

# The Condition of School Accountability in Arizona: 2005

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## ***Background***

Arizona LEARNS, the state’s school accountability system, began with the passage of Proposition 301. In addition to school accountability provisions, Proposition 301 increased the sales tax by six-tenths of a cent, dedicating the money to public education. Arizona LEARNS is intended to improve public education through the development of achievement profiles for all schools, the public dissemination of the profiles, and escalating levels of state intervention in persistently low-performing schools. This section will highlight recent developments related to Arizona’s school accountability systems—Arizona LEARNS and the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)—and evaluate the achievement profiles in the context of Arizona’s market-oriented school choice policies.

Under Arizona LEARNS, the achievement profiles are labels intended to represent the academic standing of individual schools. The achievement profiles are derived according to a formula adopted by the Arizona State Board of Education. The achievement profiles are determined according to a compensatory model, and school performance targets are set according to a sliding scale: Schools with lower baseline test scores are required to make more progress than schools with higher baseline scores.<sup>1</sup>

Based on the outcome of the formula, schools are classified into one of the following achievement profiles: Excelling, Highly Performing, Performing, Underperforming, and Failing to Meet Academic Standards (Failing). Schools are provided an appeal process to dispute the formula results and the outcome can affect the school's classification. The Arizona Department of Education (ADE) considers a school with three consecutive years of "Underperforming" designations to be "Failing Pending Review." If ADE confirms the formula results, the school is classified as "Failing."<sup>2</sup>

In addition, Arizona, like other states, is required to implement the provisions of NCLB, the federal school accountability system.<sup>3</sup> The target achievement goals are based on the expectation that all students are proficient on Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards by 2014. Schools and districts that do not meet the targeted achievement goals are considered as *not* having made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and are subject to corrective actions.<sup>4</sup> The corrective actions become more extensive and intrusive as schools fail to make AYP for consecutive years.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Recent Policy Developments***

In 2004, the State Board developed a formula to calculate an achievement profile for schools serving grades K-2 exclusively, alternative schools, and small schools. Previously, these schools had not received an achievement profile. Alternative schools are defined as schools offering an Arizona high school diploma whose "sole and clearly stated mission is to serve specific populations of at-risk students."<sup>6</sup> Small schools have student populations of inadequate size to calculate the standard Achievement Profile formula—generally fewer than 16 students per grade level.

The formula for K-2 schools is based entirely on a combination of reading and mathematics Stanford 9 Achievement scores for second grade students in the most current academic year (2004).<sup>7</sup> The achievement profiles for alternative and small schools are based on the same academic indicators (Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards scores, graduation and dropout rates, Adequate Yearly Progress determination, the Measure of Academic Progress) as other schools, where applicable. The small school formula is modified to account for the volatility of calculating statistics in circumstances

where school scores are sensitive to changes in the test scores of few students. The modified formula pools student scores across multiple school years and includes a “second look” at the test scores using a confidence interval before labeling any school as “Underperforming.”

### ***Available Data/Findings***

Table 1 summarizes the results of the achievement profile formula for all years. In 2002, the first year of the achievement profiles, the most striking statewide result is the paltry number of “Excelling” schools according to the formula defined by state law. In 2003, the sweeping revisions to the Arizona LEARNS formula adopted by the state board resulted in a notably higher percentage of schools qualified as “Excelling” and a considerably lower percentage of schools classified as “Underperforming.” The most noticeable trend in the 2004 achievement profiles is the large percentage (71 percent) of schools designated as “Performing.” In addition, the State Board voted to intervene in 11 Arizona public schools which, based on a site confirmation from the Arizona Department of Education (ADE), were designated as “Failing.”

Table 1: Achievement Profile Results, All Schools

	2002		2003		2004	
Achievement Profile	Percent of Total	School Count	Percent of Total	School Count	Percent of Total	School Count
<b>Excelling</b>	0.2%	3	12.0%	132	9.0%	150
<b>Highly Performing</b>	N/A	N/A	15.0%	167	12.5%	205
<b>Performing</b>	N/A	N/A	60.0%	663	71.0%	1161
<b>Maintaining Performance**</b>	43.0%	548	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>Improving**</b>	35.0%	446	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>Underperforming</b>	22.0%	275	13.0%	136	7.0%	109
<b>Failing</b>	0	0	0	0	1.0%	11
<b>Schools Receiving Profile (Total)</b>	<b>1272</b>		<b>1098</b>		<b>1636*</b>	

Source: Arizona Department of Education, Arizona LEARNS and No Child Left Behind, Databases available online at: <http://www.ade.az.gov/azlearns/>

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

\* The sharp increase in the total number of schools receiving a profile in 2004 is due to the initial achievement profile of schools serving grades K-2 only, small schools, and alternative schools.

\*\* The legislature discontinued these achievement profile designations in 2003.

In addition to the achievement profiles, the public is presented another high-profile measure of school performance, the most recent Arizona’s Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) scores. Given the visibility of the annual AIMS score, it is important to consider the extent to which the 2004 achievement profile and 2004 AIMS scores communicate a consistent message to the public, particularly parents. Table 2 lists the average percentage of students meeting or exceeding the standards on AIMS (reading, writing, and mathematics) by achievement profile. According to this summary statistic, the two measures of school performance (achievement profiles and 2004 AIMS scores) are congruent. The percentage of students meeting or exceeding the standards by achievement profile exhibits an expected pattern; a stair-step increase in school performance where “Failing” schools have the lowest average percentage of students

meeting or exceeding the standards and school performance ascends with each higher achievement profile.

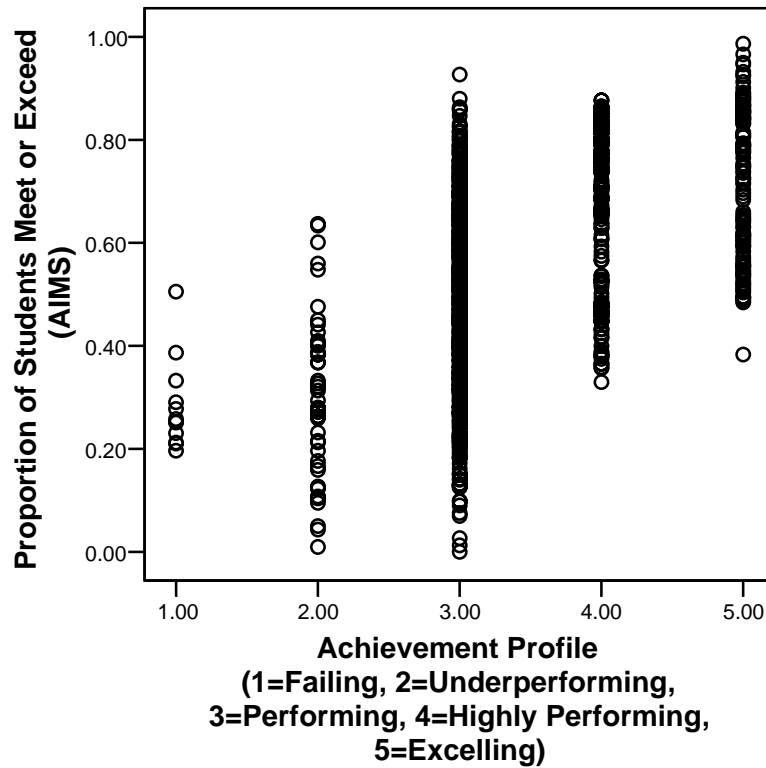
Table 2: Average Percent of Students Meeting or Exceeding the Standards on AIMS 2004 by Current Achievement Profile

Achievement Profile	Elementary Percent	School Count	High School Percent	School Count
<b>Excelling (E)</b>	72%	26	78%	24
<b>Highly Performing (HP)</b>	67%	170	64%	27
<b>Performing (P)</b>	51%	791	32%	274
<b>Underperforming (U)</b>	30%	47	16%	30
<b>Failing Pending Review (F)</b>	28%	126	0%	0

Source: This table was created from the merging of two data sources: Arizona Department of Education, *AIMS Report Wizard*, Retrieved December 23, 2004, from <http://www.ade.az.gov/profile/publicview/> and Arizona Department of Education, *2003-2004 Achievement Profiles for All Schools*, Retrieved January 18, 2005, from <http://www.ade.az.gov/profile/publicview/AZLEARNSSchoolList.asp?Year=2005>,

The variability in school performance across individual schools within the achievement profile classifications presents a more confusing picture. Within each achievement profile category, the percentage of students per school meeting or exceeding the standards varies widely. The range is broadest among schools in the “Performing” category, the group where 7 in 10 schools are classified. At the elementary level, the range of AIMS scores for schools in the “Performing” category is nearly wide enough to eclipse the range of scores in the other categories (see Figure 1). At the two extremes, two elementary schools, one with zero percent of students meeting or exceeding the standards in 2004, and another school with 93 percent of students meeting the same standards, both received a “Performing” classification (see Table 3). Many of the “Performing” schools with low 2004 AIMS scores are either alternative or small schools.

Figure 1: Proportion of Students Meeting or Exceeding the Standards by Achievement Profile, Elementary Schools (2004)



The findings are similar at the high school level. The lowest and highest AIMS scores for schools in the “Performing” category vary from three percent to 79 percent of students meeting or exceeding the standards (see Table 3). The range of scores for schools in the “Performing” category encompasses the scores for schools in all achievement profile categories, except for “Excelling” (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Proportion of Students Meeting or Exceeding the Standards by Achievement Profile, High Schools (2004)

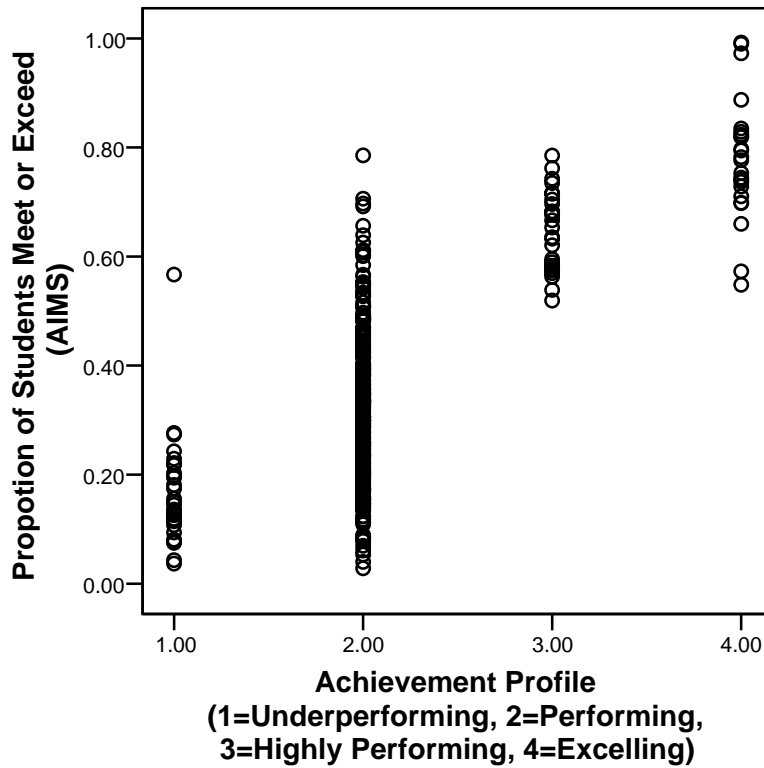


Table 3: Lowest and Highest 2004 AIMS Scores (% of Students Meets or Exceeds) by Achievement Profile

	Elementary		High School	
	Low	High	Low	High
<b>Excelling</b>	38%	99%	55%	99%
<b>Highly Performing</b>	33%	88%	52%	79%
<b>Performing</b>	0%	93%	3%	79%
<b>Underperforming</b>	1%	64%	4%	57%
<b>Failing</b>	20%	51%	N/A	N/A

Source: This table was created from the merging of two data sources: Arizona Department of Education, *AIMS Report Wizard*, Retrieved December 23, 2004, from <http://www.ade.az.gov/profile/publicview/> Arizona Department of Education, *2003-2004 Achievement Profiles for All Schools*, Retrieved January 18, 2005, from <http://www.ade.az.gov/profile/publicview/AZLEARNSSchoolList.asp?Year=2005>.

Although each school can be considered a unique case, these are some general explanations for the discrepancy between the 2004 AIMS scores and 2004 Arizona LEARNS achievement profiles:

- School test scores dramatically improved or declined in the most recent year. The achievement profile is based on a multi-year average and current year scores may be inconsistent with the school's trend in AIMS scores from prior years.
- The students included in the achievement profile formula are not the same set of students reported in AIMS results. The achievement profile formula eliminates mobile students. Mobile students who do *not* begin the school year at the school in which they are tested are excluded from the achievement profile calculations. The AIMS scores reported publicly on the ADE website or in the newspaper include all students.
- The achievement profile includes an indicator of student growth. The Measure of Academic Progress, based on the percentage of students by school who make one year's progress, is a principal factor in the achievement profile formula. The AIMS results report the absolute level of student performance on the academic standards.
- The achievement profile formula weights school performance in favor of the school's academic strength, absolute achievement, or growth. Higher scores in one area compensate for lower scores in another area.

## 2004 NCLB Results

According to the federal NCLB accountability system, 76 percent of Arizona public schools met the federal criteria for AYP in 2003 (see Table 4).<sup>8</sup> The number of schools making AYP improved to 82 percent in 2004.<sup>9</sup> Currently, there are 12 schools in the first year of restructuring and they face the most severe corrective actions to date.<sup>10</sup> Eventually, schools in restructuring may be required to reopen as a charter school or replace school staff.<sup>11</sup>

Table 4: Number of Schools Per Stage According to NCLB Results, Least to Most Severe Corrective Actions

School Improvement - Year 1	School Improvement - Year 2	Corrective Action	Restructuring - Year 1
67	54	51	12

Source: Arizona Department of Education, 2004-2005 *Title I School Improvement*, [Excel File] Retrieved December 14, 2004, from <http://www.ade.az.gov/asd/Title1/AccountabilityGrants/2004-05TitleISchoolImprovement.xls>

## *Policy Implications*

Tom Horne, Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction, encourages parents to focus on Arizona LEARNS because “the state system is more comprehensive and fair.”<sup>12</sup> The inconsistent relationship between the 2004 Arizona’s Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) test results and the achievement profiles, however, raises important policy implications about the clarity of the achievement profiles as a tool to aid parents in school choice decisions. For example, the extreme variability in AIMS scores for “Performing” schools calls into question the interpretation of that achievement profile classification. The mixed message is most egregious at the high school level because schools labeled as “Performing” enroll a substantial percentage of students who have not passed AIMS and may be in danger of not graduating.

Policy makers intended the achievement profiles to serve as an accessible and visible source of information for parents. In cases where AIMS scores and the achievement profile are incongruent, what resources are available to help parents reconcile the two conflicting indicators of school performance? The school report cards, created and disseminated by ADE, are of little assistance to parents due to the volume of data required under No Child Left Behind. The presentation of AIMS results in the typical K-8 school report card includes 2,835 individual statistics.

There are other threats to clear and consistent information on the horizon. Beginning in spring 2005, the state is administering a new standardized assessment, called the Dual Purpose Assessment. If the change in assessments disrupts the

achievement profiles, it could confuse parents and erode confidence in the school accountability system.

Clear and accurate school performance information is of particular interest in Arizona, where parents have more public school choice than in any other state.<sup>13</sup> In Arizona's market-oriented state policies, the achievement profiles are intended as key information to help parents make informed school choice decisions. In fact, some have argued that in a market-oriented environment, one of the state's exclusive roles should be to provide parents the necessary information to exercise school choice.<sup>14</sup> If the state is taking on the responsibility of labeling schools and providing information to parents, then careful attention should be paid to the consistency of such information.

## ***Recommendations***

It is recommended that:

1. The Arizona State Legislature authorize and fund an independent evaluation team composed of personnel who are not responsible for directing and managing the accountability program to review the accountability system.
2. The State Board of Education and the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) maintain consistency in the school accountability system as the state transitions into the new "Dual Purpose Assessment."
3. The State Board and ADE establish a consistent definition of the achievement profiles and Adequate Yearly Progress designations, and educate parents and the public on the meaning of these school labels.



- <sup>13</sup> Greene, J.P. (2000, September). *The education freedom index* (Civic Report #14). Center for Civic Innovation: Manhattan Institute. Retrieved April 13, 2005, from [http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr\\_14.htm](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_14.htm)
- <sup>14</sup> Finn, Jr., C.E. & Keegan, L.G. (2004). Lost at sea. *Education Next*. Retrieved April 13, 2005, from <http://www.educationnext.org/20043/15.html>