

How to Use PAP To Make AYP Under NCLB

Today's educators live in fear of the draconian consequences of failing to make adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act. Mr. Popham offers sage advice on how to “comply” with the law and not get hurt.

BY W. JAMES POPHAM

ONE OF B. F. Skinner's little-known principles of reinforcement states, “If any organism, human or subhuman, discerns the prospect of impending pain, that organism will attempt to avoid such pain.” This principle, often shunned by strict behaviorists because it seems corrupted by cognitive overtones, was first articulated in 1965 in an unpublished essay. The essay is known chiefly because of Skinner's concluding comment that “inside every fat rat is a thin rat yearning for food pellets.” Skinner's “pain-avoidance principle” was somewhat unimaginatively identified by Skinner as the “pain-avoidance principle.” In referring to it, reinforcement theorists typically use its initials: PAP.

PAIN POTENTIAL OF A FEDERAL LAW

PAP, then, describes the proclivity of organisms to avoid upcoming pain. And if ever there was a law that pos-

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sessed enormous potential for inflicting pain, it is surely the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Signed into law in early 2002, this federal statute is thought by some analysts to be, in fact, an enormous pile of pap.

The NCLB pain to be avoided, of course, is associated with the formidable set of aversive consequences that kick in when a public school fails to get its students to make “adequate yearly progress” (AYP), as measured by improvements on approved achievement tests. At best, a school that fails to make AYP is merely regarded by the public as ineffectual. However, those “failing” schools that receive Title I funds are placed on an “improvement track” that, in time, can improve a school right out of existence.

In the following analysis, I offer guidance to my public school colleagues who, yearning to dodge the distress brought on by NCLB, sometimes operate solely on the basis of PAP. First, I will identify a number of tactics currently being employed to escape the pain of NCLB and then describe a set of tactics — not yet widely in use — that show considerable PAP potential. Following the inspirational insight of Stephen Potter, who in 1947 introduced us to *gamesmanship* as “the art of winning games without actually cheating,” I shall refer to all of these tactics — sometimes psychometric, sometimes psychological, sometimes psychotic — as *ploys*. More specifically, I will dub them NCLB PAP Ploys.

I won’t spend much space on the array of NCLB PAP Ploys that are already in widespread use. Clearly, word is getting around regarding which tactics can help evade AYP-induced failure. As more educators learn about these federally sanctioned schemes to avoid pain, we can safely predict that the education profession’s mimicry machine will kick into high gear. My chief purpose here is to introduce educators to a set of inchoate, innovative tactics that, if employed adroitly, will stave off a great deal of suffering.

NCLB PAP PLOYS NOW IN USE

1. *Challenge chopping.* Because a state’s yearly NCLB tests must, by federal law, be based directly on a state’s “challenging” curricular goals, and because students’ low scores on those tests will lead to AYP failure, some states have tried to minimize NCLB-induced casualties simply by lowering the challenge levels of their state curricula. Many educators have already learned to their distress that — from a public relations perspective — such wholesale reductions in a state’s curricular aspirations must be *labeled* with consummate care. For obvious rea-

sons, these sorts of endeavors should not be described as “expectation lowering,” “standard softening,” or the dreaded “dumbing down.” Indeed, there is even some risk in referring to such an overhaul of the state curriculum as “curriculum revision.” “Revision,” after all, could go either way. The best label for such challenge chopping currently appears to be “curricular refinement.” After all, who could find fault when educators strive to make something finer?

2. *Proficiency paring.* Again, because the percentage of a school’s students who fail to achieve proficient scores on NCLB-approved tests is the most important factor in determining a school’s annual AYP fate, some states have simply reduced the levels of test scores that students must attain in order to be considered proficient. In one state, for example, prior to the arrival of NCLB, there was a distinction drawn between students whose test scores were “proficient” and those whose scores caused them to be designated as “approaching proficiency.” After the NCLB requirement that teachers never look at their students using a rearview mirror, this state’s officials decided to label *both* groups of students “proficient.” Apparently, these officials discovered that students in the lower-scoring group were “approaching proficiency” faster than anyone had thought.

3. *Subgroup sizing.* One common way for a school to misfire in the annual test score turkey shoot is to have any one of its NCLB-designated student subgroups fail to make AYP. But the architects of NCLB — in an obvious nod to rigor and respectability — require the performance of any given subgroup in a school to be “statistically reliable” before that subgroup’s scores are counted for AYP. Of course, each state can negotiate the minimum size of a student subgroup that’s needed before it must be included in a school’s AYP calculations.

Well, in a not-so-subtle effort to get fewer schools to flop on AYP, many states have recently taken part in a great upward movement of subgroup minima. This supersizing of subgroups frequently excludes from AYP calculations the very students who, because they perform less well, ought to be getting more instructional attention rather than being rendered invisible by means of quantitative camouflage. Fortunately, several recently released software programs can optimize the minimum sizes of a state’s NCLB subgroups — all the way to infinity if necessary.

4. *Statistical sidestepping.* A well-known adage states, “If you torture statistics long enough, they’ll confess to anything.” Accordingly, using a statistical ploy to dodge AYP-induced pain, a flock of states have hopped

happily aboard the confidence-interval caravan. As these statistical confidence intervals are currently being employed, they enable a state's schools to perform well below state-set proficiency levels on NCLB tests yet *seem* to be performing satisfactorily. This statistical sleight

ber had ballooned to more than 17,000.

This particular NCLB PAP Ploy, of course, pertains only to the proportion of a school's students who do or don't graduate. However, in the Merrow report, titled "Disappearing Dropouts," it is all too apparent that,

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of hand is accomplished simply by computing confidence intervals that, in essence, allow a school with huge numbers of low-scoring students to be deemed a success. Such specious successes are due solely to gigantic margin-of-error intervals surrounding the cut score a state selects for determining proficient performance.

Because this form of statistical skulduggery is laden with numerical nuances and allows far fewer schools to miss AYP, it has become quite popular. Moreover, state officials have learned that, when they shift from using a 95% confidence interval to using a 99% confidence interval, even fewer schools will fail their AYP goals. What most citizens mistakenly regard as a more stringent confidence interval actually allows many more schools to feign success. Recently, some states have proposed that they be allowed to adopt truly rigorous 100% confidence levels. Such proposals are a key component of a multifaceted initiative usually described as "No School Left Visible."

5. *GED gulaging*. The Gulag Archipelago was a labyrinthine series of Soviet forced-labor prison camps in which prisoners often became permanently "lost." Well, reports are now emerging that some state officials have stumbled onto their own Gulag gimmickry in an effort to fend off NCLB-induced pain.

A 30 November 2004 report by John Merrow on the PBS show "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer" informed us that, in order to attain sufficiently high NCLB-related graduation rates, many Florida educators were urging struggling students to enroll in General Education Development (GED) programs. By enrolling in GED programs, however, these struggling students would actually have to *withdraw* from the public schools. Thus they would not be counted as having failed to receive their high school diplomas. Two years ago, there were 11,600 GED students in Florida; last year, that num-

ber because this approach seems to be working in the Sunshine State, it may be adopted elsewhere. That's because Florida is clearly on the cutting edge when it comes to creative counting — not just votes, but students too.

As I indicated above, these five NCLB PAP Ploys are state-level — not school-level — contrivances. But when state authorities countenance such connivances, do those officials not "loose the dogs of deception" at the local level? If it is acceptable to play deceitful accountability games in a state's capital, isn't it okay for local educators to dish out their own dollops of deception?

MORE PAP ON THE WAY

I now turn to a second series of largely untried ploys that are better suited for local use. These tactics stem, in large measure, from the insights provided to us by 19th-century illusionists, 20th-century magicians, and 21st-century swindlers. Standing on the slanted shoulders of such charlatans, today's educators can offer a fundamental reconceptualization of AYP. In the agile minds of these heirs to Houdini, AYP can be thought of as the Appearance of Yearly Progress.

1. *School scrunching*. One of the most universally accepted tenets of teaching is that really small classes are superior to really large classes. When pushed to its logical conclusion, this idea means that a class of only one student is optimal. Indeed, when we contemplate images of truly wonderful instruction, we can recall President Garfield's reference to having Mark Hopkins on one end of a log bench and a student on the other. Clearly, small classes are spiffy. And now, through the magic of exotic electronics, we can install widespread applications of individualized instruction — at least virtually.

When the "school-within-a-school" organizational innovation first surfaced in American schools several dec-

ades ago, its proponents claimed big things for it. If we simply configured smaller groups of students and teachers within a large school, they claimed, this arrangement would support superior instruction. And now, because we can command increasingly powerful computers to carry on electronic student-shifting and student-sorting, there is no reason we can't move directly to the ultimate archetype of individualized instruction, that is, one-on-one teaching.

For purposes of reporting NCLB results to state and federal authorities, we can now present a collection of electronically incarnated "single-student schools" within existing real-world schools. The evaluative advantage of this approach, of course, should be apparent. One-student schools completely remove any possibility that a school will fail to meet its AYP targets because of the poor performance of a school's subgroups. In these single-student virtual schools, there simply are no student subgroups.

A predictable side benefit of this NCLB PAP Ploy, happily, is that each and every high school student can become class valedictorian. Think of the positive impact that this prestigious accomplishment will have on a student's self-esteem! As you can see, this ploy promotes student growth in both the cognitive *and* the affective domains.

2. *Subgroup swapping.* "Sister cities" are pairs of municipalities that choose to establish closer-than-normal working relationships. These arrangements usually lead to a host of economic and cultural exchanges between representatives of the participating cities. Based on the apparent advantages of sister-city arrangements, especially in an era of nearly unlimited electronic communication, it seems that America's schools should seriously explore an exciting concept at the heart of another PAP Ploy, namely, the creation of "sister schools."

The NCLB-related payoffs from such arrangements are obvious. Students in some schools perform better than students in other schools. As a corollary of that incontestable fact, students in some schools' NCLB-designated subgroups are bound to perform better than students in the NCLB-designated subgroups of other schools. Thus, in an unabashed effort to establish more harmonious relations with other educators, sister schools can be established to foster mutually beneficial inter-school collaboration. One prominent form of such collaboration would be the electronic transfer of subgroup scores from high-scoring schools to low-scoring schools. I suggest that such score transfers focus only on subgroups rather than on a school's overall NCLB test scores

because subgroup transfers, being more modest in magnitude, are less likely to attract the attention of state and federal officials who, for their own peace of mind, will often prefer to remain oblivious of the inner workings of this consummately collaborative activity.

Because experience tells us that there will be more schools in need of high test scores than in need of low test scores and because there is no technical limit on the number of sister schools that any one school might have, most high-scoring schools will discover that they soon acquire substantial extended families. To make such sisterly arrangements sufficiently attractive to the staff of a high-scoring school, of course, there should be a financial *quid pro quo* supplied by every low-scoring school to its high-scoring sibling. These funds could be employed by the recipient schools in a variety of ways, some of them actually related to education.

3. *Score storing.* One of my grandfather's favorite sayings was "Waste not that ye want not." Probably because of his impoverished childhood in England, my grandfather regarded "thrift" as an almost transcendental virtue. Well, I believe that we might profitably derive another PAP Ploy from my grandfather's frugality fetish. More specifically, I believe that schools should embark on a major campaign to "bank" their students' scores on NCLB tests. After all, once a student has attained a suitable score on one of these high-stakes tests, is there any compelling reason to squander that score?

Madeline Hunter used to recommend that the often-unused early moments of a class period be devoted to instructionally relevant exercises she referred to as "sponge" activities. She urged that these activities be used to soak up otherwise wasted teaching time. Well, all we need to do now during the early moments of class is to employ "scrounge" activities, wherein we try to scrounge up proficient-level scores from our students. Employing a variant of the increasingly popular, albeit inappropriate, "value-added" analytic techniques, we can come up with total-score projections based on a student's meaningful interaction with only three or four test items. These proficient scores can then be "banked" in such a way that, when the call for NCLB data arrives, we can simply wheel out our baskets of winning test scores — many of which will have had heaps of value added to them.

Some educators, of course, will be concerned that this sort of daily NCLB testing will fall outside state-specified windows for NCLB testing. However, all we need to do to counter such objections is employ a variant of the federally approved confidence-interval concept. We can create margins of error around the time period set

aside for NCLB testing. Indeed, if we employ a sufficiently stringent confidence interval, it is possible that a school's testing window can be made to approximate eternity.

4. *Performance enhancing.* During the last decade we have witnessed an explosion in the popularity of ingestible performance enhancers. Everyone's attention seems to be riveted on over-the-counter or prescription substances that can help the ingestee function at improved levels — whether on the playing field, in the boardroom, or in the bedroom.

Happily, careful reading of the NCLB statute and its attendant regulations and guidance documents reveals no prohibition against the use of performance-enhancing substances to shore up a school's lagging test scores. If an anti-Alzheimer's drug can help grandparents remember the names of their grandkids, why can't a comparable drug help fourth-graders remember their times tables?

An early 2005 report in the *Los Angeles Times* indicated that, when Cambridge University students completed mental ability tests, their brain power was a 10, but after taking a "smart drug," their brain power was a 15. Even without smart drugs, most of us can see that this represents a 50% improvement in the cognitive functioning of those students.

What a school's staff needs to do is identify a suitable substance that can send students' scores soaring and then purchase sufficient quantities for schoolwide "dissemination" prior to the NCLB testing. In most instances, of course, parents will need to give permission for their children to consume these enhancers. However, if this performance-enhancement ploy is described with sufficient aplomb — characterized, for example, as "developmentally appropriate cognitive enrichment" — most parents will readily acquiesce. After all, what parent wants to see a child deprived of all possible tools for academic success — especially one that's "developmentally appropriate"?

In the months leading up to NCLB testing, loads of appropriate "enrichers" could be periodically ladled into students. On the actual day(s) of testing, an extra-strength stimulant could be given to all students so that, during the examination period, they would be well wired and eager to do successful battle with the test items.

But educators who adopt this ploy need to be aware of possible side effects. A student's error-free test performance lasting more than four hours, though rare, requires immediate psychometric attention. In fact, if such extended instances of error-free performance take place on norm-referenced NCLB tests, they can contribute to a clear-cut case of *percentile dysfunction*.

A MILD PERVERSION OF POTTER

As I pointed out above, all nine of these ploys can be identified as variants of Stephen Potter's gamesmanship ploys. However, whereas Potter characterized his numerous ploys as elements in "the art of winning games without actually cheating," the tactics I have suggested here are rooted in slightly different topsoil. I believe that these NCLB PAP Ploys are part of "the art of winning NCLB games without actually being caught cheating." The difference may seem subtle, but it's important.

It seems that any federal law that can precipitate such a massive array of deceptive practices must be repaired — and not by mild massaging. Major surgery is clearly required. Currently, hoards of American educators wait hopefully — scrubbed and gowned, with sharpened scalpels in hand. 

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