

Educationally Speaking
October 2009

Twenty out of twenty-two. That's a success percentage of 91%. If the Chargers win 91% of their regular season football games, they are in the playoffs. If a Padres hitter or pitcher is successful 91% of the time he will be an all-star. A basketball player who makes 91% of his/her shots is performing well above the average performance of other players. A golfer who executes 91% of his/her shots successfully will win many tournaments and lots of money. But in education, 91% is not good enough.

In education, schools and school districts are expected to meet or exceed achievement targets in all areas or risk being labeled as "Program Improvement" after falling short for two consecutive years. And, so that schools don't get complacent, the achievement targets that have to be met each year get more and more rigorous. In fact, by 2013-2014, all schools and school districts are expected to have all students performing at or above grade level.

What is the source of this logic? Both Republicans and Democrats got together and created the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) that results in the logic you read above. Professionally, I have no problem striving to have all students perform at or above grade level, and I do think that NCLB has done a great job of helping schools and districts identify and help those students who are not as successful as others. But to label schools as Program Improvement and in need of interventions and sanctions because not all students met all targets is demonstrating poor judgment.

Now, I understand that there are areas where imperfection can't be tolerated. We don't want heart surgery performed on us by someone who is successful only 91% of the time. We won't fly on airplanes where the likelihood that we will safely arrive at our destination only 91% of the time. However, the doctors, pilots, and support staff will have had multiple opportunities to practice the exact skills they are to perform with immediate support, assistance, and guidance. In education, at the high school level, student and school success as determined by NCLB is based upon the STAR test and the CAHSEE (California High School Exit Exam) taken during the sophomore year. For purposes of measuring school success, students will take the tests one time only without support or assistance.

Our schools are successfully educating many students. Ninety-one percent success on NCLB measures is just one of many criteria to determine the success of students and schools. Are we meeting the educational needs of all students? No. We have work to do, and we are doing it. Our English language learners are the students who are experiencing the least amount of academic success in our schools. However, we do know that all students can benefit from a more rigorous education and higher achievement.

The Fallbrook Union High School District is continuing its commitment to improve the quality of education for all students. We know that our students are more important and more successful than what is communicated through faulty labeling established by NCLB.

Dale J. Mitchell
Superintendent