

TEXAS SUPERINTENDENTS' RATINGS OF STANDARDS/ASSESSMENT/ACCOUNTABILITY PROGRAMS

Accountability and assessment are critical components to the success of schools today. As leaders of school districts, superintendents in Texas and across the nation are faced daily with meeting this challenge. While doing so, they must remember that their priority commitment is not to testing programs, but to helping children achieve. Consequently, understanding how to analyze and use data for education planning is critical. With this in mind, superintendents must be able to use accountability systems that work to equip children to achieve. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to evaluate the impact on the district of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) assessment and accountability programs as perceived by Texas superintendents.

Literature Review

State-mandated testing and the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) have continued to raise the bar of education and, at the same time, increase the tensions of testing (USDOE, 2002). NCLB, signed into law in 2002, has mandated a large-scale system for state educational standards and testing accountability which extends from the student to subgroups of children, to the school, the district and the state (Doyle, 2004). It requires schools to show "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) in test scores among the general population, as well as in disaggregated subgroups based on race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and disability. Many educators feel that the NCLB standards are unrealistically high, especially for schools that serve a large population of special education students or English language learning students. According to the U.S. Department of Education only 1% of students can be exempted from testing because they are in special education. All other students must test on grade level or be counted as failures, despite disabilities (Bloomfield & Cooper, 2003).

In addition to the federally mandated NCLB, within the past twenty years all of the 50 states have adopted initiatives to raise academic standards and have actually incorporated some form of mandated state assessment that students are required to pass in order to be promoted to the next grade (Simon, 2004). Additionally, nearly half of the states have mandated assessments that must be passed for a student to graduate from high school. Schools in the United States are given accountability ratings by states based on their test data. Similarly, gaining or losing necessary funds is tied to these same data. Yet this often presents a challenge because some state rankings can contradict the NCLB federal rankings because the two accountability systems apply test results differently (Irons & Harris, in press; LaCoste-Caputo, 2004).

Establishing Databases

Many states, such as Texas, have established large databases (Texas Academic Excellence Indicator System—AEIS, for example), based on state-mandated tests, that are published annually and are easily accessible to the public (TEA, 2005b). The availability of this type of data has been valuable in assisting educators in data-based decision-making for campus planning (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2006). While most educators agree that setting a high standard for student academic achievement is certainly appropriate, there is concern that making major decisions about students and schools based on one form of standardized testing data is not appropriate (National School Public Relations Association, 2002). Others point out the possibility of teachers teaching to the test to ensure that students will pass the test, and omitting other important educational goals. Generally, when high stakes tests are administered, exam content tends to define curriculum and previous test content is emphasized to prepare students for the new test (Schroeder & Pryor, 2001).

Need for a Variety of Assessments

Many educators feel that there should be a variety of assessments considered when making high stakes decisions about students and schools (National School Public Relations Association, 2003). For example, multiple assessments that include the triangulation of standardized test information, portfolios, other student artifacts, and teacher input have been suggested as ways to enhance the accountability system and make data-based decisions more accurate. However, at this point mandated multiple-choice testing is the primary source upon which most accountability systems are based utilizing state tests, such as TAKS in Texas, and NCLB guidelines throughout the nation (Skrla et al., 2006; Sunderman, Orfield, & Kim, 2006).

When accountability is based on a limited view of assessment, students' successful performance on tests can become the schools' ultimate goal and test performance can become a surrogate for educational quality. Therefore, school superintendents who are genuinely concerned about student achievement must recognize that their responsibility is far greater to students than that of just helping them score well on a test. Often these leaders feel, and educational research seems to agree, that working toward building a larger culture of success at the school will also increase achievement scores. Roland Barth (2001) emphasized this in his book *Learning by Heart* by saying, "Show me a school where instructional leaders constantly examine the school's culture and work to transform it into one hospitable to sustained human learning, and I'll show you students who do just fine on those standardized tests" (p. 12). Creating this larger culture of success begins with identifying the impact of assessments at the district and school level.

Methodology

This study implemented a survey method to explore the perceived impact on Texas school districts of the state-mandated TAKS test and the NCLB assessment program. The survey is the most widely used type of indirect measure in educational research because it provides the best way of obtaining information for a wide-range of research problems in a large population (McMillan, 2000). A stratified random sample was utilized to identify superintendents to participate in the survey because this allows for a more representative population than if the sample were taken from the population as a whole. It also reduces error and ensures that an adequate number of subjects is selected from the different subgroups (McMillan, 2000).

Population Sample

One third of the 1,026 superintendents in Texas were invited to participate. We selected superintendents using a stratified random sample in order to assure an equal representation of small, medium, and large districts. Surveys were mailed in the fall of 2005. One hundred seventeen (34%) responded.

Participating superintendents were 91 male and 26 female. According to Bruner (2001), nationwide approximately 14% of superintendents were women. In our study 23% were female. At least 36% had been superintendents from one to three years; 35% had been superintendents from 4 to 10 years; and 27% had been superintendents for ten or more years. We divided school districts by size and gave them the following designations: rural (small), suburban (medium) and urban (large) based on the 2004–05 Pocket Edition Snapshot (TEA, 2005c). Almost 72% of responding superintendents were from rural Texas school districts, 19% were from suburban school districts, and 8.5% were from urban school districts. This is representative of the districts in Texas with size designations of 80%, 12%, and 8% respectively. Only 2.6% of participating superintendents represented schools with an Exemplary rating, 35% represented Recognized schools, and 61% represented Acceptable schools. No superintendents participated from schools that were Low Performing. These ratings are somewhat representative of Texas districts where in that same year, 2005, 1% of districts were Exemplary, 14% were Recognized, 80% were Acceptable, and 4% were Academically Unacceptable (TEA, 2005a). (See Appendix A for Texas rating requirements)

Data Collection

Surveys were mailed to one third of all superintendents in the 1,036 districts in Texas. The survey consisted of five parts. Part I asked superintendents about general demographic information such as gender, location, and size of district. Part II asked superintendents to rate the impact of TAKS on general assessment areas, such as amount of training, growth in assessment knowledge, use of student achievement data, and

the degree and quality of the impact of state assessment efforts on teaching and learning. Parts I and II were developed in collaboration with researchers in Nebraska who were investigating the same concerns with their state assessment. Part III rated the impact of NCLB on the district and on specific programs. Parts IV and V were open-ended and queried superintendents regarding their main concerns and recommendations for TAKS and NCLB, respectively. The survey was pilot-tested in a university certification class of aspiring superintendents and was revised and refined based on subsequent suggestions. The survey had a reliability coefficient of .8151 and a standardized item alpha of .8298 indicating a high level of reliability. A copy of the survey is in Appendix B.

Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics were utilized as appropriate. Comparative analyses were conducted on specific variables, such as gender and district size. Cross tabs, independent samples *t* tests, means and ANOVA were calculated to identify areas of statistical significance at the alpha level of $p < .05$.

Findings

Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS)

Using a Likert scale of 1 = none, 2 = little, 3 = some, 4 = quite a bit, and 5 = extensive, superintendents consistently rated the impact of TAKS on themselves and on their districts as nominal. For example, as indicated in Table 1, superintendents have had only a little standards/assessment/accountability training ($M = 2.11$), their knowledge in assessment has grown little ($M = 2.06$), their district use of assessment data for improving student achievement has been little to none ($M = 1.92$), their vision of assessment has had little alignment with that of other leaders within the district ($M = 2.02$), and the impact of standards and assessment efforts on teaching and learning has been very small ($M = 1.93$).

The final question in this section asked superintendents to give an overall evaluation of the impact of standards/assessment efforts on teaching and learning within the district using a somewhat different scale of 1 = very negative, 2 = mostly negative, 3 = neutral, 4 = mostly positive, and 5 = very positive. Superintendents rated this question with a mean of 3.03 ($SD = .642$). Clearly the little training acknowledged and lack of growth in or use of assessment data that superintendents reported in survey questions 7–11 were reflected in survey question 12, causing superintendents to perceive that overall TAKS testing had a neutral or nominal effect on their district.

Table 1

Superintendent Perceptions of TAKS on a Scale of 1–5

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Rate amount of standards/assessment/accountability training during your educational career *	117	2.11	.679
Rate your growth in assessment knowledge over last 5 years *	117	2.06	.620
Rate district use of assessment data to improve student achievement * #	117	1.92	.998
Rate your vision of assessment with that of other leaders in the district	116	2.02	.722
Rate impact of standards/assessment efforts on teaching & learning within district	116	1.93	.743
Rate overall impact of standards/assessment efforts on teaching & learning within district #	115	3.03	.642
Valid <i>N</i> (listwise)			114

* $p < .05$ by gender—females higher than males.

$p < .05$ by location—rural lower than suburban or urban.

When independent samples *t* tests were performed by level of school rating, there were no significant findings, suggesting that there were no differences in how superintendents responded based on their school academic ratings. However, when disaggregating data by gender, three categories were significant and in each case, female superintendents ranked the items higher than their male counterparts. Females ($M = 2.54$) were more likely to report the amount of standards/assessment/accountability training during their careers between “little” and “some,” while males acknowledged “little” ($M = 1.99$) ($p = .000$). Although still low, females rated their own growth in assessment knowledge as higher than males (female $M = 2.35$; male $M = 1.98$) ($p = .007$). This same trend followed in rating district use of assessment data for improving student achievement (female $M = 2.27$; male $M = 1.82$) ($p = .047$). Females were more likely to note that the data were “little used” while males were more likely to indicate that it was “not used.” Because more females than males responded to the survey relative to population demographics, the possibility of some degree of respondent bias may exist.

With the current focus upon educational leaders as instructional leaders, extensive knowledge about effective assessment practices is necessary (Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2001). Teaching continues to be a female-dominated field and our results suggest that females tend to keep abreast of assessment knowledge somewhat better than males. Thus, females are more likely to acknowledge at least attempts at data-driven decision-making. On the other hand, males appear to base instructional decision-making on information other than assessment data. These findings suggest a need for more emphasis upon data-based decision-making in leadership preparation programs for both men and women.

Disaggregating the data by location, two categories were significant at $p < .05$. For the item "rate your district use of assessment data for improving student achievement" ($p = .03$), rural school superintendents were more likely to report not using their data ($M = 1.74$) than suburban districts ($M = 2.45$). In rating the overall impact of standards/assessment efforts on teaching and learning within the district, again, rural school superintendents rated the impact as more negative ($M = 2.89$) than either suburban ($M = 3.36$) ($p = .007$) or urban superintendents ($M = 3.40$) ($p = .045$). It is well known that rural school districts often lack resources that suburban and urban schools have (Strange & Malhoit, 2005). Thus, rural superintendents may have neither monetary nor human resource assistance to keep abreast of effective assessment practices and training. Collaborating with other nearby small districts to share resources and training might be a possible solution that would change this negative trend to one that is more positive (Darden, 2005).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Using a Likert scale of 1 = very negative, 2 = mostly negative, 3 = neutral, 4 = mostly positive, 5 = very positive, Table 2 details superintendent perceptions of the impact of NCLB on particular aspects of their district. Although, in general, NCLB was rated as having a somewhat higher impact than TAKS, overall the results were not encouraging. Superintendents noted that the impact of NCLB on Special Education (IDEA) had the highest mean ($M = 3.01$), rating it a neutral impact with all other categories rated as "mostly negative." The 1% requirement was considered to have been the most negatively impacted, with a mean of 1.70. Table 2 has complete information.

Table 2

Superintendent Perceptions of NCLB on a Scale of 1–5

Best describes the impact of NCLB on your district:	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Title I - Academic Achievement of Disadvantaged @	116	2.49	.850
School Drop Out Prevention	114	2.16	.589
Advanced Placement programs #	113	2.21	.574
Title II - High Quality Teachers and Principals	114	2.35	.716
Staff Development	116	2.52	.639
Use of Technology	116	2.39	.601
Title III - LEP/Immigrant Students	116	2.23	.651
Title IV Safe and Drug Free Schools	116	2.28	.584
Title V Parental Involvement	115	2.24	.571
Special Education (IDEA) @	114	3.01	1.216

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Best describes the impact of NCLB on your district:	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
The 1% requirement	115	1.70	.966
AYP requirement @	115	2.37	1.046
Your district rating/accountability	116	2.02	.698
District funding *	116	2.76	.798
Extended day/tutorial programs	116	2.26	.620
Multicultural/diversity programs #	115	2.02	.495
Valid <i>N</i> (listwise) 108			

* $p < .05$ by gender.

@ $p < .05$ by district rating.

$p < .05$ by school district location.

When disaggregating data by gender, females ($M = 3.08$) indicated that the impact of NCLB on district funding was significant ($p = .020$) compared to males ($M = 1.67$). In other words females were more likely to rank the impact of NCLB on funding as neutral rather than negative when compared to males.

Because there were only three Exemplary districts participating in the survey, we collapsed the Exemplary and Recognized superintendents into one category. When data were investigated by the state recognition system (Exemplary and Recognized as one category, and Acceptable as the other category), three items were significant: Title I (Acceptable $M = 2.61$, Recognized, $M = 2.3$) ($p = .050$); Special Education (Acceptable $M = 3.2$, Recognized, $M = 2.72$) ($p = .042$), and the AYP requirement (Acceptable $M = 2.59$, Recognized, $M = 2.02$) ($p = .004$). In each case, Acceptable schools were more likely to rate the impact of NCLB on these categories as more neutral, while Exemplary or Recognized schools rated the impact as mostly negative. This is likely a reflection of the challenges and stresses of NCLB especially for continued progress (AYP) and testing of previously waived populations (such as special education students) in order to retain the coveted district rating of Exemplary or Recognized.

When ANOVA were used to investigate significant differences by school district location, two items were significant: Advanced placement (rural $M = 2.12$, suburban $M = 2.4$, urban $M = 2.5$) ($p = .028$) and multicultural/diversity programs (rural $M = 1.94$, suburban $M = 2.14$, urban $M = 2.30$) ($p = .032$). Rural superintendents were more likely to rate the impact of NCLB on these programs as mostly negative, while suburban schools regarded it as more neutral. Also, rural schools were more likely to rank the impact on multicultural/diversity programs as more negative than urban superintendents. These findings suggest that rural schools may not be prepared to address an influx of students from diverse cultures or groups. As stated earlier, resources are often less available in rural areas. There is also the concern that if the rural school does not meet eligibility

requirements specified for federal Title I programs as a school-wide program (minimum of 40 students), they may receive only limited funding based on each eligible disadvantaged student. This funding may not support what is needed for adequate NCLB implementation. The rating of the negative impact of NCLB mandates for multicultural/diversity programs should not assume that rural superintendents do not understand the importance and need for such programs. Perhaps instead, this is a reflection of a frustrated recognition that such programs are not easily subject to standardized testing in this one-size-fits-all test environment. Still, rural superintendents tend to rate the impact of NCLB mandates more negatively than either suburban or urban programs with access to more resources, which is consistent with other findings (USDOE, 2002).

Major Concerns of State Accountability and Implementing NCLB

There were three major concerns identified by superintendents in response to the open-ended questions regarding state accountability measures and implementing NCLB. These were too much testing, the lack of funding, and the stress of implementation. Sixty (51.3%) superintendents noted that there was simply too much testing resulting in a loss of instructional time. For example, one superintendent noted that entirely too much time was spent on “preparation for the tests.” Another superintendent feared that “too much testing would cause a narrowing of the curriculum overall.”

Fifty-two (44.4%) superintendents noted a lack of funding as a major concern. For example, one complained that the “lack of funding makes it impossible to produce expected results.” Another said that “we are being charged with greater standards, but provided fewer educational dollars.”

The challenges of too much testing and too little funding led 49 (42.9%) superintendents to point out that this resulted in increased stresses on superintendents, faculty, students, and the community as a whole. One superintendent noted that the “progression of test standards is not being understood in the community.” Another commented that “the people responsible do not understand school districts.” Fifteen (12.9%) respondents noted that there was “too much pressure on teachers, administration, and students.” One superintendent worried that “constantly changing the standards and testing students” with one educational assessment program and then another contributed to this stress. Another superintendent commented that “the testing program stresses decoding (testing), rather than encoding (teaching).” Eleven (9.4%) superintendents worried that the stress of retaining students would have harmful effects on students.

Recommendations for Alleviating Concerns

Recommendations for alleviating concerns of state and federal mandated testing were consistent with the concerns noted: increase funding, be consistent, and listen to educators. Seventy (60%) superintendents noted the need to increase funding to “mirror expectations.” One superintendent

noted that “adequately and equitably funded public education systems with achievable goals and positive support from legislature would de-emphasize the current ‘we gotcha ya’ mentality.”

While superintendents had many concerns, none argued to get rid of increased standards. Instead, 48 (41%) recommended the need for consistency. This was articulated by a need for “stability over a period of time,” “give fewer tests,” “quit changing the bar every year,” “give us goals and let us reach them,” and “quit playing games with tests.” The third recommendation theme that emerged from 45 (38.3%) superintendent comments was to listen to educators. Repeatedly, superintendents asked for “local input” on testing dates, for “more local control on test content,” that “testing should not be criteria for grade advancement,” and to “use various sources of assessment such as portfolios.”

Conclusions

We began this study seeking to find out how state-mandated testing (TAKS) and federally mandated testing (NCLB) were impacting school districts. Basically, we found that Texas superintendents perceived that they have little training regarding assessments and accountability. At the same time, the overall impact of these efforts has been perceived as either mostly negative or neutral and, consequently, the data from TAKS testing are often unlikely to be used for improving student achievement. When disaggregating data, we found the following trends:

- Females were significantly more likely to rank the impact of NCLB as neutral rather than negative when compared to males.
- Females were more likely to rate the amount of standards/assessment/accountability training during their careers, their own growth in assessment knowledge, and their district use of assessment data for improving student achievement as low, but still higher than males.
- Rural superintendents rated the impact of NCLB on Advanced Placement and multicultural/diversity programs more negatively than urban school superintendents.
- Rural school superintendents rated their district use of assessment data lower than suburban districts. They also rated the overall impact of standards/assessment efforts on teaching and learning within the district as more negative than either suburban or urban superintendents.
- Acceptable schools rated the impact of NCLB as more neutral than those schools which were rated Exemplary or Recognized. These schools perceived it as mostly negative.

Based on the data reported in this study, we can infer that the 117 Texas superintendents who participated in this study either perceived mandated accountability as negative or as having had little impact on improving student achievement within their district. At the same time, superintendents were not unwilling to meet these challenges but articulated a need for help to make this happen.

Recommendations

An underlying theme in the responses of the superintendents in this study suggested a sense of powerlessness. In the words of one superintendent, it was “too much, too many, too soon” and he was “too tired” to respond to the accountability and assessment mandates of NCLB. Clearly, superintendents want to lead the students in their districts to increased academic achievement, but in order to do this they need specific training regarding how to understand the data that are being collected. They also need training in communicating this information to their faculty and to the learning community. Additional funding is also needed to support the NCLB programs from those who are mandating them.

With NCLB, the federal government has mandated a large-scale system for creating and maintaining state educational standards and testing accountability. While proponents argue that NCLB will boost student achievement, especially among the poor and minority group members for whom the law was ostensibly intended, others, such as the National Education Association (NEA) and American Association of School Administrators (AASA), fear that the law actually “punishes” schools (Toppo, 2006, p. 12B). Similar to the superintendents who participated in this study, these organizations are also concerned about too much testing, too many new requirements, and a lack of funding, which they fear will have a negative effect on public education (Toppo, 2006).

If NCLB and TAKS can cause superintendents to feel less powerful, they can also cause superintendents to feel powerful...when they are effective in leading their districts to become places of learning for all students. At this point, superintendents indicate that the impact of mandated standards and testing has been negative to neutral. Perhaps with increased training, this trend can be changed to one that is more positive.

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Appendix A

Requirements for Texas Rating Categories

	<i>Academically Acceptable</i>	<i>Recognized</i>	<i>Exemplary</i>
Base Indicators			
<p><i>Spring 2005 TAKS</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All students and each student group meeting minimum size: • African American • Hispanic • White • Econ. Disadv. 	<p>meets each standard:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading/ELA 50% • Writing 50% • Social Studies 50% • Mathematics 35% • Science 25% <p>OR meets Required Improvement</p>	<p>meets 70% standard for each subject</p> <p>OR</p> <p>meets 65% floor and Required Improvement</p>	<p>meets 90% standard for each subject</p>
<p><i>Spring 2005 SDA A II</i></p> <p>All students (if meet minimum size criteria)</p>	<p>meets 50% standard (Met ARD Expectations)</p>	<p>meets 70% standard (Met ARD Expectations)</p>	<p>meets 90% standard (Met ARD Expectations)</p>
<p><i>Completion Rate II (class of 2004)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All students and each student group meeting minimum size: • African American • Hispanic • White • Econ. Disadv. 	<p>meets 75.0% standard</p> <p>OR</p> <p>meets Required Improvement</p>	<p>meets 85.0% standard</p> <p>OR</p> <p>meets 80.0% floor and Required Improvement</p>	<p>meets 95.0% standard</p>

Source: (TEA, 2005a).

Appendix B

Copy of Survey

Superintendent District Assessment Analysis

Part I: Demographics: Circle the appropriate response

1. Your gender: 1) Male 2) Female
2. Years as superintendent: 1) 0-1 2) 2-3 3) 4-6 4) 7-10 5) 10+
3. District location: 1) rural 2) suburban 3) urban
4. Size of district: 1) 1A 2) 2A 3) 3A 4) 4A 5) 5A
5. Texas District Rating: 1) Low Performing 2) Acceptable 3) Recognized 4) Exemplary
6. Percent of districts funds from NCLB sources: _____

Part II: TAKS: Circle the number that best describes your response to the statements regarding TAKS.

7. Rate the amount of standards/assessment/accountability training that you have had during your educational career.
1—no training 2—little training 3—some training 4—quite a bit of training 5—extensive training
8. Rate your growth in assessment knowledge over the last 5 years.
1—no growth 2—little growth 3—some growth 4—quite a bit of growth 5—extensive growth
9. Rate your district use of assessment data for improving student achievement.
1—no use 2—little use 3—some use 4—quite a bit of use 5—extensive use
10. Rate your vision of assessment with the vision of assessment of other leaders within your district.
1—no alignment 2—little alignment 3—some alignment 4—quite a bit of alignment 5—extensive
11. Rate the impact of standards/assessment efforts to date on teaching and learning within your district.
1—no impact 2—little impact 3—some impact 4—quite a bit of impact 5—extensive
12. Related to question 11, overall, the impact of standards/assessment efforts on teaching and learning within the district has been:
1—very negative 2—mostly negative 3—neutral impact 4—mostly positive 5—very positive

Part III. No Child Left Behind Act: Circle the number that best describes the impact of NCLB on your district.

	1—very negative	2—mostly negative	3—neutral impact	4—mostly positive	5—very positive
13. Title I: Academic Achievement of Disadvantaged	1	2	3	4	5
14. School Dropout Prevention	1	2	3	4	5
15. Advanced Placement Programs	1	2	3	4	5
16. Title II – High Quality Teachers and Principals	1	2	3	4	5
17. Staff Development	1	2	3	4	5
18. Use of Technology	1	2	3	4	5
19. Title III – LEP & Immigrant Students	1	2	3	4	5
20. Title IV Safe and Drug Free Schools	1	2	3	4	5
21. Title V – Parental Involvement	1	2	3	4	5
22. Special Education (IDEA)	1	2	3	4	5
23. The 1% requirement	1	2	3	4	5
24. The AYP requirement	1	2	3	4	5
25. Your district rating/Accountability	1	2	3	4	5
26. District funding	1	2	3	4	5
27. Extended day tutorial programs	1	2	3	4	5
28. Multicultural/diversity programs	1	2	3	4	5
29. Other – Please specify	1	2	3	4	5

Part IV. State Accountability/standards/assessment: TAKS

30. List major concerns regarding state accountability/standards/assessment.

31. List recommendations for alleviating concerns about state accountability/standards/assessment.

Part V. NCLB Act

32. List major concerns regarding implementing the NCLB Act in your district.

33. List recommendations for alleviating concerns about implementing the NCLB Act.