

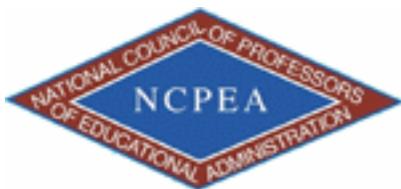
# SUPERINTENDENTS' VIEWS OF THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT\*

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## Abstract

The views of 33 superintendents in South Texas were obtained concerning the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act through a Likert-format survey. Results were that superintendents perceived NCLB as having limited, at best, impact in encouraging the development of more educational services; opening more communication between the district and parents; providing an equal opportunity to disadvantaged pupils; creating strong community relations; and, involving more parents in the education of their children. Superintendents in South Texas are implementing the NCLB requirements with limited information being provided to the parents or the community. Implications are discussed.



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## 1 Introduction

Since the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk*, stakeholders have placed a strong emphasis on improving student achievement. Recently and due to the impact of the 2001 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), the emphasis has been to close the achievement

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gaps that separate low income, Special Education, English Language Learners, and students of color from their more advantaged peers. The NCLB Act has called on all educators to ensure that no child loses the opportunity for a quality education.

The NCLB Act provides increased accountability for states, school districts, and schools; greater choice for parents and students, more flexibility for States and local education agencies (LEA) in the use of Federal education dollars, and a stronger emphasis on reading. Whereas some educators have called for Congress to roll back the clock on the accountability provisions embedded in the NCLB Act, other practitioners, advocates, and policy makers are insisting states and districts be held accountable for results. For example, critics claim that the “requirements in NCLB are totally out of the blue and have caught states by surprise” (ESAE Myths, 2003, p. 6). Others claim, “states are being forced to lower their standards to meet goals set by the feds” (ESAE Myths, 2003, p. 6). Supporters of the NCLB Act have argued, “If states feel compelled to lower standards for fear of not meeting them, then one of two things is true: Either their standards were wildly unrealistic and never were intended to establish what all students should know and do or these states do not have confidence that their teachers and schools can improve” (ESAE Myths, 2003, p. 4).

To ensure that the achievement gap is closed, NCLB mandates that all states assess their students in reading and mathematics annually for grades 3-8. Sawyer (2006) stated, “All students in grades three to eight are to be assessed in these core subjects to help teachers and principals identify weaknesses and make needed changes in instructional practices. These assessments also help schools and districts measure their performance as a whole” (p. 18).

Low performing schools who fail to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) face intervention. Schools and districts that have not made AYP for one year will be identified as needing improvement. If they miss AYP for two consecutive years, they must offer students a chance to transfer to another school. Students attending schools that have failed to meet State standards for at least three of the four preceding years may use Title I funds to obtain supplemental educational services from a public or private sector provider. After five years of failure the school must be restructured (NCLB, 2001).

Of particular interest to these researchers is the changing of the role of superintendents from managers to instructional leaders focused on standards - based accountability (First, 2004), as a result of the NCLB Act. The implementation of reform efforts, including a focus on accountability and test scores, has become the minimum expectation for the superintendent’s job. Superintendents are responsible for their schools meeting AYP toward state proficiency goals. When their schools do not meet AYP, superintendents face a variety of consequences including corrective action and restructuring measures aimed at getting the schools to meet State standards (Anthes, 2002). As such, school leaders face a number of social challenges including changing demographics, growing diversity, deregulation in the form of vouchers and charter schools, and decentralization of power (Houston, 2001).

Practitioners and policy leaders are in general agreement that the NCLB Act has focused central office administrators, teachers, and principals on improving educational outcomes and closing the achievement gaps. Educators, generally, are also learning “that we need to do a better job educating low-income and minority students in particular” (ESEA, 2003, p. 7).

Of interest in this study are superintendents who work in school districts that have a substantial percentage of low-income and minority students. In 2005, out of a total South Texas K-12 Region XX student enrollment of 354,350 students, 68% met the poverty guidelines for free and/or reduced lunch and were classified as being economically disadvantaged. In that same year the overall passing rates on the state-mandated assessment, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) for Latino students was 30%, 27% for African American students, 26% for economically disadvantaged students, and 5% for Limited English Proficient (LEP) students. Approximately 16% of those students classified as at-risk passed the TAKS, whereas the passing rate for their White counterparts was 60%, a gap of over 44 percentage points. Put differently, while all major groups of students need to achieve at higher levels, this is especially true for LEP students who have a 55 point gap when compared to their White peers. These gaps must be closed by 2014 (Texas Education Agency [TEA], Academic Excellence Indicator System [AEIS] Regional Report 2004-2005).

## 2 Purpose of the Study

The focus of this study was to obtain the views of school superintendents concerning their efforts and practices in implementing the No Child Left Behind Act in their school districts. In addition, the extent to which superintendents were positive or negative toward the NCLB Act was investigated. Thus, the purpose of this study was twofold: (1) to identify the practices and attitudes of public school superintendents in South Texas toward the No Child Left Behind Act and (2) to obtain the views of South Texas public school superintendents about the extent to which the No Child Left Behind Act was being embraced, implemented, and refined.

## 3 Research Questions

1. What is the extent to which superintendents provide information to parents concerning the NCLB Act?
2. What are the problems or barriers that superintendents indicate their school districts face in implementing the NCLB Act?
3. What are the reasons that superintendents' report that influence them most to implement the NCLB Act?
4. What are the views of superintendents regarding the impact of the NCLB Act in their schools and districts?
5. What are the views of superintendents concerning specific recommendations regarding the future of the NCLB Act?

## 4 Method

### 4.1 Participants

The sample for this study was comprised of 33 superintendents, out of a total of 50 superintendents in South Texas, Region XX. The return rate was 66%, a sufficiently high level for survey research. Potential participants ( $n = 50$ ) were selected by identifying the district population of superintendents through alphabetical listing of designated school districts made available to the senior researcher by the Region XX, Education Service Center. This alphabetical list was cross-referenced with the Texas Education Agency directory.

Regarding ethnicity, the majority of the public school superintendents in this study were White ( $n = 18$ , 54.5%), followed by Hispanic ( $n = 11$ , 33.3%), and Other ( $n = 4$ , 12.1%). Though asked on the survey to provide information about their gender and age, superintendents did not complete these items. Concerning educational level, over half of the superintendents ( $n = 17$ , 51.5%) reported they had doctoral degrees and the remainder ( $n = 16$ , 48.5%) had master's degrees. The average years of experience were 4.80 ( $SD = 6.12$ ), with a range of one year of superintendent experience up to 26 years. Concerning school district size of respondents, 25.7% ( $n = 18$ ) of the superintendents were employed in school districts of more than 5,000 students. Twelve superintendents reported they led school districts that had student enrollment between 1,501 and 2,500. The same number of superintendents led school districts with student enrollment between 2,501 and 5,000. The remainder of the participants worked at school districts with fewer than 1,501 students.

### 4.2 Instrumentation

The design of the study was descriptive. The study was based on a self-administered questionnaire comprised of forced-choice questions. The survey was developed from an extensive review of the literature to identify research-based and data-driven decisions made by superintendents pertaining to the No Child Left Behind Act. These factors were incorporated into the survey. After developing the survey, it was then examined by a panel of educational experts and practitioners in the local school system.

Approximately one-half of the questions required a response to a five-point scale. Part I of the questionnaire was designed to generate data on five professional background questions, specifically relating to the

superintendents of Region XX school districts. Part II of the questionnaire was designed to generate data on information about general superintendents' practices and attitudes toward NCLB in South Texas. Five questions constituted Part III of the questionnaire. These questions were designed to generate descriptive information about the school districts lead by this sample of superintendents.

### 4.3 Procedures

Survey materials were mailed to district superintendents across Region XX. The materials included the questionnaire, a cover letter to the superintendents, and a postage-paid return envelope. Four weeks after the initial mailing, a second mailing was sent to the superintendents who did not respond to the initial survey. The same materials were included in the second mailing.

## 5 Results

When asked, "Has the Texas Education Agency provided services to your district in implementing NCLB programs?", 81.8% ( $n = 27$ ) indicated that services had been provided to their district from the state. Interestingly, 16.2% ( $n = 6$ ) superintendents indicated that no assistance had been provided to facilitate their district's implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Concerning the survey question, "Who is primarily responsible for implementing NCLB at the district level?", 39.4% ( $n = 13$ ) superintendents indicated that they assumed primarily responsibility for implementing the No Child Left Behind Act. Another 39.4% ( $n = 13$ ) of respondents stated that they had an assistant superintendent assume this responsibility. Three of the school districts (9.1%) had appointed a supervisor to directly manage and lead the development and implementation of NCLB programs.

Next, participants were requested to answer, "Were you advised by TEA (ESC20) to develop a plan of action to overcome the needs of at-risk pupils in your district?" Almost half, 48.5%, of the superintendents reported that they had been advised by TEA to develop a plan and another 27.3% indicated that they had developed a plan of action to meet the needs of their at-risk students, even though they had not been advised by TEA to do so.

When asked, "In which of the following ways have you shared with your Board of Education the need for NCLB in your district?", 75.8% ( $n = 25$ ) of the superintendents indicated that they had accomplished this sharing through open board meetings. Interestingly, only 12.2% ( $n = 4$ ) of the superintendents stated that they had shared the need for the No Child Left Behind Act with their community stakeholders. This limited community involvement appears interesting especially given that the law insists on parent and community notification and participation.

The question, "Do you have an established advisory committee to involve parents in recommending and planning NCLB in your district?", resulted in 57.6% ( $n = 19$ ) of the superintendents responding that they had an established parent committee. Nine (27.3%) of the superintendents, however, reported that they had not yet established a parent committee. Five (15.2%) of the superintendents stated that they were in the process of having such a committee formed. Given that the NCLB Act mandates parental involvement, these findings are cause for concern.

Next, superintendents were asked to indicate assistance that may have been provided to help the local community understand the No Child Left Behind Act. Table 1 depicts these findings.

### Superintendents' Responses in Percentages to Ways in Which They Assist Their Communities in Understand the NCLB Act

Survey Item	A Great Deal	Quite a Bit	Some	Very Little	Not at All
Provided copies of PL 107-110 to the community	0.0	18.2	15.2	27.3	39.4
Encouraged interested parents and educators to recommend plans of action	0.0	18.2	33.3	30.3	15.2
Endorsed the concept of NCLB in the local newspaper	3.0	12.1	21.2	30.3	33.3
Sent school personnel to conferences and workshops on NCLB	39.4	18.2	24.2	15.2	3.0
Meet with the community representatives over their concern for NCLB	6.1	9.1	27.3	12.1	42.4

**Table 1**

Table 1 reveals that a majority of superintendents had not provided copies of PL 107-110 to the community. Less than 20% of the superintendents had encouraged interested parents and educators to recommend plans of action. This finding is a clear failure to comply with NCLB as it pertains to parental involvement. In addition, slightly more than 15% had met with community representatives over their concern for NCLB. A positive finding was that over half of the superintendents had sent school personnel to obtain training on the NCLB Act.

Superintendents were requested to rate several items concerning the extent to which they had experienced problems or barriers in the implementation of the NCLB Act in their school districts. These findings are depicted in Table 2.

**Superintendents' Responses in Percentages to Problems or Barriers They had Experienced in Implementing the NCLB Act**

Survey Item	A Great Deal	Quite a Bit	Some	Very Little	Not at All
<i>continued on next page</i>					

Pupil's needs do not require NCLB	12.1	21.2	39.4	9.1	15.2
The community does not want NCLB	15.2	15.2	21.2	18.2	24.2
Members of the staff have convinced me that the need does not exist	9.1	9.1	15.2	21.2	39.4
NCLB has not been proven to work effectively	18.2	18.2	30.3	15.2	15.2
This school district does not have the funds to provide NCLB	12.1	12.1	42.4	15.2	15.2
There are not enough highly qualified teachers available	18.2	15.2	18.2	9.1	36.4
The school district meets the need of all pupils without NCLB	33.3	18.2	24.2	12.1	12.1

**Table 2**

Table 2 reveals that 33% of superintendents believe that pupils' needs do not require the NCLB Act. A similar percentage, 30.4%, indicated that the NCLB Act was not wanted by members of their community. Not having highly qualified teachers available was noted as a concern by 33.4% of superintendents. Given the fact that teachers matter most, this issue raises the concern that without an adequate number of highly qualified teachers, those students (i.e., poor and minority) who have traditionally received the least qualified teachers may continue to experience under-qualified teachers.

The next set of questions to which superintendents were asked to respond are shown in Table 3 and address factors that superintendents believed would influence the development of the NCLB Act in their school districts.

### **Superintendents' Responses in Percentages to Factors That Would Influence Development of the NCLB Act in Their Districts**

Survey Item	A Great Deal	Quite a Bit	Some	Very Little	Not at All
To comply with the NCLB	60.6	21.2	9.1	3.0	6.1
To assist pupils in need	42.4	30.3	12.1	6.1	3.0
To show good faith with TEA	15.2	42.4	24.2	6.1	6.1
To show good faith with federal agencies	21.2	27.3	27.3	6.1	12.1
To determine how much NCLB will cost	21.2	24.2	21.2	12.1	15.2
To be in a better position to receive outside funds	9.1	42.4	12.1	12.1	18.2
Because it is a sound educational alternative	3.1	21.2	24.2	24.2	21.2
To respond to the concerns of teachers	6.1	21.2	27.3	24.2	15.2

**Table 3**

Almost all of the superintendents indicated their implementation of the NCLB Act was due to having to comply with it, although only 24.3% believed that the NCLB Act was a sound educational alternative.

Superintendents were next queried concerning the impact they believed that the NCLB Act could have, if fully implemented. Table 4 shows these findings.

### **Superintendents' Responses in Percentages to the Potential Impact of the NCLB Act in**

**Their Districts**

Survey Item	A Great Deal	Quite a Bit	Some	Very Little	Not at All
Will encourage the development of more educational services to economically disadvantaged pupils	6.1	24.2	27.3	27.3	12.1
Will confirm previous speculation for the poor academic progress of pupils	0.0	18.2	42.4	27.3	9.1
Will “open up” more communication between the district and parents of NCLB	0.0	15.2	39.4	18.2	24.2
Provide equal educational opportunity to economically disadvantaged pupils	0.0	24.2	33.3	21.2	18.2
Facilitates in all children an appreciation and acceptance of other cultures	0.0	9.1	30.3	30.3	27.3
<i>continued on next page</i>					

Provides strong community relations	0.0	9.1	36.4	18.2	33.3
Involves more parents in the education of their children	3.0	9.1	24.2	33.3	27.3

**Table 4**

These findings are strongly indicative of superintendents' beliefs that the NCLB Act has limited potential to influence the development of more educational services for economically disadvantaged pupils, to open up more communication between the district and parents, to provide equal educational opportunities to economically disadvantaged pupils, to facilitate in all children an appreciation and acceptance of other cultures, and to provide strong community relations. Clearly evidenced in this table is a lack of superintendent belief in the efficacy of the NCLB Act.

An analysis of superintendents' responses to the question, "Using the scale provided, rate the extent to which you would support the following recommendations regarding the future of NCLB in South Texas," reveals that a majority of superintendents were not supportive of continuing the NCLB Act as it currently exists. Interestingly, almost half of the superintendents supported making participation in the NCLB Act optional for local school districts. Superintendents were opposed to withholding funds from school districts who did not comply with the NCLB Act. Moreover, they were very supportive of having state funds provided to school districts based upon need and local support. These results are depicted in Table 5.

#### **Superintendents' Responses in Percentages to Recommendations Concerning the NCLB Act in Their Districts**

Survey Item	A Great Deal	Quite a Bit	Some	Very Little	Not at All
Continue NCLB as it is now	0.0	6.1	27.3	24.2	39.4
Make all participation in NCLB optional for local school districts	33.3	12.1	27.3	15.2	9.1
Provide state funds to designated school districts based on need and local support	42.4	24.2	15.2	6.1	9.1
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Withhold funds from school districts refusing to comply with NCLB	18.2	6.1	15.2	9.1	48.5
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Table 5

## 6 Discussion

Under NCLB school districts are responsible for making sure all students, including those students who are disadvantaged, achieve academic proficiency. Superintendents are given flexibility in how they can use federal education funds in exchange for providing stronger accountability system for results, education methods based on rigorous scientific research, and more choices and control over their children's education for parents. Even though the superintendent is responsible for their district meeting AYP toward state proficiency goals, surveyed Superintendents in South Texas were equally divided between assuming the responsibilities themselves or assigning personnel the task of facilitating the implementation of NCLB.

The vast majority of districts had received services in implementing NCLB programs from the Texas Education Agency. Superintendents were aware of the need to develop a plan of action to close the achievement gap for all groups of students and to set expectations for annual achievement based upon meeting grade-level proficiency and not upon student background or school characteristics. Each superintendent's academic plan of action is important when considering the demographics of South Texas and the substantial percentage of low-income and minority students.

One goal of NCLB is to involve parents by giving them timely information and choices about their children's education. In looking at the findings, superintendents were not providing enough information to parents and the community to help them understand NCLB, including new options for children in low-performing schools. In schools that do not meet state standards for at least two consecutive years, parents may transfer their children to a better-performing public school, including a public charter school, within their district. The district must provide transportation, using Title I funds if necessary. Students from low-income families in schools that fail to meet state standards for at least three years are eligible to receive supplemental educational services, including tutoring, after-school services, and summer school. The majority of communication with members of the Board of Education regarding NCLB had been accomplished through open board meetings. Increased communication with the parents and the community by the superintendents may benefit the school districts in South Texas by providing stronger advocates on behalf of the students. This increased communication could save the school districts the added expense of providing required supplemental educational services should the school fail to meet the state standards.

Approximately one-third of the superintendents believed that pupils' needs did not require the NCLB Act. A similar percentage indicated the NCLB Act was not wanted by members of their community. But the law has provided stronger accountability for academic results and has helped school districts in South Texas focus on using data to drive instruction. Annual state and school district report cards require superintendents to inform parents and communities about state and school progress.

The factor a majority of the superintendents (81.8%) identified as most influencing the development of the NCLB Act in their districts was the need to comply with the federal law. Only a quarter (24.3%) of all respondents believed that NCLB should be mandatory and on the average, superintendents, do not support the idea of withholding funds from districts refusing to comply with NCLB. Withholding federal funds would have a dire effect on a school district, particularly in South Texas, where federal grants for low income and Hispanic students are often used to provide much needed resources.

Interestingly, only 24.3% of the superintendents believed the NCLB Act was a sound educational alternative. They perceived the NCLB Act as having limited, at best, impact in the following areas: encouraging

the development of more educational services; opening more communication between the district and parents of NCLB; providing an equal opportunity to disadvantaged pupils; creating strong community relations; and, involving more parents in the education of their children. Over one-half (63.6%) of the superintendents surveyed do not support continuing the NCLB Act as it presently exists.

These findings are especially troublesome given that NCLB is designed to strengthen the administrative, organizational, and instructional capacity of school districts to improve student achievement.

Finally, given that data-driven research concludes that “teachers matter most,” about a third of the superintendents indicated their concern regarding not enough highly qualified teachers available. The NCLB requires all teachers of core academic subjects to demonstrate NCLB teacher quality compliance. The federal definition of a Highly Qualified Teacher (HQT) is threefold: teachers must hold at least a bachelors degree, be appropriately licensed by the state, and demonstrate subject matter competency.

Finding teachers that meet the definition of a HQT and are willing to relocate to South Texas has been a challenge, especially in the areas of math and science.

Despite all of the concerns with NCLB, as identified by the superintendents in South Texas, annual yearly reports in Texas reflect an upward trend in academic results. According to Texas Commissioner of Education Robert Scott (TEA, 2009), “I’m pleased to see such strong performance during a year that has been plagued by many disruptions such as hurricanes and flu outbreaks. Performance has improved at most grade levels and in most subjects this year. I applaud both our students and our teachers who stayed focused on academics and thus were well prepared for the TAKS this spring.”

This study is important for a number of reasons. First, an abundance of speculative information exists concerning how superintendents are reacting to the NCLB Act. This study provides information on how some superintendents are reacting to NCLB services in their local settings. Second, this study may contribute information to local boards of educations, school officials, and teacher training institutions with responsibility for making decisions about educational practices affecting the successful implementation of NCLB. Third, given the present absence of research in this area, this study may assist practitioners and educators in the identification of concerns for the development of practically-based in-service programs, solutions, suggestions and realistic alternatives available to insure success for the students similar to the ones enrolled in these South Texas school districts.

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