

A Report Card for No Child Left Behind

David L. Gray
The University of South Alabama

Abstract

The *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act has failed to provide funds and programs envisioned by President George W. Bush. The Act's key tenets promised improved student learning and professional development for teachers, but changes in national priorities have prevented congress from meeting state requests for assistance. Schools are struggling with federal mandates for Adequate Yearly Progress and highly qualified teachers, and the outlook for additional resources is dim.

Introduction

More than four years have passed since congress enacted *Public Law 107-110* (No Child Left Behind, or NCLB) on January 8, 2002. A Department of Education Preliminary Analysis (2004) noted that Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), sanctions and rewards, accountability, and highly-qualified teacher have become popular jargon, but NCLB's effect on student achievement and teacher quality is receiving mixed reviews.

The Act's staunchest opponents agree that its goal to improve student achievement is worthwhile, but insist that President George W. Bush has failed to appropriate funds needed to implement its key provisions. Criticism has been widespread from both sides of the aisle in congress. House Democrat Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-California), a critic of the President on many issues, said that none of Bush's budgets have come close to meeting the level of funding authorized. Further, Education Week reported in January, 2004, that the bi-partisan National Governors Association voted to label the Act an unfunded mandate. Farkas, Johnson, and Duffet (2003) discovered that eighty three percent of superintendents and 65 percent of principals responding to a Wallace Foundation survey said that they "were obligated to spend a disproportional amount of money and other resources on special education" (p. 12).

Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to: David L. Gray, EdD, University of South Alabama, UCOM 3600, Mobile, Alabama 36688-0002.

The Act is a comprehensive federal reform of America's educational system. Its merit is based on the success of key provisions for Accountability; Assistance, Sanctions, and Rewards; Staff Quality; Curriculum and Instruction, and a controversial component, Funding Streams.

Accountability

The Act holds schools accountable for teaching and learning through extensive testing and calls for annual reading and mathematics examinations for all students by 2005-2006 in grades 3-8 and at least once in grades 10-12. Results must prove that students are making AYP, which means mastering material and improving their scores each year. After a base line for test results is established, schools are expected to comply with NCLB's annual assessments beginning in 2005-2006. Data will be disaggregated by poverty level, race, gender, ethnicity, migrant status, disability, limited English proficiency, and reported for each school and sub-group.

The Act's accountability provisions mean states must set high-level benchmarks against which students' performance will be measured. This provision conveys an expectation that students will reach complete mastery of grade-by-grade and subject benchmarks within a specific time frame.

Federal funds are tied to a requirement that local districts and their schools provide rigorous, research-based programs for everyone. NCLB's Title IX, Part A, offers eight choices of "scientifically based research" that schools may use to develop instructional strategies.

Assistance, Sanctions, and Rewards

NCLB emphasizes school improvement in several ways. First, Title I schools that fail to make AYP toward Alabama's proficiency goals will be given assistance from the State Department of Education in areas of deficiency, and may be restructured. Two consecutive years of inadequate AYP will cause schools to be labeled as needing improvement, which means they must spend a portion of their Title I, Part A, funds for professional development for teachers.

Other requirements for schools needing improvement include developing a two-year plan that reflects stakeholder involvement, annual and measurable objectives that move students toward AYP goals, and using special support teams or partnerships to guide learning in appropriate directions. The detailed, two-year plan must identify ways in which the school intends to strengthen core academic subjects and requires local educational agency approval within 45 days of its receipt.

Second, NCLB provides for school choice when any Title I elementary or secondary school has been identified as needing improvement. Students have an option of transferring to another, successful district school, or outside the district if all schools in the district have been classified as low-performing. The sending district pays for transportation costs from federal funds. Other stipulations prevent students from leaving low-performing schools, but they center on health and safety issues if overcrowding occurs as a result of too many transfers to one school.

Third, schools needing improvement must notify parents about their deficiencies and make them aware of the option to transfer children. The lowest-achieving students from low-income families receive priority.

NCLB requires schools in their second and third years of improvement to offer tutoring and other supplemental services to help students meet academic goals. All services must be high-quality, research-based, and designed to help children succeed on the state's assessment instruments.

Finally, the district must develop a plan to correct deficiencies in schools failing to make AYP for four consecutive years. McCloud, D'Amico, and Protheroe (2003) suggest that the district's plan "could include measures such as (a) Replacing some school staff members, (b) fully implementing a new curriculum, (c) decreasing management authority at the school, (d) appointing an external expert knowledgeable in scientific research, (e) extending the school day or year, and (f) reorganizing the school" (p. 27).

Staff Quality

The U. S. Department of Education (2003) maintains that a key provision of NCLB is its "belief that a student's academic performance can be directly linked to the quality of the school staff" (McCloud et al., 2003, p. 31). Title I, Part A, requires states to certify by 2005-2006 that all teachers of English, reading or language arts, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and governments, economics, arts, history, and geography are highly qualified (McCloud et al., 2003). Highly qualified teachers are those who have full state certification or have passed a state teacher licensing examination. New elementary teachers must have a bachelor's degree and pass a state examination assessing their knowledge and teaching skills in reading, writing, and mathematics.

Middle and secondary school teachers have the same degree and state examination requirements as their elementary colleagues. They also must complete a graduate program in their teaching specialty or earn advanced certification.

This provision is an impetus for change because NCLB requires school districts to notify parents annually of their right to request information about the qualifications of their children's teachers. Principals must inform the public about whether or not the school's faculty is highly qualified. McCloud et al. (2003) remind us that the provision also "applies to teachers who work with Limited English Proficiency students and to special education teachers who teach core academic subjects, but does not apply to those who serve as consultants or adapt material in core areas" (p. 35).

Staff Development

NCLB emphasizes professional development to increase teacher quality and improve student learning. Title IX, Part A, lists 13 characteristics of professional development that must be considered when activities are designed. Other requirements include: (a) Districts must use part of their Title I funds to ensure that all teachers become highly qualified, (b) a school needing improvement for failing to attain AYP must use ten percent of its Title I, Part A funds for professional development to address academic problems that caused sanctions, (c) limited Title II funds may be available for activities to enhance principals' and teachers' skills in selected areas, such as effective instructional strategies, addressing special needs students, or ways in which data may be used to improve instruction, (d) Title II, Part C offers funds for the National Writing Project to train faculties to teach writing to their students, and (e) the Foreign Language Assistance program (Title V, Part D) encourages competitive grant funding to support professional development through intensive foreign language programs. Limited funds for staff development may be available through provisions in Title I and scientifically-based research when selecting activities.

Curriculum and Instruction

McCloud et al. (2003) report that Title I and Title IX prohibit the federal government from mandating instructional content, achievement standards, or curriculum to states, but Part B of Title I describes an essential reading program as one that “. . . includes phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency, and reading comprehension strategies” (p. 42).

The Reading First initiative helps states and districts with comprehensive reading instruction grounded in scientifically-based research for children in grades K-3. The program assists teachers in identifying children who are at risk of reading failure. States will receive funds according to a poverty-based formula.

NCLB recognizes the importance of school libraries to its Reading First initiative and authorizes funding through competitive grants to improve school media centers. Grants will be available to districts in which at least 20 percent of the students are from low-income homes.

The Act also offers competitive grants through its *Civic Education Program* and *Teaching of Traditional American History Program*, provisions of Title II. Funds are authorized for these efforts, but congress has not yet appropriated money to them.

Funding Streams

NCLB was designed to move public education in a different direction, but President Bush's budget proposals since 2002 reflect competition among national priorities. Funds that might have bolstered NCLB have been diverted to military programs, tax cuts, and other initiatives. Education Week reported in January, 2004, that state and local governments, struggling with increases in inflation and student enrollments, have not received financial assistance the Act should have provided.

NCLB includes opportunities for schools to compete for federal funds in 20 different programs. McCloud et al. (2003) note that all of them require qualification based on poverty of specific populations and include *Title I School-wide* if more than 40 percent of students are from low-income families; *Parental Assistance Information Centers* help parents to participate in their child's education (Title VI); *Comprehensive School Reform*, an extension of past federal programs that support school wide, integrated improvement efforts (Title I); *Reading First* offers funds to improve K-3 reading (Title I); *Early Reading First* helps children entering kindergarten from low income families with reading skills; *William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy Program* funds are available to families needing services to break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy (pp. 51-52).

Secondary schools may receive federal funds on a competitive basis for Advanced Placement (AP) Programs, Immigration Education, Smaller Learning Communities, Math and Science Partnerships, and Technology (McCloud et al., 2003, pp. 56-59).

Title V encourages districts to develop or improve counseling programs in elementary schools (McCloud et al., 2003, p. 61). The Secretary of Education will award funds for innovative approaches to creating teams of service providers, such as qualified psychologists working alongside psychiatrists, social workers, and school counselors to meet American School Health Association professional/student ratios. Title V also offers funding for *Foreign Language Assistance*, *Physical Education*, and *Arts Education*. Other provisions in NCLB include *English Language Acquisition* for limited-English proficient children, *Homeless Education*, *Migratory Children*, and *Neglected, Delinquent, and At-Risk Youth* (McCloud et al., 2003).

The Act authorizes funds for those programs, but congressional appropriations have failed to meet state and district demands. Democratic Senate leader Tom Daschel attributed financial shortfalls to the White House. In a January, 2004 statement, he said, "The President's budgets since the enactment of No Child Left Behind have repeatedly failed to fund Title I, the key federal mechanism for educating children and encouraging reform at the state and local level."

Time and circumstance will determine whether or not No Child Left Behind will become the reform measure President Bush intended. Among its provisions, AYP and highly-qualified teachers have already impacted local schools. Its bottom line, business-model approach to teaching and learning may become its undoing. McCloud et al. (2003) suggest that negative attitudes about NCLB are contagious. They recommend that we "embrace the educational policy because. . .it's the law" (p.78).

School districts are trying to comply with the Act's tenets, but inadequate funding for programs and heavy emphases on high-stakes testing are causing financial difficulties and resistance to full implementation. The consensus of opinion about NCLB's first four years among politicians and educators is unfavorable. Its success as a reform is questionable. With appropriate funding, perhaps its future will be more successful.

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