

NCEO Brief

The Characteristics of Low Performing Students on Large-Scale Assessments

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□ Background

All students, including students with disabilities, are required to participate in state assessments used for accountability purposes. Most participate in the general test, with or without accommodations. A few with significant cognitive disabilities participate in alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS). A small group of students with disabilities may not be appropriately assessed with these options and several states offer an additional assessment option—alternate assessments based on modified achievement standards (AA-MAS).¹

According to federal regulations students who participate in an AA-MAS must be served by an Individualized Education Program (IEP). They also must be able to make significant progress, but not be expected to reach grade-level proficiency, within the year covered by their IEP. The regulations require that students who participate in an AA-MAS have access to grade level content and they may be from any disability category. The AA-MAS is an optional assessment and many states do not offer it. Federal regulations require states that offer an AA-MAS to

develop participation guidelines that IEP teams can use to determine which students with disabilities qualify to participate in this option. It is up to states to decide (subject to federal approval) who the students are and the criteria that will be used to identify them.

States need to have a clear understanding of how students who may participate in an AA-MAS differ from other students. To this end, the National Center on Educational Outcomes and a consortium of five² states investigated the characteristics of the students who may be candidates for an AA-MAS.

□ The Longitudinal Study

This brief reports the findings of a longitudinal analysis of three years of student-level demographic and performance data for four states (Alabama, Hawaii, South Dakota, Wisconsin).³ Data were from the 2004-05, 2005-06, and 2006-07 school years.⁴ Data sets were compiled for each state for students who were in grades 5 and 8 during the 2006-07 school year,⁵ and included student performance data on the regular Reading/English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics assessment.

The goal of this analysis was to learn more about the characteristics of low performing students. For this analysis, **low performing (LP)** students were defined as students who scored at the 10th percentile or below on the statewide assessment in any one of the three years. **Persistently low performing (PLP)** students were defined as students who scored at the 10th percentile or below for all three years. Federal regulations require that students who participate in an AA-MAS must have an IEP. This means that low performing students without disabilities are excluded from participating in AA-MAS. For research purposes we sought to learn more about the characteristics of all struggling learners, and included both low



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performing students with and without IEPs in this study. Specifically, this analysis sought to answer the following questions:

1. Are the demographic characteristics of PLP students different from the characteristics of the total population of students?
2. Is there movement out of the low performing (LP) category?

Characteristics of Persistently Low Performing (PLP) Students

The results of the demographic analysis are reported in Figure 1. The figure presents results of four demographic analyses for all students and for PLP students at the 5th and 8th grade levels for Reading/ELA in the four states. Though not included in this brief, there were similar findings for mathematics.

Gender. Figure 1a shows that across both

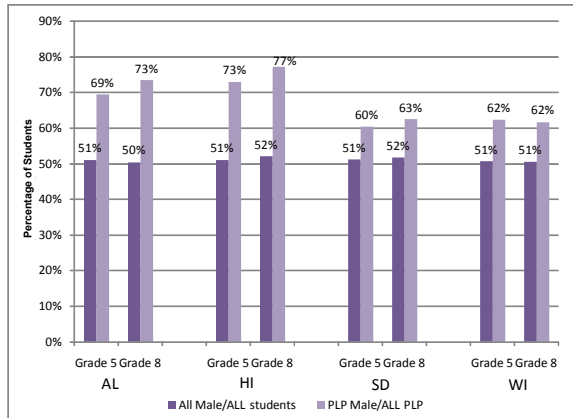
grades in the four states males were more likely to be persistently low performing than the overall population (PLP = 60% - 77%; baseline = 51% - 52%).

Minority Status. Figure 1b shows the percentage of minority students in the overall population and in the PLP group. Note that for Hawaii the group considered to be the majority would be considered a minority in the other three states. In Hawaii PLP students were less likely to be from an ethnic minority than the overall population (PLP = 13% - 15%; baseline = 16% - 17%). For the other three states, students who were PLP were more likely to be from an ethnic minority than the overall student population (PLP = 43% - 58%; Baseline = 14% - 35%).

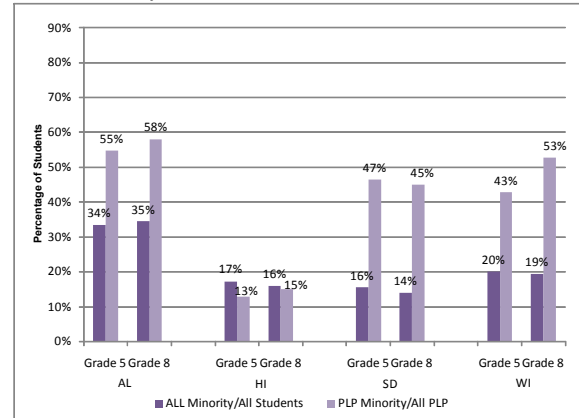
Free and Reduced Lunch. Figure 1c shows that across both grades, in three⁶ states, students who were living in poverty (i.e., qualified for a free/reduced lunch) were more likely to be PLP than the overall population (PLP = 48% - 71%; baseline = 29% - 44%).

Figure 1. Percentage of Students with Selected Demographic Characteristics: All Students and Persistently Low Performing (PLP) Students, Reading, Grades 5 and 8

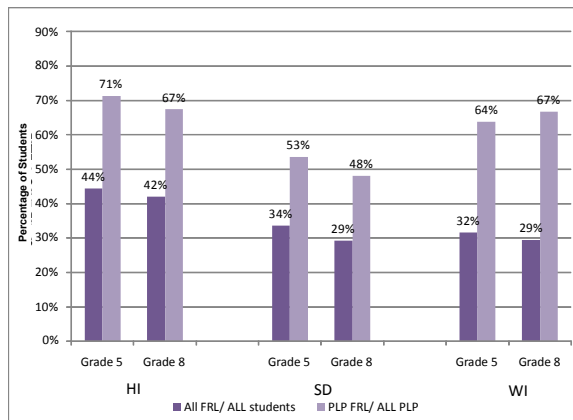
1a. Male Students



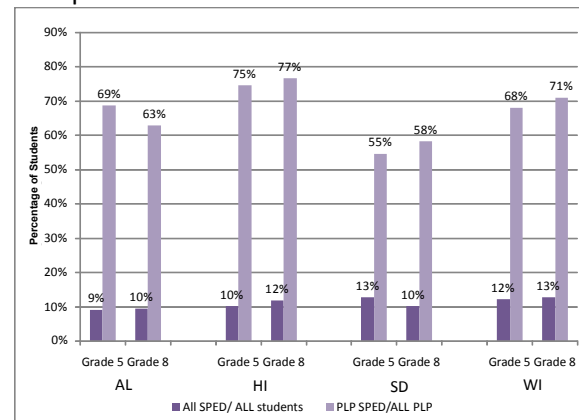
1b. Minority



1c. Free-Reduced Lunch



1d. Special Education



Special Education. Figure 1d shows the percentage of students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in the PLP group. As indicated in the figure, 9% to 13% of students received special education services, but more than half (i.e., 55% - 77%) of the students in the PLP group belonged to this subgroup.

□ Student Movement Out of the Low Performing Group

In this section we explore the movement of students out of the low performing groups. Figure 2 presents Year 3 results and indicates what ensued for students who had been low performing (LP) in Year 1. For this analysis four groups were formed—the persistently low performing (PLP) group, students who were LP in both the first and third year, students who were in LP in the first and second year, and students who were only in the LP group during the first year. The denominator of the percentages in Figure 2 is the number of students who were in

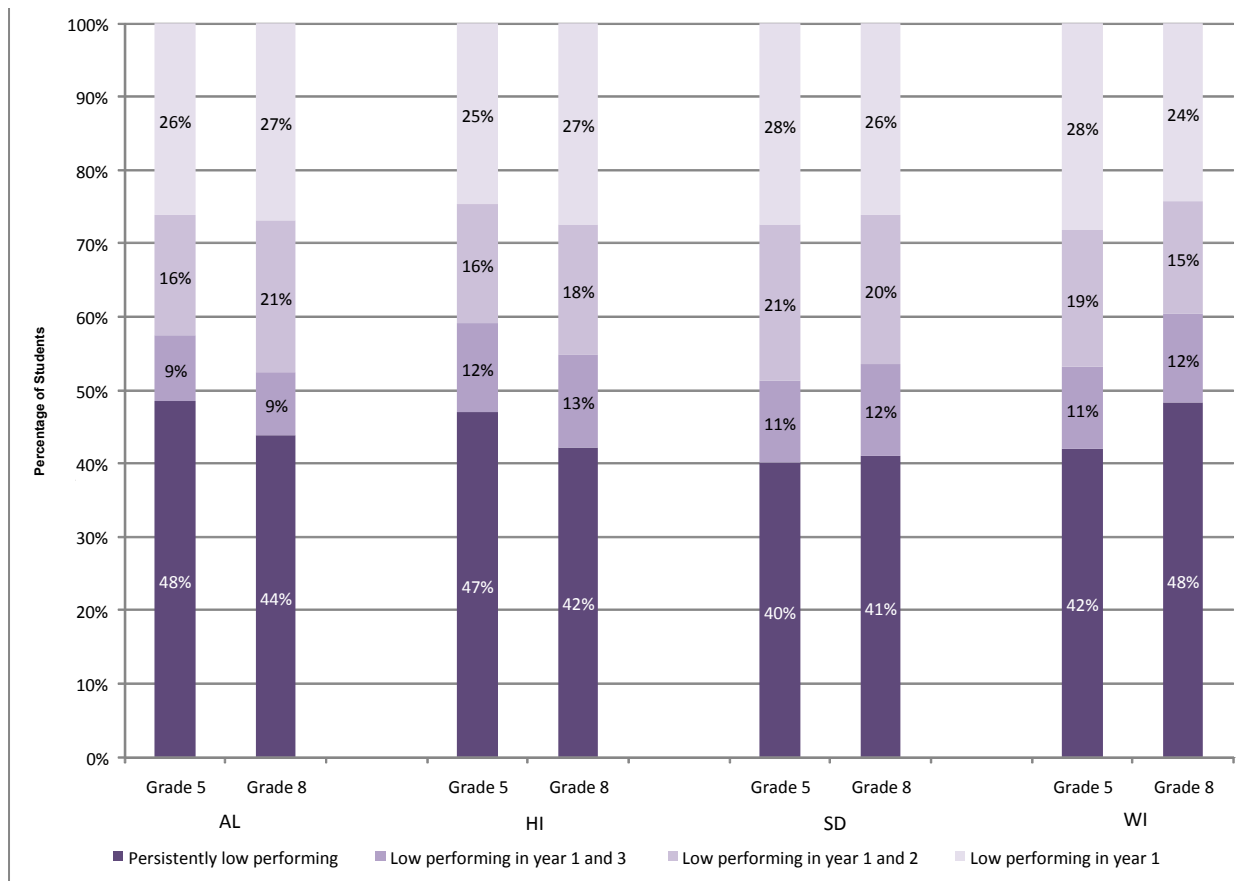
the LP group in the first year. Two analyses were conducted—one for students who were in 5th grade in Year 3 and another for students who were in 8th grade in Year 3. The figure presents the results for reading, but there were similar results for mathematics.

As shown in Figure 2, across all states and grade levels more than half of the students who were LP in the first year did not become PLP students. Across states and grade levels approximately 25% (24% - 28%) of the students moved out of the LP group after the first year and did not return. There were no clear differences between data at the 5th grade level and data at the 8th grade level.

□ Conclusions

Though many state data have been showing recent gains in the percent of students reaching proficiency (Altman, Thurlow, & Vang, 2009; Chudowsky, Chudowsky, & Kober, 2007), educators are aware that there is a segment of students who are performing far below proficiency year in and year out on the state

Figure 2. Percentage of Low Performing (LP) Students Who Stay or Move Out of LP Across Three Years



regular assessment. This analysis was an attempt to learn more about the characteristics of these students by using longitudinal student-level data from four states in a Multi-State GSEG. The findings indicate that male students, minority students, and students from low socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to be persistently low performing (PLP). PLP students included both students who qualified for special education services and general education students. Also, many low performing students do not become PLP, and student grade did not seem to affect likelihood of becoming PLP.

Some low performing students may not have had access to grade-level content which is another requirement of the federal regulations (Quenemoen, 2009). Focusing on ensuring that students are being taught well should be a top priority.

□ Resources

- Altman, J., Thurlow M., & Vang, V. (2009). *Annual performance report: 2006-2007 state assessment data*. Minneapolis MN: National Center on Educational Outcomes, University of Minnesota.
- Chudowsky, N., & Chudowsky, V., & Kober, N. (2007). *Answering the question that matters most: Has student achievement increased since No Child Left Behind?* Washington DC: Center on Educational Policy.
- National Center on Educational Outcomes. (2009, November 9). *State alternate assessment policies*. Retrieved from <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/nceo/TopicAreas/AlternateAssessments/StatesAltAssess.htm>
- Quenemoen, R. (2009). Identifying and understanding the population. In M. Perie (Ed.), *Considerations for the alternate assessment based on modified achievement standards (AA-MAS): Understanding the eligible population and applying that knowledge to their instruction and assessment* (pp. 17-50). Albany, NY: New York Department of Education.

¹In addition to the options discussed in this paragraph, three states have an Alternate Assessment Based on Grade-Level Achievement Standards (AA-GLAS) (National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2009).

²The Multi-GSEG Toward a Defensible AA-MAS and the Alabama GSEG Project includes Alabama, Hawaii, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Wisconsin.

³In this brief, four states' data are presented because the full population data for Tennessee were unavailable at the time of publication.

⁴The data set for Wisconsin was for the 2005-06, 2006-07, 2007-08 school years.

⁵In Wisconsin, students were in grades 5 and 8 during the 2007-08 school year.

⁶Socio-economic status data were not available for Alabama.

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