

FairTest

National Center for Fair & Open Testing

Why “No Child Left Behind” Will Fail Our Children A FairTest Position Statement on NCLB

“No Child Left Behind,” the name of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, describes a worthy goal for our nation. Tragically, the legislation will exacerbate, not solve, the real problems that cause many children to be left behind.

- The gauge of student progress in most states will be reduced to reading and math test scores. Many schools will narrow instruction to what is tested. Education will be damaged, especially in low-income and minority schools, as students are coached to pass a test rather than learning a rich curriculum to prepare them for life in the 21st century.
- Most schools will fail to meet the unrealistic demands imposed by the law’s “adequate yearly progress” provision. Virtually no schools serving low-income children will clear the arbitrary hurdles. Many successful schools will be declared “failing” and forced to drop what works for them.
- Sanctions intended to force school improvement will do the opposite. They will pit parent against teacher, parent against parent, and school against school. They take funding away from all students to be used by relatively few students. The law’s ultimate sanctions—privatizing school management, firing staff, state takeovers, and similar measures—have no proven record of success.
- The federal government has failed to adequately fund the law. Most states are now cutting budgets to the bone, watching their education resources dwindle just as they are hit with the demands of the law. Neither federal nor state governments are addressing the deepening poverty that makes it difficult for so many children to learn.

What Would Really Help Children?

The federal law should be transformed from one that uses punishments to control schools to one that supports teachers and students; from one that relies primarily on standardized tests to one that encourages high-quality assessments. Elected representatives should listen to educators and parents to determine the real needs of schools. Congress should work with the states to ensure that all schools are adequately funded and that all children have adequate food, housing, medical care, and other basic human needs to enable their success in school.

In the short term, Congress should amend the law to stop the destructive inflexibility of the “adequate yearly progress” provisions and eliminate the requirement for states to annually assess all students in grades 3 to 8 in reading and math. The amount of required testing should be reduced and the draconian penalties removed. Congress must appropriate the full amount authorized for Title I of ESEA without cutting overall ESEA appropriations.

FairTest also calls for a helpful accountability system that would emphasize local, classroom-based student assessment information combined with limited standardized testing, as is being developed in Maine and Nebraska. Each school would report its progress and problems to its own community and discuss with the community how to improve the schools. Each school would also produce an opportunity-to-learn index, including such factors as per-pupil funding, class size, number of books in libraries, teacher qualifications, and school climate and satisfaction surveys. Where schools have adequate resources but fail to provide a good education, the district or state should intervene with methods shown to succeed.