

Who Is No Child Left Behind Leaving Behind?

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Abstract: More than six years after the election of our current president, the nation is analyzing the effects of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) federal legislation. Educators are discovering that the plan is flawed, developmentally inappropriate, ill funded, and leaving more students, teachers, and schools behind than ever before. In this article, the author offers a brief history of educational testing, delves into the debate of teaching to the test, analyzes the side effects of testing, and focuses on subgroups of school populations that are negatively affected by NCLB, specifically students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, minorities, students with special needs, and second-language learners.

Keywords: assessment, No Child Left Behind, policy, public school

Every four years, presidential hopefuls stand on their soapboxes and profess to cure the world's ills. Apparently, U.S. presidential candidates can cut taxes, create world peace, rid our streets of crime, and of course, fairly educate every child in America in four short years. One presidential hopeful claimed that he would develop the most influential education plan in our nation's history. He guaranteed every child in America would read on grade level and compute high-level mathematical problems, every teacher would be highly qualified to educate our students, and every school would make adequate yearly progress (AYP) to prove these outcomes were legitimate. These goals are laudable and thus we elected a president. This was the foundation of President Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) educational plan.

More than seven years after the president's election, the nation is analyzing the effects of NCLB. Educators

have discovered that the plan is flawed, developmentally inappropriate, ill funded, and leaving more students, teachers, and schools behind than ever before. In this article, I offer a brief history of educational testing, then delve into the debate of teaching to the test, analyze the side effects of testing, and finally focus on subgroups of school populations that are negatively affected by NCLB, specifically students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, minorities, students with special needs, and second-language learners.

A History of Testing

Since World War I and the creation of the U.S. Army Alpha assessment test (Wineburg 2004), educators have been using standardized testing instruments to assess student performance in K-12 public schools. The Army Alpha allowed military officials to test recruits for suitable positions. The assessment sorted recruits based on intellect, ability, and potential. Educators discovered the method of evaluation and adapted the format to meet educational purposes. Politicians have been attempting to raise the bar toward tougher standards since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983), the subsequent development of Goals 2000 (Goals 2000 Legislation and Related Items 2005), and finally the advent of NCLB (2005) in 2001. At this point, standardized testing has been the main vehicle for measuring student and teacher performance. States all over the nation are using the results of these tests to determine student promotion and placement, teacher salary, school accreditation, district funding, and graduation opportunity.

U.S. governors are making grand assumptions as to why schools need higher and tougher standards. Ramirez (1999) outlined some of those assumptions:

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- Students are unmotivated and need more immediate consequences tied to their learning.
- Teachers are either inadequately skilled or lack the motivation to inspire students to higher levels of learning.
- Local communities, school board members, and superintendents do not know what their students should be learning or to what degree they should be learning it.
- Accountability through testing will pressure the system to improve. (205)

The exams the politicians and state departments of education create to measure student performance and ability are typically designed as criterion-referenced tests. Criterion-referenced tests do not compare how students are performing against each other; they are concerned with a student's competence level. Criterion-referenced tests are designed to measure a single behavioral objective in a course of study. The conflict with criterion-related exams is that the stakes to do well have risen so high that validity issues are compromised because teachers are beginning to teach to the test rather than to the objective (Popham 2005).

Teaching to the Test

High-stakes testing is forcing instruction to change from exploratory, lifelong learning to teaching to the test through drill and kill. Teaching to the test has dramatic effects on the validity of the exam. Drilling students on specific methods to achieve high scores on standardized tests is ethically inappropriate conduct for teachers. Haertel (1999) contended that

as teachers teach to even the best of tests, the meaning of the tests scores can change, and validity can erode. Thus, a tremendous weight is placed on the assumptions that external performance assessments do, in fact, represent comprehensive, valid, and robust indicators of desired learning outcomes. But there is serious reason to question whether external performance assessments can fulfill those assumptions. (666)

Teaching to the test is eliminating the opportunity for teachers to teach students higher-order thinking skills (Darling-Hammond 2004). Teaching to the test reduces teacher creativity, innovative instruction, the use of varied teaching strategies for diverse students, and teacher and student motivation. However, because teachers' jobs are at stake, student promotion is in jeopardy, and graduation opportunity is riding on the scores of these tests, it is no wonder that teachers think they are doing students and themselves a favor by teaching to the test. If teachers are training students to perform on these assessment measures, then the validity of the measurement tool is drastically reduced; thus, the results of the assessment tell us little to nothing about the teacher's instruction or the ability of the student.

The National Center for Fair and Open Testing (2007) contends that many of the best teachers will transfer from low-performing schools to higher-performing schools, leaving behind students with the greatest need. Flores and Clark (2003) argue that "when teachers' decision making power is limited, their ability to be innovative in meeting student needs is also limited, thus leading to feelings of frustration and to a sense that their educational role has been reduced to that of a technician. Removing decision-making power from the teacher is a clear example of de-professionalization." NCLB is leaving the teaching profession behind.

The Side Effects of Testing

Much of the debate surrounding standardized testing is focused on the effects the testing atmosphere has on teachers and students. Negative side effects are associated with teacher decision making, instruction, student learning, school climate, and teacher and student self-concept and motivation. The tests have turned into the objective of classroom instruction rather than the measure of teaching and learning. Gilman and Reynolds (1991) reported sixteen side effects associated with Indiana's statewide test, including indirect control of local curriculum and instruction, lowering of faculty morale, cheating by administrations and teachers, unhealthy competition between schools, negative effects on school-community relations, negative psychological and physical effects on students, and loss of school time.

Testing anxiety related to these assessments affects all populations associated with the institution of education, such as students, teachers, administrators, and parents. Research reports that elementary students experience high levels of anxiety, concern, and angst about high-stakes testing (Barksdale-Ladd and Thomas 2000; Triplett, Barksdale, and Leftwich 2003). Triplett and Barksdale (2005) investigated students' perceptions of testing. They concluded that elementary students were anxious and angry about aspects of the testing culture, including the length of the tests, extended testing periods, and not being able to talk for long periods of time.

Student anxiety increases when teachers are apprehensive about the exams (Triplett, Barksdale, and Leftwich 2003). When students are drilled every day about testing procedures and consequences, the fear of failure prevails. Flores and Clark (2003) investigated teachers' perceptions of high-stakes testing. They summarized six themes of their findings as the following:

1. Teachers are not against accountability; rather, they view assessment as distinct from high-stakes testing.
2. Teachers posit that an overemphasis on testing results in an unbalanced curriculum and inappropriate instructional decisions.
3. Teachers suggest that excessive pressure is placed on particular grade levels.

4. Teachers are having second thoughts about pursuing or remaining in the teaching profession.

5. Teachers propose that test results should not be used to make high-stakes decisions.

6. Teachers have observed that test emphasis affects students negatively, and it manifests in physical, psychological, or emotional symptoms.

These are insights from professional teachers working inside the classrooms every day with the students. These opinions need to make newspaper headlines and be the center of Sunday morning news debates.

Socioeconomic Status and Race

The argument against high-stakes testing goes beyond student and teacher anxiety. Tracking, sorting, and labeling students has been educational standard modus operandi since the nation decided to educate the masses. Using standardized tests gives administrations the numbers that allow for this type of practice to take place. However, as recognized by many researchers, standardized testing has biases in relation to socioeconomic status and race. Freeman (2005) argues that a “colorblind racism” ensues under the NCLB mandate, which disregards the realities of racial disparities. Jimerson (2005) observes that rural schools are disadvantaged by NCLB’s school choice plan because traveling from a failing school in a rural area to a top-rated school could take up to four hours; in the state of Hawaii it could necessitate a plane trip. Beers (2005) offers a realistic perspective when she writes,

Our children of poverty are most likely to attend schools that are best described as lacking: lacking equipment (of all sorts—lab equipment, band equipment, sports equipment); lacking cleanliness; lacking textbooks; lacking computers and Internet access; lacking parental involvement; lacking extracurricular activities; lacking fine arts and technology electives; lacking high student achievement; and, lacking enough highly qualified teachers. (5)

Even when the discussion of NCLB moves toward test preparation, the arguments of economics and race are still entwined. Kohn and Henkin (2002) argue that when test stakes rise, people seek help from professional resources. Naturally, affluent families, schools, and districts can afford these tutorials. Lower-performing schools typically cannot afford to offer high-priced materials for these high-stakes tests. NCLB is leaving minority and economically disadvantaged students behind.

Students with Varying Exceptionalities

Towles-Reeves et al. (2006) argue that if NCLB is to meet its goal of creating higher standards for all students, then provisions must be made for students with varying exceptionalities. More specifically, deaf-blind coordinators need to have a voice in how these

students’ needs are met. Jameson and Huefner (2006) contend that it is nearly impossible for schools with special-needs populations to stay in compliance with the federal legislation because NCLB calls for highly qualified teachers but does not adequately fund the demand. Highly qualified teachers are difficult to train. The state of Florida faces the challenge of hiring twenty-five thousand new teachers for the 2007–8 school year because of a smaller class size amendment. School officials predict that special education programs will be among the first to suffer under this legislation because such skilled training is not compensated in the public school setting.

Proponents of the legislation argue that NCLB stipulates that schools can exclude 2 percent of their population from the report of state assessments. However, many magnet and charter schools specialize in educating students with varying exceptionalities. One hundred percent of the school population has special needs. It is irrelevant that the school only has to report 98 percent of the results. In these cases, AYP will never be met, schools will be labeled as failing, and special-needs students are once again left behind.

Limited English Proficient Students

The validity of AYP reporting is threatened when schools inconsistently label limited English proficient (LEP) students (Abedi 2004). States like California, Texas, Florida, and New Mexico face a greater challenge when educating LEP students and making AYP in comparison with states that have sparse LEP student populations, like Vermont, Maine, and Connecticut. State assessments demand high levels of English-language ability. Because of the linguistic complexity of these exams, many schools cannot report AYP and therefore receive low state marks and lose state and federal funding; in the end, LEP students are left behind.

Conclusion

Evaluating the effects of the mandates of NCLB leads to the undeniable conclusion that many subgroups of school populations are not receiving equal educational opportunities. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, minorities, students with special needs, and second-language learners are adversely affected by this legislation. After investigating the history of educational assessment and analyzing the various populations affected by legislative mandates, a call for public action is imperative.

Money is the driving force behind these contemptible standards. Testing is a multibillion-dollar industry, and policymakers and politicians use the information gathered from these tests as major grounds for their political platforms. Bracey (2005) reported that the U.S. General Accounting Office estimated that NCLB testing would cost between 1.9 billion and 5.3 bil-

lon dollars over a six-year period from 2002–8. These tests are firmly embedded in our educational laws and practices; therefore, due to the financial and political investment in these high-stakes tests, they are here to stay for some time. We can argue back and forth about why they are either valuable or a disaster to public education reform. Almost a decade ago, Gordon and Reese (1997) offered various methods for ameliorating the effects of these tests; they are still pertinent today.

- Policymakers, assessment experts, and local school administrations should begin an intensive dialogue about the preparation for side effects of high-stakes tests.
- Provide staff development on the purposes of standardized testing and appropriate ways to prepare students for the test.
- Schools need to be monitored to make sure that large portions of the established curriculum are not thrown out as a result of test preparation.
- Total reliance on test results should be replaced by the establishment of a variety of indicators of student achievement, including various types of authentic assessment.
- Standardized achievement scores should be but one of a broad range of school performance indicators.
- State personnel, educational associations, and local educators should work together to convey to the media and local communities the limitations of high-stakes testing as a single indicator of school and student success. (365–66)

Triplett, Barksdale, and Leftwich (2003) concluded that test anxiety can be reduced if teachers play the role of coaches and comforters rather than drill sergeants. The students in their study reported, “Mr. Z wrote GOOD LUCK on the board in big letters so I felt better.” And “Ms. K let us take our shoes off and chew gum . . . she wanted us to be comfortable!”

State officials are beginning to realize that AYP is nearly impossible to measure equitably across the country; thus, we need to stop focusing on faulty legislation and begin creating accountability procedures that are grounded in the research. Neill (2003) posited that accountability means “support first—not punishment” (228). The use of tests as sole determinants of high school graduation imposes heavy personal and societal costs without obvious social benefits (Darling-Hammond 2004). All stakeholders involved need to continue to communicate that high-stakes testing is reducing educational opportunities for students and teachers. Our teachers, our students, and our profession are being left behind because of national legislation.

An Idea for the Future of Accountability

If the national board of education wants to track accountability for administrators, faculty, and students,

then a series of exams is not the process by which to achieve the goal. It is an obvious failure. A reasonable, albeit time-consuming, model of accountability must include a well-calculated, well-constructed, and well-monitored school site visit. Site visits are part of every institution of higher learning’s means of assessment; a similar model should be structured for public schools. Suggestions for the model are discussed below.

School self-evaluation. The self-evaluation should be based on a set of criteria created by each state. Three levels of evaluations should be developed: one for elementary schools, one for middle schools, and one for high schools. The self-evaluation should be discrete enough that each school is aware of high levels of expectations from the state but also malleable enough that each school can highlight its individuality, highlight the unique characteristics of its program, and offer a rich description of its population—all factors that aid in leveling the accountability playing field.

School site visit. The state department of education should develop a team of well-trained personnel. This team should visit each state school every three years to observe classrooms and interview teachers, school personnel, and, most important, students. The site visit team should review student work, portfolios, and assessment tools. The site visit should last several days and the team should gather data to determine the progress in that particular school. The team should analyze its findings, report to the school with conclusions, and make recommendations.

Site visit conclusions and recommendations. The school-site team should be given ample time to review and evaluate all data collected during the site visit. The team must provide written feedback to the school offering a detailed account of the strengths and weakness determined during the visit. The school should be given an opportunity to respond to the critique and address any cited weakness.

School improvement plan. After each site team’s investigation and each school’s response to the report, the school should develop a school improvement plan. The plan must include steps the school will take to improve its weaknesses, methods of continued compliance with competencies and skills set forth by the state, and a rich description of how the school will continue to evolve into a robust environment for its intended population. This school improvement plan should be the foundation for the next site visit.

If state boards of education implement a version of this plan, students, teachers, administrators, and parents can all work collectively to develop a school

that works best for their needs, their population, and their unique learning potential. The value of accountability is at the heart of the plan, but one size cannot be forced on every school in every district in every state. The rigor is demanding, but at the same time, the flexibility will offer schools the opportunity to be creative, develop a curriculum that meets the needs of the students, highlight diversity, and evaluate the progress of the individual. The state exams may continue to exist, but with this model they will become a piece of the accountability and assessment puzzle instead of the high-stakes bar that too many are failing to reach. This type of model will work toward supporting public education and giving every student the opportunity to succeed.

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