



Point of View THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

Everyone knows that No Child Left Behind is up for reauthorization. Mr. McKim urges well-meaning policy makers not to make the same mistakes again.

BY BRENT MCKIM

THE FEDERAL journey into public education has followed a long and winding road. Most educators know that the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act is simply the latest version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which dates all the way back to 1965. In the years since its initial passage, the ESEA road has taken a number of turns and has been reauthorized many times, in various forms, under various names. The 1994 reauthorization, for example, was called the “Improving America’s Schools Act.”

In the past, ESEA was seen as a positive, supportive law, designed to help local school districts provide equitable and adequate education to children who face challenging and expensive hurdles to learning. This segment included students with disabilities, poor children, and

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children whose first language is not English. About five years ago, ESEA reached a fork in the road, and the decision was made to go down the very different NCLB road.

This new path was carved out of the landscape by the kind of high-stakes accountability that is based on inexpensive standardized tests and comes with an extremely narrow focus on low-level knowledge and skills. In addition, NCLB replaces decision making by those closest to the students in the school community (e.g., teachers, parents, school boards, and site-based councils) with rigid control by the federal government.

The NCLB path has been fraught with numerous unintended consequences. Most fundamentally, NCLB fails to address the needs of the whole child and reduces the guiding purpose of public education from the development of effective and contributing citizens to an unending quest for higher scores on tests that cannot assess what we value most in a democratic society — things like critical and creative thinking, problem solving, effective and persuasive communication, cooperation, perseverance, caring, respect, and appreciation for diversity.

These qualities empower citizens to thrive in a democratic society and in our complex, ever-changing world, and they cannot be measured on the easy-to-score, paper-and-pencil tests that are the centerpiece of NCLB’s accountability policy. The good news, however, is that these important qualities can be demonstrated by means of 21st-century, real-world, authentic performance assessments and that our schools can be encouraged to foster them through rich, meaningful, empowering learning experiences in caring, high-participation learning environments. The bad news is that NCLB’s focus on once-a-year, multiple-choice tests — until 2007 in just two subjects — actually works against such a learner-empowering approach.

In other words, the aspirations of Sen. Kennedy and the other architects of NCLB that our public schools would “guarantee every child in America, regardless of race, economic background, language or disability, the opportunity to get a world-class education” have deteriorated into the pursuit of a single reading score and a single math score per year on low-level, paper-and-pencil tests. NCLB’s advocates call this “student achievement” — as if there were no other indicators of student learning and performance.

Why this profound reduction of aspirations? Because NCLB’s accountability provisions mean that the test scores themselves have become the motivators and chief driving force of the system. Educators, students, and their schools face stiff consequences if these pre-

determined test-score standards are not met every year. Hence, in too many U.S. schools, “education for life” has been reduced to “preparation for tests,” and as a result the teachers in those schools are witnessing the seri-

In too many U.S. schools, “education for life” has been reduced to “preparation for tests,” and teachers in those schools are witnessing the serious discouragement of their students and colleagues.

ous discouragement of their students and colleagues. The more teachers are compelled to focus on “producing” scores, the less time they have to focus on the learning that they feel will most benefit their students in the long run.

Tragically, because the pressure to teach to the test is the greatest in low-income schools that depend to a large degree on federal Title I funding, NCLB has actually widened the gap between the students at these schools and their more affluent counterparts at schools not dependent on Title I funding. As Professors Dennis Shirley and Andy Hargreaves of Boston College put it, “The achievement gap in tested performance coexists with a widening *learning gap* between functional basics for the poor and working class and an enriched and enlarged set of learning experiences for the privileged in the suburbs — where schools are free of many testing constraints and can (and do) fly far beyond the standards.”¹ And while testing and publishing companies

have seen their profits soar by repackaging standardized tests that have changed little in decades and by creating a multitude of test-prep materials for these tests, the children whose education has been narrowed and lowered have not similarly benefited.

When the law was passed, some educators immediately expressed concern regarding the potential for NCLB to create just this sort of curricular segregation. But many chose to be characteristically optimistic, hoping the law’s focus on educating all students might at last bring the attention — and so the resources — needed to improve educational equity and adequacy. However, rather than promoting equity and closing gaps, we can now see that NCLB is actually making the disparities worse. We should all be extremely troubled that the very youths who most need a rich, deep, meaningful, and empowering education are the ones most likely to receive a narrow, rote, dumbed-down curriculum. By focusing on achievement test scores in the basic skills, rather than on the whole child, NCLB actually works against what research tells us are best practices for teaching and learning.

That’s why, as NCLB comes up for reauthorization this year, its inherent flaws cannot be fixed by minor adjustments. To address the problems of NCLB, we must backtrack to that fork in the ESEA road where we started down the NCLB path. We must create a path in federal education policy that actually promotes good instructional practices that empower the whole child. We cannot afford to take the easy way out and reauthorize this act with only minor changes.

This time, we must take the road less traveled and learn from those committed educators around the world who have managed to blaze a different trail of learning and school improvement for their students. We must look to such efforts as Nebraska’s STARS model; the New York Performance Standards Consortium; the Natural Learning Institute in California; the Coalition of Essential Schools; the New Basics Project in Queensland, Australia; and Finland’s student-centered democracy approach.

Clearly, the federal government can play a key role in helping all students succeed, but we must see to it that our public policy follows the right path. Let us draw on the models, talents, and research available to us and commit ourselves to finding that supportive, empowering path that addresses the needs of the whole child. If we take this road less traveled, it will make all the difference.

1. Dennis Shirley and Andy Hargreaves, “Data-Driven to Distraction: Why American Educators Need a Reform Alternative — and Where They Might Look to Find It,” *Education Week*, 4 October 2006, p. 33. ■

File Name and Bibliographic Information

k0712mck.pdf

**Brent McKim, The Road Less Traveled, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 89,
No. 04, December 2007, pp. 298-299.**

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