

Who Attends Maryland's Reward, Focus, and Priority Schools?

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In 2012, Maryland redesigned its system of identifying failing or low-performing schools. Under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the state was required to set annual measurable objectives and identify schools as needing improvement when failing to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) towards those goals for two or more consecutive years. It held schools to the same accountability goals for all students and each subgroup (i.e., race/ethnicity, low-income, special education students and students learning English). The redesigned system, made possible under a flexibility waiver granted by the U. S. Department of Education, modifies these accountability requirements and allows states to develop a system of differentiated accountability, recognition, and support. Maryland received a flexibility waiver in 2011, and began implementing its redesigned system in 2012.

Maryland School Progress Index

Maryland's new school performance measurement system—the School Progress Index (SPI)—evaluates schools based on three indicators: achievement, growth, and reduction in the achievement gap between subgroups of students. By 2017, it aims to reduce the percentage of all students in each subgroup who are performing below proficient by 50%. The SPI uses a weighted scale allowing shortfalls in one area to be balanced by successes in another. The resulting index identifies schools as Reward, Focus, or Priority.

- **Reward Schools** have high student achievement or have shown growth in achievement over three years. There are two categories of recognition. *Highest Performing* schools are Title I schools with the highest performance for all students and all subgroups. *High Progress* schools are the top 10% of Title I schools that narrow the achievement gap between subgroups.
- **Focus Schools** are the lowest performing 10% of Title I schools. They include schools with the largest gaps between the highest and lowest performing subgroups, schools with low-performing subgroups, and, at the high school level, schools with low graduation rates (less than 60% in 2012-13). These schools receive targeted interventions focused on areas of need.
- **Priority Schools** are the lowest performing 5% of Title I schools or non-Title I schools meeting the criteria. These schools have the lowest school-wide performance and show little improvement over time. These schools must implement whole-school reform interventions.

Priority schools are eligible to apply for Title I School Improvement Grants and must implement a turnaround model of school improvement. This includes adopting one of the four intervention models outlined by the U.S. Department of Education or implementing a model that incorporates seven turnaround principles specified by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE). The federally mandated models include replacing school staff, closing schools and reopening as charters or transferring students to other schools, or implementing a new or revised instruction program, among others. Focus schools work with their district to develop and implement a school improvement plan based on targeted needs.

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Because the waiver allowed a change from identifying *all* schools not meeting performance standards to a focus on a specific *percentage* (i.e., the lowest performing 15%) of schools not meeting performance standards, fewer schools were identified as low performing under Maryland's SPI system than under NCLB. **In 2011-12, under No Child Left Behind, 22.4% of all Maryland public schools were identified as needing improvement; in 2012-13, under the waiver process, 4.3% of schools were identified as either Priority or Focus.** Under NCLB, 45% of Maryland schools (614 of 1375) did not make AYP in 2011 (Usher, 2012). Under Maryland's waiver, schools not meeting proficiency standards are no longer reported for accountability.

Table 1: Schools Targeted for Improvement under NCLB vs. Waiver Accountability

NCLB Accountability	Waiver Accountability
Schools in Improvement in 2011-12: <ul style="list-style-type: none">324 schools in improvement 22.4% of all Maryland public schools	Priority & Focus schools in 2012-13: <ul style="list-style-type: none">21 Priority + 41 Focus = 62 total schools targeted 4.3% of all Maryland public schools

Source: Department of Legislative Services (2014). MSDE, 2013 Maryland Report Card, <http://msp2013.msde.state.md.us/>. HB1001 (Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act – Waiver Requests) Fiscal and Policy Note (Revised). http://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2014RS/fnotes/bil_0001/hb1001.pdf.

Who Attends Maryland's Lowest Performing Schools?

Our analysis examines the geographic and demographic characteristics of the Reward, Focus, and Priority schools to provide a clearer picture of the challenges facing the state from an equity perspective. We used data from 2012-13 Maryland Report Card to gather descriptive information on school districts, identify Priority, Focus and Reward schools, and data from MSDE to identify Title I schools. We also examined the Maryland's Elementary and Secondary Education Act Flexibility Plan to understand how the waiver changed the state's accountability process.

Table 2: Number of Schools and Enrollment by School Type, 2012-13

	Number of Schools	Total Number of Children
Priority	21	9,790
Focus	41	20,589
Reward	30	10,375
Title I	412	180,955
State	1450	859,638

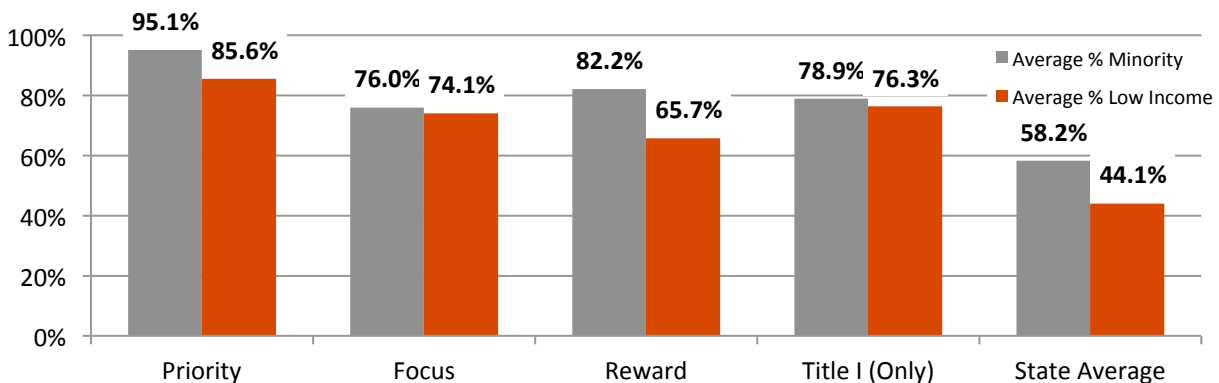
Source: MSDE, 2013 Maryland Report Card.
<http://msp2013.msde.state.md.us/PfrOverview.aspx?PV=41:0:99:AAAA:1>

Priority schools, those designated as the lowest performing, enroll almost 10,000 students (Table 2, above). These schools enroll predominately minority and low-income students. On average, 95.1% of the students in Priority schools are racial or ethnic minorities compared to 58.2% in the state's public

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schools and 78.9% in Title I schools (Figure 1). The average percentage of low-income students is 85.6%, which is almost 10 percentage points higher than the Title I average of 76.3% and almost double the state average of 44.1%. Focus schools, while demographically and economically similar to the composition of Title I schools, enroll more minority and low-income students than the state average (76% v. 58.2% minority; 76.3% v. 44.1% low-income). Reward schools have fewer low-income students than the average Title I school, at 65.7% compared to 76.3%.

Figure 1: Average percent minority and low-income students for Priority, Reward, Focus, Title I schools, and all Maryland public schools 2012-13.



Note. "Minority" includes any non-White race or ethnicity.

Source: MSDE, 2013 Maryland Report Card.

<http://msp2013.msde.state.md.us/PfrOverview.aspx?PV=41:0:99:AAAA:1>

Where are Low Performing Schools Located?

Schools designated as Priority are concentrated in 2 counties, with 15 of the 21 Priority Schools in Baltimore City (71.4%) and the remaining 6 (28.6%) in Prince George's County (Table 3, below). Focus schools (the lowest 5-10%) are located in 15 counties, with the largest number in Baltimore City (13 of 41 or 31.7%) and Prince George's County (5 of 41 or 12.2%). In both Howard and Baltimore Counties, 9.8% of schools are designated Focus schools. The 30 Reward schools are distributed across 10 counties.

Policy Implications

Changes in the federal accountability requirements around the identification of low performing schools have reduced the number of schools identified as needing improvement in Maryland and allow for a more targeted approach to school improvement. This analysis shows that schools identified for improvement under the waiver process enroll predominately minority and low-income students.

There are two caveats about the waiver process that bear watching. First, since schools and districts that are not meeting proficiency standards are no longer reported for accountability, will low performing schools that are not identified as Priority or Focus receive the help they need to improve? Without the subgroup accountability pressure, will districts pay attention to the performance of minority and other subgroups of students? Second, will the turnaround approach to school improvement mandated under the waiver process be successful in improving low performing schools and meeting the needs of diverse

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students? This second point is particularly important because the mandated interventions for Priority schools fall disproportionately on schools serving the most disadvantaged students—even relative to the group of disadvantaged Title I schools—and the evidence that these are effective strategies for improving these types of schools is not promising.

Table 3: Number and Percentage of Schools Designated as Priority, Focus and Reward School by County, 2012-13

Name of County	Number of Priority Schools	Percentage of all Priority Schools	Number of Focus Schools	Percentage of all Focus Schools	Number of Reward Schools	Percentage of all Reward Schools
Allegany	0	0%	0	0%	2	6.7%
Anne Arundel	0	0%	1	2.4%	1	3.3%
Baltimore City	15	71.4%	13	31.7%	8	26.7%
Baltimore	0	0%	4	9.8%	7	23.3%
Calvert	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Caroline County	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Carroll	0	0%	1	2.4%	0	0%
Cecil	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Charles	0	0%	3	7.3%	0	0%
Dorchester	0	0%	1	2.4%	0	0%
Frederick	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Garrett	0	0%	0	0%	1	3.3%
Harford	0	0%	1	2.4%	0	0%
Howard	0	0%	4	9.8%	0	0%
Kent	0	0%	1	2.4%	0	0%
Montgomery	0	0%	2	4.9%	0	0%
Prince George's	6	28.6%	5	12.2%	6	20.0%
Queen Anne's	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Somerset	0	0%	0	0%	1	3.3%
St Mary's	0	0%	2	4.9%	0	0%
Talbot	0	0%	1	2.4%	1	3.3%
Washington	0	0%	1	2.4%	0	0%
Wicomico	0	0%	1	2.4%	1	3.3%
Worcester	0	0%	0	0%	3	10.0%
Total	21	100%	41	100%	30	100%

Source: MSDE, 2013 School Report Card. <http://msp2013.msde.state.md.us/>. MSDE, Maryland's ESEA Flexibility 2012-2013 Reward, Focus, and Priority Schools. http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/NR/rdonlyres/6C9444F6-5522-4D9B-B13F-EA7FC25BAB9D/33361/Priority_Focus_and_Reward_Schools_120623.pdf.

References

Usher, A. (2012). AYP results for 2010-11: November 2012 update. Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy.