

No Child Left Behind

by Alan Shapiro

Student Reading 1:

A law to overcome "the bigotry of low expectations"

President Bush signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act into law on January 8, 2002, but this law of more than 1,000 pages quickly became popularly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). A White House "Fact Sheet" on its key provisions included:

"Accountability for results: Creates strong standards in each state for what every child should know and learn in reading and mathematics, grades 3-8. Student progress and achievement will be measured every year. Results from these tests will be made available in annual report cards so that parents can measure school performance...and their child's progress in key subjects." The goal is to have all students, grades 3-8, "proficient" in reading and math by 2014.

"Unprecedented state and local flexibility in the use of federal funds."

"Focusing resources on proven educational methods...research-based approaches will most help children to learn."

"Expanded choices for parents...with children in chronically failing schools" to transfer their child to a better school.

Requirements that schools hire "highly qualified teachers" and that states develop plans to provide them

Requirement that Congress consider reauthorizing NCLB after five years.

The president assessed NCLB's results on September 26, 2007 and called for its reauthorization with needed changes: "The NCLB is working. I say that because the Nation's Report Card says it's working....Children across America are learning. The achievement gap that has long punished underprivileged students is beginning to close.

"The law is based on this premise. The federal government invests money in education, and we ought to expect results in return for that investment....And the best way to determine whether you get good results is to measure....Measuring results is important because it helps teachers spot problems early. You can't solve a problem unless you diagnose the problem, and it's best to diagnose problems early in a child's life...."

"A system that doesn't hold people to account assumes that certain children cannot learn, and that it's acceptable to shuffle them through school. That's what I have called the bigotry of low expectations....And the Nation's Report Card shows we're making good progress."

The president called upon Congress to improve NCLB by giving local leaders "more flexibility" in carrying out its provisions. He also called for adequate funding "to turn troubled schools around." And he argued that tutoring programs should be established for students who need them.

NCLB has been harshly criticized and was not reauthorized in 2007 as scheduled. The presidential candidates of both parties support its provisions for high standards and school accountability for meeting them. But Hillary Clinton said she would "end" NCLB because it was "just not working." Barack Obama called for a "fundamental" overhaul. John Edwards criticized its overemphasis on testing. "You don't make a hog fatter by weighing it," he said. Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee, like a number of Republican lawmakers, objected to NCLB's intrusion on states' rights. He said he preferred states to develop their own standards.

But Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings vigorously defended NCLB in interviews: "We have learned a lot about schools" over the past five years, she said (6/18/07). Responding to critics' comments about the neglect of science, social studies and the arts, she maintained, "Reading and math are fundamental skills without which you can't learn social studies, history and so forth." While allowing that NCLB has room for improvement, she said, "Seventy percent of our schools are meeting 'adequate yearly progress targets.'" (11/5/07)

Senator Edward Kennedy (D, MA), chairman of the Senate education committee, plans to introduce a new bill in 2008. He said, "We have to convince people that the bill we introduce...will not be a rubber stamp of the current law." (12/23/07)

For discussion

1. What questions do students have about the reading? How might they be answered?
2. A major provision of NCLB is "accountability for results." What does its emphasis suggest about pre-NCLB criticisms of American schools?
3. Consider "accountability" and "results." What do you understand each to mean? Apply the two words to yourself. For what specific "results" does NCLB require your school to be accountable for you? How? Are there other "results" that completing public school should produce for you? Why?
4. Explain "research-based approaches." Are you aware of such approaches in reading and math? How might you find out if you don't know?
5. What makes a "highly-qualified teacher"?
6. Explain "the bigotry of low expectations."

Student Reading 2: Two NCLB critics

"Rosy claims"

"Despite the rosy claims of the Bush administration, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 is fundamentally flawed," wrote Diane Ravitch, a professor of education at New York University and a former assistant secretary of education. "The latest national tests, released last week, show that academic gains since 2003 have been modest, less even than those posted in the years before the law was put in place. In eighth-grade reading, there have been no gains at all since 1998...."

"In inner cities, where academic performance is weakest, only a handful of students move to successful schools because there are very few seats available to them....Under current law, state education departments have an incentive to show that schools and students are making steady progress, even if they are not. So the results of state tests, which are administered every year, are almost everywhere better than the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the benchmark federal test that is administered every other year...."

"Under current law, Congress now decides precisely which sanctions and penalties are needed to reform schools, which is way beyond its competence....Washington should supply unbiased information about student academic performance to states and local districts. It should then be the responsibility of states and local districts to improve performance."

"Congress should also drop the absurd goal of achieving universal proficiency by 2014. Given that no nation, no state and no school district has ever reached 100 percent math and reading proficiency for all grades, it is certain that this goal cannot be met." (*New York Times*, 10/3/07)

"The most inequitable education system in the industrialized world"

"NCLB contains some major breakthroughs," Linda Darling-Hammond, a professor of education at Stanford University, began in her critique of NCLB, published in *The Nation* magazine. "First, by flagging differences in student performance by race and class, it shines a spotlight on longstanding inequalities and could trigger attention to the needs of students neglected in many schools. Second, by insisting that all students are entitled to qualified teachers, the law has stimulated recruitment efforts in states where low-income and minority students have experienced a revolving door of inexperienced, untrained teachers,"

She went on to detail serious problems. "Critics claim that the law's focus on complicated tallies of multiple-choice-test scores has dumbed down the curriculum, fostered a 'drill and kill' approach to teaching, mistakenly labeled successful schools as failing, driven teachers and middle-class students out of public schools and harmed special education students and English-language learners through inappropriate assessments and efforts to push out low-scoring students in order to boost scores...."

"At base, the law has misdefined the problem. It assumes that what schools need is more carrots and sticks rather than fundamental changes....[for the] United States has the most inequitable education system in the industrialized world."

"School funding lawsuits brought in more than twenty-five states describe apartheid schools serving low-income students of color with crumbling facilities, overcrowded classrooms, out-of-date textbooks, no science labs, no art or music courses and a revolving door of untrained teachers, while their suburban counterparts, spending twice as much for students with fewer

needs, offer expansive libraries, up-to-date labs and technology, small classes, well-qualified teachers and expert specialists, in luxurious facilities....

"As...the former president of the American Educational Research Association, has noted, the problem we face is less an 'achievement gap' than educational debt that has accumulated over centuries of denied access to education and employment, reinforced by deepening poverty and resource inequalities in schools. Until American society confronts the accumulated educational debt owed to these students and takes responsibility for the inferior resources they receive,...children of color and of poverty will continue to be left behind....

"Most high-achieving countries not only provide high-quality universal pre-school and healthcare for children; they also fund their schools centrally and equally, with additional funds going to the neediest schools. Furthermore, they support a better-prepared teaching force-funding competitive salaries and high-quality teacher education, mentoring and ongoing professional development for all teachers.

"Finally, high-achieving nations focus their curriculums on critical thinking and problem solving, using exams that require students to conduct research and scientific investigations, solve complex real-world problems and defend their ideas orally and in writing....By asking student to show what they know through real-world applications of knowledge, these other nations' assessment systems encourage serious intellectual activities that are being driven out of many U.S. schools by the tests promoted by NCLB....

"Perhaps the most adverse unintended consequence of NCLB is that it creates incentives for schools to rid themselves of students who are not doing well, producing higher scores at the expense of vulnerable students' education....The child and the school are accountable to the state for test performance, but the state is not held accountable to the child or his school for providing adequate educational resources."

There are hundreds of proposals to improve NCLB. But a substantial shift is essential "if our educational system is to support powerful learning for all students." Among them:

- "The federal government should assist states in developing systems for evaluating student progress that are performance based-including assessments like essays, research papers and science experiments."
- To stop penalizing schools serving the most diverse populations, the system should move from requiring adequate yearly progress to a model that promotes continuous improvement.
- Schools should be judged on whether students make progress on multiple measures of achievement, including those that assess higher-order thinking and understanding.
- Schools should insure appropriate assessment for special-education students and English-language learners.

Linda Darling-Hammond argues that "schools alone are not responsible for student achievement." This, she says, should lead us to develop "programs that will provide adequate healthcare and nutrition, safe and secure housing and healthy communities for children."

("Evaluating No Child Left Behind," *The Nation*, 5/21/07)

For discussion

1. What questions do students have about the reading? How might they be answered?
2. What does Darling-Hammond view as two "major breakthroughs in NCLB"? Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. What do you view as the two or three most important criticisms of NCLB? Why?
4. Has your curriculum been "dumbed down"? How do you know?
5. What is a 'drill and kill' method of teaching? "Apartheid schools"?
6. What "educational debt" has the U.S. accumulated? How can it be paid?
7. What should curriculums focus on and why?
8. What is a "performance based" system of evaluation?
9. What do healthcare, nutrition, safe and secure housing and healthy communities have to do with student achievement?

This lesson was written for TeachableMoment.Org, a project of Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility. We welcome your comments. Please email author Alan Shapiro at: ashapiro7@comcast.net.