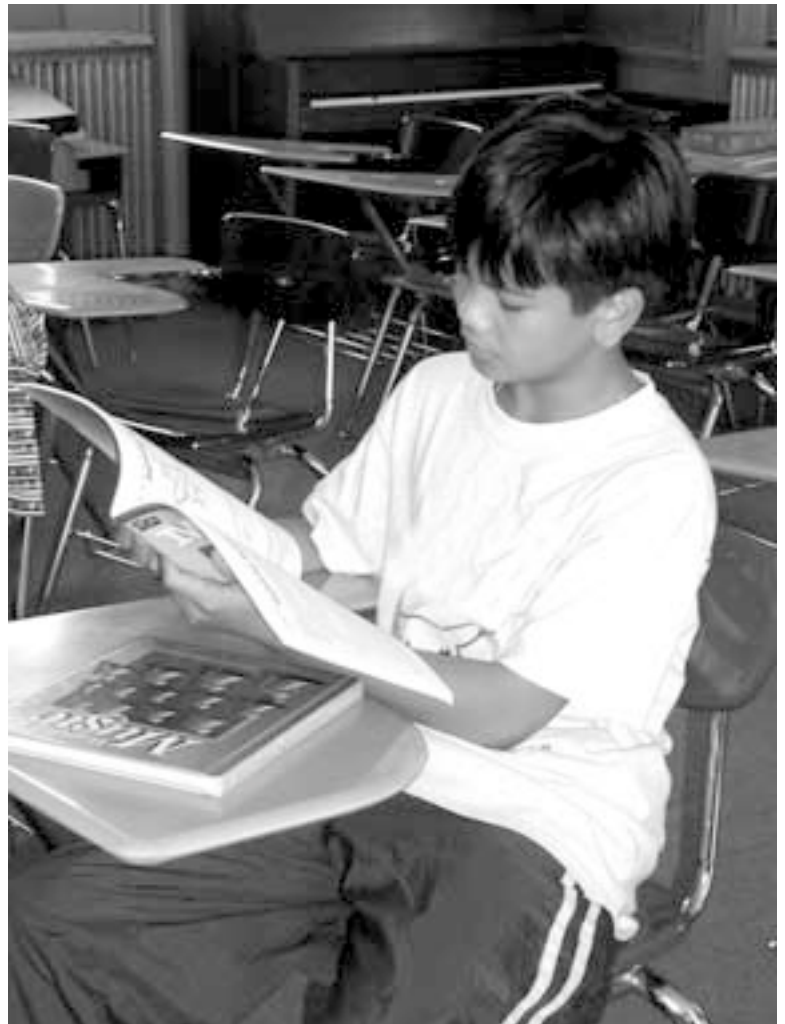
As a result of the information generated by the ABCs model, North Carolina was poised to drive school reform efforts from the state level to the local school building level. This enabled the state to be in a position to carefully target Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program (CSRSD) grants when this program became available three years later. The CSRSD grants provided some much-needed resources that North Carolina's most vulnerable schools needed to overhaul their operations.

The ABCs of Public Education was designed to provide incentives for all schools — the high-flying, the middle-of-the-road, and even the low-performing. At the same time, the model also provides "bottom-line" information about the percentage of students performing at grade level or proficiency level overall. For accountability purposes, the ABCs model charts and rewards schools according to two standards: a growth standard and a performance standard. The growth standard is the expected growth rate in student achievement for a particular school based on the school's previous performance, statewide average growth and a statistical adjustment that is needed whenever student test scores are compared from one year to the next. The performance standard refers to the percentage of students at or above grade level on North Caro-

lina end-of-grade tests. Student test results are reported as Achievement Level I, II, III or IV. Achievement Level III is considered grade-level performance for all students.

At the high school level, a composite score based on student performance on North Carolina end-of-course tests, as well as other factors such as the percentages of students completing a college prep or college tech prep course of study, is used to gauge performance.

The tests for all of these measures had been in place for several years when the ABCs model began. The accountability model, with incentives and intervention measures, was new.



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Under the ABCs, for the first time, schools were publicly identified as meeting targets for expected growth/gain or exemplary growth/gain. Schools also were identified as being low-performing if they failed to meet their growth standard and if more than 50% of their students were below grade level or proficiency standards.

Schools were recognized as Schools of Distinction if at least 80% of their students performed at or above grade level, or as Schools of Excellence if at least 90% of the students tested performed at or above grade level and the school met expected growth.

Teachers and other professional certified staff received incentive awards — \$1,500 each in schools making exemplary growth/gain and \$750 in schools making expected growth/gain. Teacher assistants also shared in this incentive, receiving \$500 bonuses in schools with exemplary growth/gain and \$375 each in schools with expected growth/gain.

In some low-performing schools that fell far below their growth standard and where the majority of students were considered to be performing below grade level or proficiency, state assistance teams were assigned to help the schools' staffs devise ways to help students achieve at higher levels. These teams of practicing educators were recruited and trained by the Department of Public Instruction to provide intensive help to the schools that needed it most.

In the 1996-97 school year, the ABCs model went into effect for K-8 schools. The following year, high schools were added. Since then, the results of the previous year have been reported publicly each fall, generating widespread publicity. Local schools identified as the 25 Most Improved in Growth/Gain (K-8 Schools) and the 10 Most Improved Growth/Gain (High Schools) have held rallies and celebrations where the State Superintendent and State Board of Education Chairman have presented the school with banners and congratulations.

For some schools, with 50% of their students performing at grade level but not meeting their goals for student achievement growth/gain, there is no recognition.

The ABCs of Public Education is alive and well in North Carolina in 2001. The State Board of Education continues to look for ways to improve the model and routinely addresses issues of unintended consequences. For example, the Board has been called on to settle a variety of technical questions raised by the high stakes nature of the accountability program, such as when a student can drop a high school class and escape the requirement to take the end-of-course test. The ABCs Compliance Commission meets regularly to recommend actions on such matters to the State Board of Education.

## What Has the ABCs Program Meant for North Carolina?

The first year of the program (1996-97), when 1,631 K-8 schools participated, approximately one third of the schools posted exemplary growth. Nearly one-fourth met expected growth, and slightly over one-third received no recognition. A total of 122 schools, 7.5%, were identified as low-performing. Of those, in that first year, 15 received mandatory assistance from a state assistance team. Also, in that first year, only 12 schools statewide had 90% or more of their students at or above grade level. Another 9.7%, or 158 schools, had 80% or more of their students at or above grade level.

“Nearly 70 percent of all schools in North Carolina posted expected or exemplary growth/gain in 1999-2000.”

By the 1999-2000 school year nearly one-fourth of K-12 schools achieved exemplary growth/gain. Another 45% had posted exemplary growth/gain. Twenty-eight percent received no recognition, but only 2.1% were identified as low performing. The number of schools with 90% or more of their students at or above grade level has grown to 73, or 3.4%. In addition, 24.1% of schools, or 510 or them, have 80% or more of their students at or above grade level.

Nearly 70% of all schools in North Carolina posted expected or exemplary growth/gain in 1999-2000.

Apart from the numbers, which are important to school reputations as well as staff wallets, the ABCs program has provided incentives and tools for local schools and local school districts to scrutinize student performance more carefully and to take necessary steps to improve student learning. Many schools and school systems have more closely aligned their instruction to the state's Standard Course of Study. More rigorous intervention has been put into place for students who are struggling.

When the opportunity became available to award Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration grants, these funds and the goals for their use were a strong fit with the ABCs model that North Carolina had in place. Low-performing schools, or those whose performance placed them close to that designation, were given priority status in awarding grants.

The most widely used models being implemented with the grants in North Carolina include A+ Schools, High Schools that Work and Success for All. The ABCs program, because it is not prescriptive in how schools address their shortcom-

ings, helped North Carolina identify schools where the grants could have a strong impact. Currently, 12 schools that have received either mandatory or voluntary assistance from the state have received CSRD grants. An additional 47 schools also received grants on the basis of their proposals.

**Intervention is Key to Improving Schools' and Students' Performance**

When the North Carolina State Board of Education and Department of Public Instruction assigned the first mandatory assistance teams to 15 low-performing schools in August 1997, officials believed this approach would be effective, but it wasn't until 1998 that we knew for certain.

In July 1998, after a full school year of assistance team intervention in North Carolina's 15 lowest performing schools, North Carolina educators could say with certainty that assigning assistance teams to schools makes a difference in school achievement. Results from the state's ABCs of Public Education program in 1998 showed that 14 of the 15 low-performing schools met their goals for student achieve-

<b>Results of the ABCs Program</b>	<b>1996-1997 (K-8 schools)</b>	<b>1999-2000 (K-12 schools)</b>
Schools identified as low-performing	7.5%	2.1%
Schools with 80% of their students at or above grade level	9.7%	24.1%
Schools with 90% of their students at or above grade level	0.08%	3.4%

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ment growth during the year that the assistance teams were assigned to help them. Thirteen of the schools actually reached the state's Exemplary Growth/Gain Status for achieving at least 10% above expected growth. One of the 15 original assistance team schools did not meet its goal for student achievement growth, but the school did move enough students forward to move out of the low-performing category.

The keys to the assistance teams' success, according to both the schools and the team members, were the efforts they undertook to focus instruction, align classroom activities to the curriculum, and provide staff development to address weaknesses. The assistance teams — with between three and five

educators each — worked in the 15 schools all year. Each team includes at least one principal as well as teachers. Their work included establishing relationships with the schools' staff, working with the staff to align the instructional program of the school, modeling and demonstrating effective instructional practices, coaching and mentoring teachers and helping locate additional resources for the schools.

Local school systems also provided extra help to these schools. This assistance included equipment/materials, volunteers, funding, staff, facilities improvements and training.

This model has continued with success even after that first year. School intervention has become accepted in North Carolina as a way to turn around schools that are low-performing. North Carolina's accountability program, and in particular, its state assistance teams, were used as examples of a system that works in the December 1998 edition of *Curriculum Reform: What State Officials Say Works*, a publication produced by the Regional Education Laboratory Network of the U.S. Department of Education. The state's assistance teams were used to show how state accountability systems can "direct technical assistance and intervention to schools and districts that are foundering."

The intervention model is being extended to a new level during the 2000-01 school year. North Carolina's State Board of Education adopted new Student Accountability Standards in 1999. These standards set statewide promotion standards at four gateways during a student's K-12 education. These gateways are third grade, fifth grade, eighth grade and graduation. Although many have focused on



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the fact that this program will curtail social promotion, its main focus is on intervention with students who are working below grade level. In this case, the intervention is not delivered by state teams, but locally, by teachers and other instructional specialists.

Teachers have asked for this next step in accountability since the beginning of the ABCs of Public Education. North Carolina's school accountability model first focused on the district-level performance, then the school-level, and now at the student level.

To pass through each gateway, students must meet local promotion standards and demonstrate grade-level proficiency in reading and math by scoring at grade level on the state's end-of-grade tests. To pass through the final gateway to a high school diploma, students must meet local graduation requirements, pass a state exit exam on essential skills and pass a computer skills test.

The new standards are being phased in. Fifth graders will be the first to be affected in 2000-01. That means fifth graders who do not meet grade-level proficiency on the fifth grade end-of-grade test face possible retention, or at the very least re-testing and intervention, before they proceed to the sixth grade in 2001-02.

“While the policy sets firm standards, it is not without exceptions for students who qualify. Students who do not score at grade level ... will be given additional tests to be sure he or she did not just have a bad test day.”



Third and eighth graders are affected for the first time in the 2001-02 school year. High school students must comply with the new standards beginning with the entering ninth graders of 2001-02, the graduating class of 2005.

While the policy sets firm standards, it is not without exceptions for students who qualify. Students who do not score at grade level (Achievement Level III on end-of-grade tests) or above in third, fifth and eighth grades have several options. The student first will be given additional tests to be sure he or she did not just have a bad test day.

If a student has not reached Achievement Level III after the second or third testing, teachers or parents may request a formal review with a committee of teachers and other educators from the school district. This group will review documentation from the student's teachers and other information to help them decide whether the student should be recommended for promotion or retention. The student's principal makes the final decision.

Students who are not promoted to the next grade will receive extra help and a personalized education plan complete with strategies to assist each student's progress.

The standards do apply to exceptional children and to students with limited English proficiency. Students with disabilities may be exempted from the standards by their Individualized Education Program Team, if it is determined that students do not have the ability to participate in the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. Limited English proficient students who are exempt from statewide testing because of their language barrier may use a portfolio to document their progress.

Based on 1999-2000 testing data, as many as one-third of all students in grades three through eight are performing below grade level on the required tests. That means that most schools and school districts have already begun targeted intervention for students who are borderline or low-performing. For some schools, that may be a very small percentage of students; for others, it could be the majority of students.

Saturday sessions, summer school and after school tutorials are just starting points for most schools' intervention activities. Schools are strengthening relationships with parents, business and other community organizations. They are tapping into differentiated instruction and other instructional practices. And, they are seeking outside resources to implement school-wide improvement models, such as the models funded by the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration grants.

With high stakes consequences built into North Carolina's accountability model for schools, educators and, now, students, schools are looking carefully at models of school reform and improvement that have proven track records.

North Carolina's accountability model drives local school reform efforts through high stakes, but also by providing intervention to schools, resources (both financial and informational) and rewards for improvement.

## **Future North Carolina Reform Challenges: Addressing Chronically Low-Performing Schools and Closing Gaps**

There are challenges, and then there are durable challenges.

That's the way that North Carolina State Superintendent Mike Ward describes two of the challenges facing North Carolina public schools in the months and years ahead. Both challenges can be identified because of the state's accountability model, which provides a wealth of testing and other kinds of information at the school and student level.

Chronically low-performing schools — the handful of schools in North Carolina that have remained on the low-performing list for two out of three years despite intervention — and the gaps in achievement between white students and racial minorities are two durable challenges that North Carolina's Board of Education and State Superintendent have pledged to tackle in the future.

### **Plan Would Address Chronically Low-Performing Schools**

State Superintendent Mike Ward, in February 2001, proposed a plan to address chronically low-performing schools through an aggressive combination of state assistance, additional school resources and financial incentives for

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teachers and principals, and the possibility of "reconstituting" schools that fail to improve.

In announcing this plan, Ward said that North Carolina parents and students should expect that aggressive steps will be taken to turn around schools that are identified as low-performing for two out of three years. "Our assistance program has been successful in the majority of low-performing schools. In a handful of cases across the state, the usual types of state assistance have not resulted in these schools solidly moving out of the low-performing status," Ward said. "In these cases, we have a moral obligation to intensify the support and, if necessary, take more dramatic steps on behalf of students and their communities."

Schools in North Carolina are identified as low-performing if they fail to meet their growth standard for student achievement and if less than half of the school's students are performing at grade level on end-of-course tests or at proficiency level on high school end-of-course tests. The growth/gain standard is set annually by the State Board of Education for each school.

Under Ward's plan, a low-performing school identified for the first time would receive state assistance, just as it currently does. If this assistance were not enough to move the school out of the low-performing category, the assistance team would be reassigned to the school (possibly with some changes) and a new level of intervention would begin.

During the second year, these schools — which some education leaders refer to as High Priority Schools — would receive additional funds to reduce class sizes significantly.

Schools also could apply for funds from a state "Turn Around" Fund set up especially for them. These funds could provide teacher training, school reform projects, the extension of the school day or year and other innovative approaches. Also, adequate funding would be provided so that teachers in these schools could be employed for 11 months annually — one month longer than in typical public schools. In addition to providing more days for student instruction, this extended employment could provide opportunities for training, planning and activities to improve the school. New staff at the school also would be eligible for special bonuses to compensate them for accepting such a challenging assignment and all staff would be eligible for performance bonuses.

If a school were still low-performing for a third year, all of the intervention and resources provided during the second year would continue, but the State Board of Education would begin its own intervention. Some of these actions could include the following:

- Requiring local boards of education to provide specific state, local or federal funds to the schools;
- Requiring the local board to restructure the entire school in terms of grades or programs offered;
- Requiring the local board of education to "reconstitute" the school, i.e. disband the school staff and re-assemble a new staff; or
- Allowing families assigned to the school to request assignment in a higher-performing public school.

While chronically low-performing schools would receive additional resources, the plan also has built-in accountability measures. During the second year, the state assistance team itself would be evaluated, as would the school's principal. The State Superintendent would assign a high-level designee to the school district and chronically low-performing school to monitor progress, and the local school district central office would be expected to report regularly on the school's progress.

The third year, of course, has more stringent accountability possibilities, including a complete re-staffing of the school.

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The costs of this program are estimated to be between \$4.5 million and \$6.1 million to work with the seven schools currently eligible. Approximately \$5 million in federal education funds are expected to be available in the 2001-02 school year for the Turn-Around Fund.

## Achievement Gap Needs Ongoing Effort

North Carolina public schools have faced a persistent gap in student achievement for many years. This gap is most significant when students are grouped by race.

The 2000 testing data reveal that the gap between minority and white students is currently an average of 30 points. Overall, 80% of white students are scoring at or above grade level on end-of-grade tests, and slightly more than 50% of minority students are scoring this high.

State educators have issued a call to schools and communities to find the will to close the achievement gaps that exist between groups of students and to challenge all students to reach higher standards. This will take different approaches in different communities, but some of the strategies to help close this gap may include more instructional time for some students, additional instructional approaches, increased parental involvement and more resources to help students for whom English is a new language. Other strategies may be identified as educators work to solve this problem in their communities. At the state level, several activities are underway to help.

The North Carolina Advisory Commission on Raising Achievement and Closing Gaps was formed in the fall of 2000. Serving as chairman of the Commission is former Wake County (NC) Schools' Superintendent Bob Bridges, long known as a strong educator and advocate of achievement for all students. The commission was appointed for the purpose of generating wisdom and advising the State Board of Education, the State Superintendent and local school systems on direction, approaches and best practices for raising achieve-

ment and closing gaps. This group has formed study committees to gather information and make recommendations to the State Superintendent and State Board in the following key areas:

- The preparation and support of teachers as they assume today's demanding teaching responsibility;
- Underachieving students and their condition for learning;
- Home and community roles in facilitating and supporting achievement with underachieving youngsters;
- The influence of legislation and policy (existing or needed) related to raising achievement and closing gaps; and
- Minority student participation in instructional programs and exclusion from school.

## Annual Conference Provides Opportunities to Share Successes

Each March, the annual Improving Minority and At-Risk Student Achievement Conference is sponsored by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. For the past several years this conference has provided an opportunity for local school districts and schools to share techniques that are working to close the gap and boost achievement. To learn more about the conference, visit the Closing the Gap web site, [www.ncpublicschools.org/closingthegap](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/closingthegap).

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## State Level Staff to Bring Focus

The Department of Public Instruction created a section comprised of employees and eight teachers on loan to provide technical assistance to schools and school systems. This section is expected to work closely with other specialists in curriculum and school improvement to help support and encourage successful strategies to raise student achievement and close gaps.

### Web Resources on North Carolina's Public Schools

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction  
[http://www.ncpublicschools.org/about\\_dpi/](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/about_dpi/)

The ABCs of Public Instruction  
<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/abcs/>

State Assistance Teams  
[http://www.ncpublicschools.org/school\\_improvement/assistance\\_index.html](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/school_improvement/assistance_index.html)

Closing the Achievement Gap  
<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/closingthegap/>

Student Accountability Standards  
[http://www.ncpublicschools.org/student\\_promotion/](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/student_promotion/)

Sample End-of-Grade Tests  
<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/accountability/testing/eog/testlets.html>

North Carolina State Board of Education  
[http://www.ncpublicschools.org/state\\_board/](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/state_board/)

Education Week's Web Page on North Carolina  
<http://www.edweek.org/context/states/nc-facts.htm>

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