GUEST ESSAY

I Thought 'No Child Left Behind' Would Fix Public Schools. I Was Wrong.

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By Ross Wiener
Mr. Wiener is an independent education policy consultant. From 2002 to 2009, he was the policy director for the Education Trust, an advocacy group focused on low-income students and students of color.

New data from Stanford's Educational Opportunity Project confirms what close observers already knew: America's test scores are slipping. The pandemic worsened the decline, but the slide began years before. In one-third of school districts, students are reading a full grade level lower than they were in 2015.

The new data is emboldening calls to restore something like the No Child Left Behind Act, the stringent, test-based accountability policy that defined American education from 2002 to 2015 and imposed penalties on schools

whose students did not meet proficiency requirements on state standardized tests. The Atlantic captured that impulse in a 2025 podcast episode titled “Bring Back High-Stakes School Testing.” In it, Margaret Spellings, a secretary of education under President George W. Bush and now president of the Bipartisan Policy Center, argues we need to restore “the muscle of accountability, the muscle of assessment.” Rahm Emanuel, exploring a 2028 presidential run, said in April that Democrats have abandoned standards and accountability and must return to them.

It was a mistake in the past to treat test scores as the purpose of public schools rather than as partial proxies for what a good education actually delivers. Reading and math are profoundly important and improving instruction must be part of any serious agenda. But test-based accountability policies were not sufficient decades ago. They are even less adequate now.

From 2002 to 2009, I was the policy director for the Education Trust, one of the most influential education reform organizations in the country. I testified before Congress, built coalitions for standards-based reform, and published analysis to advance No Child Left Behind, genuinely believing it was the path to public schools that better served low-income students and students of color. The early results seemed to vindicate us: Test scores rose, especially in elementary math among Hispanic and Black students, though much less in middle school, and never much in reading.

But there was a question I couldn’t shake: Were the outcomes we were holding schools accountable for the ones that actually determined whether a young person flourished? I still remember when I first encountered research showing that high school G.P.A. predicted college graduation better than standardized test scores. I went to my boss’s office to discuss it,

expecting her to help me push back, but she confirmed it was true, and always had been. If so, I recall thinking, why are we fighting so hard for test scores to be the arbiter of quality education?

Years later, research from the University of Chicago Consortium would show that schools' effect on students' social well-being and work habits predicted academic gains about as well as test performance did, and was more predictive than test scores for students' graduating from high school, enrolling in college, and staying out of the criminal justice system.

Accountability policy gave unprecedented authority to the idea that standardized test performance is the most important outcome schools produce and made it the organizing principle of American schooling. What could be easily tested gained importance. What could not — the practical, civic, relational and developmental — was pushed to the margins.

Over time, I became convinced that, with the best of intentions, I and many others in the education reform community had transferred our moral commitment to children over to the standardized tests. We had done this earnestly, not cynically, but we still did damage.

In 2023, 40 percent of high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness. One in five had seriously considered suicide; nearly one in 10 had attempted it. Research from the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins found that 40 percent of Gen Z believes political violence can be justified, compared with 11 percent of baby boomers. Too many

students experience school as an obligation with few opportunities for agency or meaning; recent survey data indicates that large shares of students find school boring and irrelevant and are struggling with engagement in the classroom. The academic crisis and the human crisis are not entirely separate phenomena.

The strategies that produced the early gains of the No Child Left Behind era depended on a social contract: comply with adult-designed systems, defer questions of meaning and purpose, and the payoff will come. Earlier generations may have endured school that felt boring or disconnected because they trusted that adults and institutions knew better. Many young people today do not share that trust, and they are not going to push aside their own questions of meaning and purpose on the assurance that compliance will eventually be rewarded.

You cannot accountability-pressure your way to better educational outcomes when chronic absenteeism has skyrocketed, misbehavior is common, students are disengaged and skeptical that school prepares them for the lives they want to lead, and teachers feel not just tired but stripped of the professional trust that makes the work meaningful.

The reality has changed. Too much of the old reform playbook has not.

Four years ago, the nonpartisan think tank Populace, which conducts opinion research that seeks to uncover what Americans actually believe, not what they say for social approval, asked adults to rank their K-12 priorities. Practical skills ranked first. Critical thinking ranked second. Demonstrating good character ranked third. Preparing for college was 47th on the list. Standardized test performance was 49th.

Meanwhile, young people are placing more emphasis on purpose, relationships and contribution than on older markers of status. For a

generation, the reform coalition took its validation from economists and accountability metrics, while treating parents, students and communities as mere functionaries rather than partners in a shared civic enterprise.

Taking their priorities seriously would mean broadening what we expect from the classroom. Schools should put what students can do on equal footing with what they know, embedding real skills in academic learning rather than leaving them to chance or sequencing them to later in life. Schools should reconnect with the communities they serve, so young people learn through and about the places where they live. And they should reanimate the character-forming, developmental mission a pluralistic democracy requires.

Federal policy has an essential role to play in public education: protecting civil rights, funding quality data and research, and encouraging promising practices to spread. But the formative mission cannot be mandated by Washington. Belonging, the foundation of both learning and civic commitment, is relational and starts local; it cannot be standardized or scaled, but must be cultivated by schools that are responsive to the communities they serve.

In 2010, at Springfield Renaissance School, a public school in Springfield, Mass., serving mostly low-income students of color, ninth graders were trained by city engineers to conduct energy audits of school buildings. They collected data, ran cost-benefit analyses and produced a report recommending how the city could lower its carbon footprint and reduce energy costs. The mayor invested in their plan; the city began recouping its investment within a year. Organizations like EL Education, High Tech High and Big Picture Learning have built whole school models around a similar approach: rigorous academic learning embedded in real problems, with real audiences and real stakes.

Public schools educate nearly nine in 10 American children, in cities, towns and rural hamlets across the full range of our diversity and divisions. The era of national, test-based education policy helped turn schools into both targets and drivers of polarization. Renewing public education requires balancing firm commitments to excellence and fairness for every child with the recognition that public schools, at their best, are civic institutions that communities recognize as their own.

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