

# **DAMAGING CONSEQUENCES OF NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND**

Jonathan and members of the Education Action! Team have been meeting with members of the Senate Education (“HELP”) Committee who will be revising No Child Left Behind. Following are the ten proposals we’ve been presenting, including several amendments to the law which we believe to be essential:

## **1 NCLB IS HAVING VERY OBVIOUS RACIALLY DISCRIMINATORY CONSEQUENCES**

Low-scoring urban districts have been induced by the threats incorporated in this law to adopt a stripped-down grill-and-drill curriculum in elementary schools, devoid of children’s literature, art, music, science, and most social studies, in order to pump test scores in the narrow area measured by high-stakes exams. Affluent suburban schools, where children score high on exams, continue to provide a rich curriculum in which children are educated with the breadth of cultural knowledge to succeed in higher education. NCLB has led to the creation of a racially targeted, dumbed-down, and inferior curriculum for the inner-city poor.

Good teachers refuse to accept the dangerous idea, which is inherent in No Child Left Behind, that black and Hispanic children are, in cognitive terms, a different species from white children and therefore must be taught in a unique, bare-bones, culturally denuded, and proto-military course of study, in which fear of failure on a standardized exam replaces learning for its own inherent worth. Congress has inadvertently created what teachers accurately term “an apartheid curriculum” for the children of our inner-city schools

Congress should amend NCLB to reduce the frequency and punitive consequences of high-stakes exams, prohibit teaching-to-the-test, and demand instruction in all subject areas in elementary schools.

## **2 HIGH-STAKES TESTS IN THIRD GRADE ARE BLATANTLY PUNITIVE TO CHILDREN WHO ARE EXCLUDED FROM PRESCHOOL OPPORTUNITIES**

More than half the eligible children in the nation are presently excluded from Head Start. State-sponsored pre-K programs serve only a small fraction of impoverished children. In the poorest inner-city neighborhoods, less than 30 percent of children receive even one year of pre-K education. Less than 10 percent receive two years. Meanwhile, children of the affluent typically receive at least two years and often three years of privately purchased, rich, developmental preschool preparation.

In spite of this inequity, all of these children are obliged to take the same exams. Which ones score highest and are labeled “talented and gifted” -- the first stage in a series of advantages that will lead to “HONORS” tracks and Advanced Placement programs in their high school years? Which children, on the other hand, are labeled “developmentally delayed” and frequently denied promotion? There is something deeply hypocritical at stake when Mr. Bush and members of the Congress hold a child eight years old “accountable” for her performance on a standardized exam while they refuse to hold themselves accountable for robbing her of what they gave their own kids six or seven years before.

The recently enacted \$90 million annual increase in federal Head Start funding (\$450 million in the course of five years) is pitifully inadequate to address the irreparable damage done to nearly 1 million low-income three- and four-year-olds who are now locked out of Head Start opportunities. How long will it be before the Democrats in Congress keep faith with the promise made by virtually every Democratic presidential nominee in the past four decades and, at long last, make this program universal? Until they do, they will be colluding in the cognitive decapitation of these children for no reason but the color of their skin and accident of birth.

Congress should amend No Child Left Behind to double the entire Head Start allocation (the cost of about a month of the Iraqi War) as a pre-condition for all test-based sanctions now included in the law. It should also require that high-stakes tests administered to third grade children will not hold significance in judgment of a child, school, or district until a state certifies that all low-income children in that district have been given two full years of preschool education. Without this provision, NCLB sets up a brutally unequal competition rigged against our poorest children from the start.

**3****THE PROVISION OF NCLB AUTHORIZING STUDENT “TRANSFERS” BETWEEN LOW- AND HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOLS WITHIN A DISTRICT HAS BEEN A TOTAL FAILURE. IT SHOULD BE AMENDED TO PERMIT AND FINANCE TRANSFERS ACROSS THE BORDERS OF ADJACENT DISTRICTS**

By obliging states to authorize cross-district transfers and by providing incentives for suburban districts to receive students from low-performing inner-city schools, the Democrats could dramatically reduce the rapidly increasing resegregation of our public schools without introducing racial terminology into the debate. Black children are now more segregated in their schools, which are typically 95 to 99 percent minority in major urban districts, than at any time since 1968. Black parents overwhelmingly support cross-district transfers to enable their children to enroll in high-performing districts. NCLB, while not prohibiting such transfers, offers no inducements and no enforcement mechanisms to make these transfers possible.

Democrats should amend the transfer provision of NCLB to create rewards or penalties for states that do, or do not, encourage and facilitate cross-district transfers and provide fiscal reimbursements for receiving districts.

**4****THE REQUIREMENT FOR TURNING OVER LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS TO OUTSIDE “PROVIDERS” IN THE FIFTH YEAR AFTER A SCHOOL RECEIVES ITS INITIAL WARNING HAS OPENED THE GATEWAYS FOR PROFIT-MAKING PRIVATE EDUCATION CORPORATIONS TO INVAD E THE PUBLIC SYSTEM, A HALF-WAY STEP TO VOUCHERS**

The well-oiled marketing skills of private companies like Edison have already won them contracts for the management of hundreds of our inner-city schools. NCLB, now in its fifth year, will dramatically accelerate this dangerous development, whittling away at our nation’s legacy of public education. Since these corporations usually refuse to hire teachers who are members of a union, NCLB is also proving to be a weapon against organized labor, a weapon that Congressional Democrats have helped to forge.

The Democrats should amend NCLB to restrict outside “providers” to nonprofit and highly respected educational organizations and should specifically exclude participation by profit-making private corporations. The Democrats made a bad bargain with the Bush administration in agreeing to this portion of the law. They should learn from this mistake and halt this privatizing trend by a prohibition written into No Child Left Behind.

**5****NCLB, CONTRARY TO ITS PROMISE, IS WIDENING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP BETWEEN MINORITY CHILDREN AND THE MAINSTREAM OF AMERICA**

Congressional Democrats should not believe the bogus claims of Secretary Spellings. The occasional upward blips in fourth grade scores for kids who have been drilled nonstop in test-taking strategies have not sustained themselves because these are purely “testing gains,” not learning gains. If they were learning gains, they would persist into the secondary years. But I’ve followed hundreds of these children into middle school and observed that most of them can’t write a cogent sentence, comprehend a simple text, or do fourth grade arithmetic. Teachers in middle schools also observe that students who have been subjected to the drill-and-grill curricula of test-driven elementary schools prove incapable of the critical thinking needed for participation in a class discussion or for comprehension and analysis of text materials.

As an early child educator, I would also note that the stipulations in Reading First for so-called “research-based” instructional materials, most of which rely on pit-pat phonics drill based on a stick-and-carrot theory known as “stimulus-response” and which deny the children of the poor exposure to real literary works, are viewed with derision by our most distinguished educators and specifically exclude the most successful and most stimulating practices in use at good suburban schools.

Even in terms of test results valued so highly by the Bush administration, the racial gap has not diminished but has either remained flat or worsened in these years. At the present moment, black and Hispanic twelfth grade students read at the level of the typical seventh grade white student. The achievement gap, notes Kati Haycock of the Education Trust, has “widened... on our watch.”

Even more calamitous, because of the narrowing of subject matter in test-driven inner-city schools, the cultural gap between minority children and the children of the white and middle class is wider than at any time in 30 years.

Congressional Democrats should insist that Reading First and other literacy provisions mandated by NCLB, which are, in their effects, racially targeted programs, be revised to incorporate the same range of book-rich literacy methods used successfully by the schools that educate middle-class white children in America.

**6****ADDING MORE TESTS IN SECONDARY GRADES, WHICH SOME DEMOCRATS MISGUIDEDLY PROPOSE, WILL NOT REDUCE THE LEARNING GAP AND WILL ALMOST CERTAINLY DRIVE MARGINAL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS TO DROP OUT IN EVEN GREATER NUMBERS THAN THEY DO TODAY**

Already, under pressures magnified by NCLB, many urban systems have been pushing out low-performing students (urging them, for instance, to pursue a G.E.D.) in order to present an illusion of improvement in their average scores. Major districts have also camouflaged their actual drop-out rates, as was done notoriously in Houston at the time when Mr. Bush was speaking of “the Houston miracle,” which became a model for No Child Left Behind. The catastrophic number of minority dropouts, in reality, has not diminished in the years since NCLB went into effect. In New York and Chicago alone, which together educate 10 percent of all black males in the United States, more than 70 percent of those who enter ninth grade fail to graduate in four years. Adding the threat of further tests, deepening the humiliation factor for these adolescents, is almost certain to worsen the statistics.

The Democrats should powerfully oppose any increase in the high-stakes testing regimen for secondary schools.

**7****HIGH-STAKES TESTS WERE INACCURATELY PROMOTED BY THE WHITE HOUSE AS A WAY OF HELPING TEACHERS TO IDENTIFY A STUDENT’S AREAS OF GREATEST NEED IN ORDER TO ADDRESS THOSE AREAS MORE QUICKLY. THIS WAS A FALSE PROMISE. THE TESTS ARE USELESS TO THE KIDS OR TEACHERS**

High-stakes tests do not reveal specific needs of students, but simply paste a retroactive label of success or failure on a child. Then, too, because of the long delays by testing corporations in scoring these exams, results come back too late to benefit a student. In most districts, the exams are given in late winter/early spring. The results are returned, at earliest, in the end of June. (Last year, in New York, they were not returned until September, a familiar problem all over the nation.) These tests, therefore, provide no help to teachers but function solely as a post hoc shaming ritual for inner-city children and the underfunded public schools that serve them.

Congressional Democrats should amend the law by adding two provisions: (1) High-stakes tests should be replaced as much as possible by what are called “diagnostic tests” that pinpoint student weaknesses and are immediately useful because they are scored by teachers as they are administered. (2) Where high-stakes tests continue to be used, scores must be returned to teachers within six weeks after they’re administered. If the Democrats fail to make these stipulations, the entire testing apparatus will remain an exercise in organized humiliation of the public system, with the consequence of softening the ground for privatization and, ultimately, vouchers.

**8****NCLB IS DRIVING OUT THE BEST TEACHERS FROM OUR URBAN SCHOOLS**

The business-minded accountability technicians who support this law, and who are riding high in Washington, know virtually nothing about classroom education. Unhappily, too many Democrats in Congress have listened to these people. If they listened instead to the thousands of teachers with whom I speak, they’d recognize why the best-educated, most creative and successful classroom teachers consider NCLB a hateful and destructive law. Uninspired and robotic teachers don’t object to the test regime with its drill-and-grill techniques -- this rescues them from thinking. But lively, idealistic, and contagiously exciting teachers -- those whom we try so hard to recruit into our urban schools -- are fleeing from these miserable schools where children are cheated of the kind of first-rate education which these teachers have themselves received in good suburban systems.

Fully half of all first-year teachers are quitting their jobs in urban schools within three years. They love the children. They despise the degradation of education forced upon these children by No Child Left Behind.

The Democrats should save tax-payers billions of dollars wasted upon needlessly repetitive and obsessive testing and redirect a hefty portion of those funds to reduce the size of classes in inner-city schools, make these often sordid and decrepit buildings aesthetically appealing, and provide additional incentives for terrific teachers to remain within them.

**9****NCLB HAS SERVED AS A CONVENIENT DISTRACTION FROM THE SINGLE MOST DECISIVE REASON WHY BLACK AND HISPANIC CHILDREN LAG BEHIND WHITE CHILDREN**

That reason is the shameful fact, which Congressional Democrats, with few exceptions, are apparently afraid to name, that the overwhelming majority of inner-city children are forced to go to public schools which not only make a mockery of *Brown v. Board of Education* but do not even live up to the standard set by *Plessy v. Ferguson*. It should be an embarrassment to Democrats in Congress to reauthorize a law that cynically avoids this matter altogether.

The appealing but incorrect assumption at the heart of this benighted law is that “more efficient management” -- rewards and sanctions based on business practices -- and more repetitive assessment will enable us to side-step any effort to address the savage inequalities of our dual system. But tougher management will never be a substitute for equal opportunity, and every member of the Congress probably already knows this.

Congressional Democrats should not continue to accept the myth, embodied in No Child Left Behind, that more accountability and more severe assessments are going to eventuate in “wonderfully successful separate and unequal schools.” They should, instead, uphold the legacy of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Dr. Martin Luther King, by insisting, at the very least, that there be specific reference in this law to the long-range goal of confronting and diminishing separate and unequal education.

**10****WHAT HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF TEACHERS WILL DO IF DEMOCRATS IN CONGRESS TURN THEIR BACKS ON THESE CONCERNS**

I’ve been organizing teachers at the grass-roots level to galvanize their numbers into a force that is strong enough to have an impact on elections. Virtually all these teachers are traditionally Democratic voters. But, no matter what endorsements the leaders of the teacher unions give to Democratic candidates, vast numbers of teachers who feel betrayed by Democrats who genuflect before the Bush agenda in No Child Left Behind will either not vote at all or bring only limited energy to bear in working for the Democratic candidates. The teachers I’ve been organizing are calling for the Democrats in Congress to do more than make small ameliorating alterations in No Child Left Behind but to take a visionary and courageous role in reconceiving the entire law to correct the devastation it has brought upon our nation’s schools.