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## Classroom-Based Assessment Should Replace 'No Child', Experts Say

By [LAURA MCMULLEN](#)

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President Barack Obama announced last week that 10 states will be exempt from the requirements of the [highly-criticized No Child Left Behind legislation](#). In exchange, those states will have to agree to a series of reforms. But some experts say the law should be scrapped completely for models that don't rely on standardized tests.

"It behooves us to take a careful look at the policies at the heart of NCLB, because they have not worked, [and] if they are not working, we need to change them," said Monty Neill, chair of the [Forum on Educational Accountability](#) (FEA), at the FEA House Briefing on Assessment last Thursday.

[Read about the [No Child Left Behind legacy](#).]

Neill, who is also the executive director of [The National Center for Fair & Open Testing \(FairTest\)](#), a testing-integrity organization, said that NCLB's emphasis on high-stakes tests—the scores of which often determine the futures of teachers, schools, state education systems, and students—is misguided. Tests should be used more as a sample or indicator of student achievement, he said.

A vocabulary test, Neill noted as an example, could consist of about 50 words that one would expect fifth graders to know, and when the students take the test, one could get a fairly reliable indicator of what vocabulary those students know.

But, "If you train [students] to memorize the spelling of those 50 words and the definitions of those 50 words and re-administer the test, you couldn't believe the results," Neill said of the pressure to teach the material on NCLB's standardized tests. "We have mistaken the indicator for the thing itself."

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In lieu of these tests, some education experts suggest different kinds of assessments, such as those used in the [New York Performance Standards Consortium](#) of 28 schools.

The assessments in the Consortium schools are "practitioner-designed and student-focused," said Ann Cook, director of the Consortium, at the briefing. Student performances are based on literary essays, problem-solving math skills, original science experiments, and research papers.

A senior in a consortium school, for instance, may be asked to write a well-sourced, college-level essay answering this prompt: "What is multiculturalism, and how is it defined and restricted?" Cook said. Many students who are instead taught to the test have "appalling" writing skills, she added, because they are trained to write uniform five-paragraph essays.

Another alternative to standardized tests proposed at the briefing was [The Learning Record](#) system, through which K-12 teachers track each student's progress throughout the year and use that information to determine the best way to teach that student.

The record teachers keep for each student for each grade level would include reading and writing samples, as well as observational notes on how that student listens, works with others, and performs other skills. Teachers would use this record in parent conferences and to advise the student's next teacher.

Even in a world without No Child Left Behind, students would still be assessed, Neill of FairTest points out. Ideally, though, they won't be taking standardized tests.

"Teachers can develop a rich repertoire of assessment tools and use them ... to gather rich sources of evidence about how their kids are doing," he said.

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