

FairTest

National Center for Fair & Open Testing

“NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND” AFTER SIX YEARS: AN ESCALATING TRACK RECORD OF FAILURE

After six years, there is overwhelming evidence that the deeply flawed “No Child Left Behind” law (NCLB) is doing more harm than good in our nation’s public schools. NCLB’s test-and-punish approach to school reform relies on limited, one-size-fits-all tools that reduce education to little more than test prep. It produces unfair decisions and requires unproven, often irrational “solutions” to complex problems. NCLB is clearly underfunded, but fully funding a bad law is not a solution.

Public recognition of the law’s ill effects has produced a growing consensus in favor of a fundamental overhaul. It’s time for a new conception of the federal role in education—beyond standards, tests and punishments—in order to strengthen schools and truly leave no child behind.

* NCLB rests on false assumptions—e.g., test scores equal educational quality, and sanctions based on low test scores drive school improvement. As a result, it offers false remedies that are not working. Since NCLB was signed, reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have stagnated, and the rate of improvement in math has slowed. The neediest children in our nation continue to receive an unequal and inadequate education. In Texas, for example, the “achievement” gap narrowed on the state test but widened on NAEP. The façade created to portray Houston and “the Texas Miracle” as national models crumbled. Similar problems are surfacing in other states. The U.S. cannot test its way to better schools.

* State tests are extremely weak measures of high-quality standards. NCLB’s obsessive focus on raising test scores causes an increased emphasis on exam preparation. “Teaching to the test” narrows the curriculum, particularly in low-scoring schools, and forces teachers and students to concentrate on memorizing isolated facts and practicing rote skills, ignoring higher order thinking. Arts, foreign languages, social studies, physical education and recess have been squeezed from the curriculum, especially in schools with high numbers of minority and low-income students. In the past six years, these effects have been documented in dozens of reports by reputable, independent researchers. When fewer students are prepared to be successful citizens, rising test scores do not mean academic improvement.

* Thirty percent of the nation’s schools failed to make “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) in 2005-06. Diverse schools are more likely to ‘fail’ simply because they serve children from more demographic groups, all of which must meet NCLB’s mandates simultaneously. Independent researchers agree that nearly all schools will eventually be labeled “in need of improvement” (INOI) and sanctioned under NCLB. This will happen because of the way AYP statistics are calculated, *not* because all schools are actually in need of major improvement (though some schools clearly do need help).

* Demanding that disabled and limited English proficient students reach “proficiency” on standardized tests sets many schools up for failure. The tests are grossly inadequate and invalid measures of these students' learning. Rather than provide resources and guidance so schools can offer the individualized approaches these students need, NCLB claims that by holding them to the “same standards” they will magically rise to the occasion. Nevertheless, those groups disproportionately fail to meet AYP targets.

* Transfer provisions make matters worse. Some receiving schools are overwhelmed by transfers and ill-equipped to handle them. Most eligible parents are saying, "No thanks." Parents increasingly view "choice" as a hoax: their children cannot attend elite exam schools within their home districts or better-performing schools in neighboring districts. Communities need improved schools for all, not limited extra options for a few children.

* Tutoring provisions divert money from classrooms that most need it, giving assistance to the few at the expense of the many. Tutoring focuses on test preparation and rarely connects to the curriculum. Student attendance is often low. NCLB paves the way for private firms to reap huge profits but does not hold the firms accountable.

* As experienced, high quality teachers see schools with society's most needy students get labeled instead of helped, they transfer to higher performing schools or leave the profession. Stigmatized schools have a hard time attracting new, skilled teachers.

* Funding for Title I, the core provision of the law, has barely increased in the last several years. NCLB funding is tens of billions below promised levels and tens of billions more from what is needed to help all children reach meaningful educational goals.

* NCLB fails to address key reasons many children are left behind. The best school, the best teachers and the best curriculum can make a huge difference, but basic needs like housing, health care and nutrition must also be addressed. These gaps continue to widen. By blaming schools and focusing attention on boosting test scores alone, NCLB dampens the political will to address the real needs of children.

* The law's remedies for "failing" schools do not work. Most attempts to "reconstitute" troubled schools fail to improve student performance significantly. Few if any states have the capacity to intervene in the large numbers of public schools being identified for NCLB's ultimate sanctions.

* There are better ways to help troubled schools. Improvement requires rich assessments, from tests and quizzes to projects and portfolios, rooted in ongoing classroom work by students and teachers; collaborative professional development for educators and time for them to plan improvements in curriculum and instruction; involvement by parents as real partners, not just test score consumers; monitoring by the state to ensure schools are equitably serving all students; and targeted assistance for schools that really need it. Only if schools or districts demonstrate they cannot or will not improve should more serious sanctions be employed.

* Nearly 150 education, civil rights, religious and other organizations have signed the *Joint Organizational Statement on NCLB*, calling for an overhaul of the law away from a focus on testing and punishing and toward helping schools improve their capacity to serve all children well (available on the FairTest Website at www.fairtest.org). The Forum on Educational Accountability, chaired by FairTest, has provided detailed recommendations for overhauling the federal law (www.edaccountability.org).