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Opinion: A new, improved No Child Left Behind

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NOW THAT we've marked the 10th anniversary of the No Child Left Behind law, let us examine its strengths and weaknesses, and make recommendations about its future.

Actually, it's possible that the law may not have a future. Congressional reauthorization, due in 2007, has been stalled for more than four years. Meanwhile, the Obama administration has effectively modified the law through Race to the Top and, even more recently, the process for states to seek waivers of many of NCLB's requirements.

In both cases, substantial federal funding is the carrot dangled in front of fiscally starving states. To qualify, they have to sign on to the Obama administration's favored education reforms such as teacher evaluations based on student test results and greater availability of charter schools.



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If it turns out NCLB is on its death bed, that could signal the end of an ambitious bipartisan education reform program. NCLB incorporated most of President George W. Bush's educational platform, but it won strong Democratic support, including from Sen. Ted Kennedy.

Decrying the "soft bigotry of low expectations," Bush argued that we should make a national commitment to "leave no child behind."

Objectives

The primary vehicles for doing that were:

- Establishing a core goal that every child, no matter his or her circumstances, should become "proficient" by 2014.
- Upgrading teaching by requiring schools to have "highly qualified" teachers for the "core academic subjects."
- Ensuring that we move toward the core goal by annually assessing student

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proficiency levels on state-adopted standardized tests and by demanding “adequate yearly progress.”

Requiring states and school districts to report test results on a “disaggregated” basis, that is, by separating students by demographic and educational variables such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English language proficiency and disability. Under this method, poor performance of some groups could not be hidden by merging their scores into statewide and districtwide averages.

- Labeling schools whose students failed to meet “adequate yearly progress” criteria for two or more consecutive years as “in need of improvement,” justifying an escalating series of reforms and, ultimately, closing schools whose students’ performance did not improve enough.

Two of these five approaches, although hardly perfect, have weathered the test of almost 10 years’ time —the focus on improved teaching and the disaggregation of student test scores so that some groups don’t get lost or left behind.

The other three have fallen into disrepute. Universal “proficiency” by 2014 was never a realistic goal, but, at least originally, it could



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be seen as aspirational.

Once the 50 states were empowered to make individual determinations of what proficiency meant, and, therefore, what constituted AYP, and then permitted to lower both as students failed to meet them, this goal became farcical.

NCLB’s emphasis on ever-growing use of standardized tests has generated increasing criticism. The tests themselves and the process by which they are created have been found wanting. The high-stakes nature of the tests for teachers, administrators, schools and school districts, as well as for students, has resulted in a narrowing of curricula to focus on those subjects that are tested and sometimes even cheating by those threatened with draconian sanctions for low test scores.

Finally, NCLB’s remedial options for “failing” schools have been harshly criticized for demeaning schools and their staffs, as well as students, without attempting to address many of the major underlying causes of low test performance, including the lack of

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adequate school resources and failure to address the educational disadvantages associated with poverty and its attendant problems.

Despite Bush's view that educational problems often stem from discrimination, NCLB has ignored sociological research on both the role of schools and communities in challenging or reinforcing discrimination and inequality, and the powerful effects of poverty on educational outcomes.

Recommendations

Despite its lofty ambitions, NCLB clearly has fallen so far short that it must be substantially retooled or replaced. Here are some recommendations:

- The goals of a new law must be rigorous and ambitious, but realistic and attainable. For example, as to eliminating achievement gaps, research cautions that NCLB reforms may reduce the gap, but cannot eliminate it. Without simultaneous efforts to reduce the pernicious effects of poverty on low-income children, even the best school-based reforms can achieve only so much.

Although poverty should not excuse low achievement, it cannot be treated as irrelevant.



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As Race to the Top has done, a new federal law must incorporate into its school-level accountability system longitudinal value-added models for students and teachers. Progress toward a goal, rather than a snapshot of current performance levels, must be the centerpiece.

To be effective and fair, such models should take account of school, student and neighborhood demographics and their impact on student achievement.

- Whatever role standardized tests play, they must be carefully constructed to be fair, reliable and valid. States should be given the time and expert assistance necessary to do that, something neither NCLB nor Race to the Top did.
- Although the aim of NCLB's teacher quality provisions was laudable, not enough was done to actually improve teacher quality, including well-conceived professional development programs.
- NCLB has been too quick to stigmatize and

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punish low-performing, low-income schools by taking away Title I funding, notifying parents that they could transfer their children to other schools, and threatening to close those schools. Struggling schools should be supported and assisted to improve, receiving more resources when inadequate resources contribute to the problem.

Closing schools that wrestle with the challenge of raising the achievement levels of disadvantaged students should be an absolute last resort.

- Widely touted reform models, such as the Harlem Children's Zone, the Obama administration's Promise Neighborhoods initiative, and the Broader Bolder Approach in Newark, which address the effects of poverty, insufficient economic development and inadequate health care, should become part of a new federal education reform agenda.



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