

FairTest

National Center for Fair & Open Testing

NCLB's Lost Decade for Educational Progress: What Can We Learn from this Policy Failure?

By Lisa Guisbond with Monty Neill and Bob Schaeffer

Executive Summary

January 2012

Ten years have passed since President George W. Bush signed No Child Left Behind (NCLB), making it the educational law of the land. A review of a decade of evidence demonstrates that NCLB has failed badly both in terms of its own goals and more broadly. It has neither significantly increased academic performance nor significantly reduced achievement gaps, even as measured by standardized exams.

In fact, because of its misguided reliance on one-size-fits-all testing, labeling and sanctioning schools, it has undermined many education reform efforts. Many schools, particularly those serving low-income students, have become little more than test-preparation programs.

It is time to acknowledge this failure and adopt a more effective course for the federal role in education. Policymakers must abandon their faith-based embrace of test-and-punish strategies and, instead, pursue proven alternatives to guide and support the nation's neediest schools and students.

P.O. Box 300204, Jamaica Plain, MA 02108
fairtest@fairtest.org 617-477-9792 <http://fairtest.org>

The data accumulated over ten years make three things clear:

1) NCLB has severely damaged educational quality and equity, with its narrowing and limiting effects falling most severely on the poor.

2) NCLB failed to significantly increase average academic performance and significantly narrow achievement gaps. And

3) So-called "reforms," such as the Obama Administration's waivers and the Senate Education Committee's Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization bill, fail to address many of NCLB's fundamental flaws and in some cases will intensify them. These proposals will extend a "lost decade for U.S. schools."

Despite a decade's worth of solid evidence documenting the failure of NCLB and similar high-stakes testing schemes, and despite mounting evidence from the U.S. and other nations about how to improve schools, policymakers cling to discredited models. This is particularly tragic for families who hoped their children's long wait for equal educational opportunity might be ending. It is also tragic for our public education system, whose reputation has been sullied by promises not kept and expensive intervention schemes that do more harm than good.

It is not too late to revisit the lessons of the past ten years and construct a federal law that provides support for equity and progress in all public schools. With that goal in mind, this report first provides an overview of the evidence on NCLB's track record. Second, it looks at recent efforts at NCLB "reform" and what past evidence says about *their* likely outcomes. Finally, it points to alternative strategies that could form the basis for a reauthorized federal law that would improve all schools, particularly those serving our most needy students.

- The full report is available online at <http://fairtest.org/NCLB-lost-decade-report-home>.