After many years of implementing the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and other school reforms, how much progress have Iowa schools made in raising achievement for students from all types of schools and backgrounds? The Center on Education Policy reported that 28 percent of schools nationwide missed the NCLB benchmarks in 2007, 35 percent in 2008 and 33 percent in 2009. The center estimates that at least 37 percent fell short last year and the U.S. Education Secretary Duncan claims that figure may balloon as high as 80% in 2011.

Among the shortcomings of NCLB is labeling children simply as “proficient” or “not proficient.” This labeling does not recognize the fact that all children, regardless of where they start, can demonstrate growth in their achievement from year to year. However, change may be in the near future. President Obama’s current plan calls for schools to be rated on the amount of academic growth their students achieve. His plan suggests that excellence would be rewarded, the vast majority in the middle would be given more flexibility to choose strategies to improve, and the lowest performers would face a stricter federal mandate to adopt a stringent school turnaround program.

How would the schools in the state of Iowa fare under this new metric? With the measurement of academic growth as a primary goal of the Iowa Testing Programs (ITP), growth in mathematics performance was analyzed for several different types of schools within our state.

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Schools identified in the State Report Card (September 2010) as SINA were compared to schools not identified as SINA schools (NonSINA). As defined by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), if schools fail to meet the state participation goals or state measurable objectives for either the “all students” group or any of the subgroups for two consecutive years they are identified as SINA.

Sixty-nine elementary schools that included 4th and 5th grade students in the same building and were on the SINA list due to mathematics performance were included in this analysis. When these schools are studied in terms of growth rather than in terms of NCLB proficiency labels, the results are very different. Figure 1 indicates that the schools designated as SINA, are making progress not reflected by their building AYP status. These are accomplishments that current NCLB regulations do not recognize as educational progress.

![Figure 2](image)

**Most Iowa schools (79%) demonstrated expected or greater than expected growth in mathematics between 4th and 5th grades.**

Growth from fourth grade to fifth grade was selected as a starting point for two primary reasons. First, most fourth graders transition to fifth grade in the same building. By selecting these two consecutive years, the analysis would allow the quantification of growth at the school level. There were 568 schools included in this analysis.

Figure 2 illustrates that 38% of the elementary buildings demonstrated expected growth while 41% of the elementary buildings demonstrated growth beyond what was expected.

**A Final Thought**

Growth metrics are easily understood by children, parents and teachers. Every parent knows that their 7 pound baby at birth has different expectations for growth for the next year, than a 10 pound baby at birth. In the first year of life, children may be “measured” in terms of weight and height. Change demonstrated between appointments helps parents determine whether their child is growing as expected. Translating these well-understood and appreciated metrics to the achievement growth world will help demystify “proficiency” indicators for children, parents and teachers.

Refocusing the evaluation of performance on aspects of growth will allow schools and students to be moving forward, regardless of the starting place. Rather than simply labeling children as proficient or not, using growth measures and setting goals for growth will provide students the increased opportunity to learn and teachers with information to design effective strategies for teaching and learning.