

The Paradigm Trap

Getting beyond No Child Left Behind will mean changing our 19th-century, closed-system mind-set.

By William Spady

If you don't like the federal No Child Left Behind Act, don't blame President Bush, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, Rep. George Miller, Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, or her predecessor, Rod Paige. Well, not entirely anyway. And if you're a supporter of the legislation, which the president signed into law five years ago this week, this is an opportunity to rethink your assumptions about its nature, purpose, and potential impact. As the nation's premier education law heads toward its scheduled reauthorization this year, here are some thoughts on its history and impact to consider.



—Patti Raine

The No Child Left Behind Act is the natural extension of a paradigm that has defined, shaped, and sustained our public education system for over a century. The paradigm took form in the late 19th century, during the optimistic adolescence of America's Industrial Age, and it embodies the leading ideas of that bygone era: a subject-structured curriculum, an age-based grade-level grouping and promotion structure, a time-based and time-defined form of organization, and a decidedly uniform pace of

instruction, from September into June. All of these elements combined to mimic the much-admired factory assembly lines of the day, and within a few decades this industrial-age model of education became so institutionalized, legalized, internalized, and reinforced that it has been virtually impossible to change.

We simply know it as “school,” and most Americans have spent at least 12 of their most formative years in it. Most of their schools looked like huge boxes containing a host of structural and operating elements that placed literal boundaries around the thinking and actions of educators, parents, policymakers, and the students themselves. These tightly bounded and self-constraining “boxes” of school included the content-subjects box, the grade-level box, the time box, the requirements box, the role box, the grading box, the credentialing box, the opportunity box, the classroom box, and (now ascendant) the test-score box—all intertwined in a web of mutually reinforcing boundaries and limits, something we know today as a closed system.

Hence, the boxes have become the way we think, talk, and act whenever we deal with “schools.” Should you doubt this, just try having a conversation about schooling without referring to the boxes. It’s almost impossible. That’s the paradigm trap we’ve fallen into, because it’s all that most of us have ever experienced about education. I call it “educentrism”—a closed-system mind-set that views and treats these boxes as givens and then bases and defines everything else, including educational change, on and around them, as if no other alternatives are possible. The No Child Left Behind law simply represents educentrism at its extreme, with a very heavy dose of threat, coercion, control, and punishment piled on top.

If this seems like a questionable way for a forward-looking nation to proceed, it is. But it’s also the price we’re paying for failing to move beyond the thinking and knowledge base of our 19th-century forebears and ignoring alternatives that have been screaming for attention for the past 25 years.

When Americans recognized the hard realities of the Information Age 25 years ago, they faced a profound challenge: become future-focused and change, or “stay the course” and become obsolete. To survive, U.S. businesses chose the former. To provide continuity with the past and not rock the boat, education’s power brokers in contrast chose the familiar, tried-and-true route. That decision launched what I call

the “Great Regression” in educational change. It kept us focused on the educentric boxes and moved education policy and practice further and further away from the new research realities: what we know and continue to discover about learners, learning, brain development and functioning, human potential and motivation, our ever-changing world, and successful life performance.

These new realities continue to expand radically and open a vast array of options for educating our highly diverse population of children in more-effective and fulfilling ways—ways that true, noneducentric pioneers like John Dewey, Maria Montessori, and Rudolf Steiner brought to our attention generations ago. The No Child Left Behind Act, though, appears to embrace *none* of this work. Hence the continuing Great Regression, whose chronology can be seen in the following:

Phase 1: Endorsing *A Nation at Risk*

The Great Regression visibly began in 1983, with the enormous exposure and legitimacy given to *A Nation at Risk*. But that report by the federally appointed National Commission on Excellence in Education totally ignored the volatility and dramatic implications of the Information Age, and instead issued a host of highly touted but archaic recommendations. These proposals blithely treated the educentric boxes as givens, explicitly reinforced their unyielding assembly-line character, and offered “the New Basics” as the key to public education’s regaining “excellence,” the buzzword of that era. But the new basics weren’t new at all. They simply repeated the Committee of Ten’s key recommendations from 1893. The so-called new basics required students to take four years of this subject, and three years of that one—a prescription that had legitimated most of the boxes in the first place.

A Nation at Risk set the Great Regression on its present educentric course and exemplified the premise, “If it doesn’t work, keep doing what you’ve always done, only harder, longer, and better.”

Phase 2: Encouraging the Standards Bandwagon

The regression’s next phase was the natural extension of the subject-focused New Basics; namely, the content-standards bandwagon of the 1990s. This development allowed in-the-box subject-matter specialists to give tangible meaning to the new

basics, and to everyone's desire for excellence. Soon excellence was declared to mean the advanced content and concepts these experts valued most in their particular subject areas. And, over time, these specialized pieces of content became mandated as "essential" for every student.

Never mind that this ignored and ran counter to a mountain of new research realities on student learning, aptitudes, learning styles, learning rates, and domains of functional life performance. Never mind as well that only the brightest, most conventional academic learners could hope to attain all of these standards in the time students were given to achieve them. This stage of the Great Regression further narrowed and solidified the educentric paradigm by inexorably linking the new basics with the concepts of excellence and standards. This integration then provided an unassailable rationale for the emergence of the No Child Left Behind Act: How can you be against the basics, excellence, and standards? They've all been defined by academic experts, and we *know* what they are because they're on paper! Now all we need are valid and reliable standardized measures for them, so we can prove who's excellent at the basics, and who isn't. Why? Because parents, educators, employers, politicians, and taxpayers *need* to know.

Phase 3: Endorsing the Testing-and-Accountability Juggernaut

Can you spell the words testing and accountability? Good, because that became the next natural step in the Great Regression and gave the No Child Left Behind law its legitimacy: devising and implementing standardized, paper-and-pencil tests that presumably embodied the standards to which *everyone* in the system would be held accountable—and pay a serious price for noncompliance, poor performance, or low achievement.

We weren't supposed to notice, but this step took the Great Regression to its lowest and narrowest point and exposed what many now call its reductionist nature. If education's goals and ends are embodied in its declared standards of excellence, for example, and if those standards are embodied and measured by a given test, and if that test is scored and made public, and if there are serious life consequences linked to these scores, then the *scores* become the goals and ends of education, as well as the definers and drivers of everything that really matters. So, what happens

to you and your future if your score isn't high enough? Well, you're probably going to get "left behind," and that troubles a lot of people.

Moreover, the thought of reducing a child's learning, "achievement," and perceived value as a human being to a set of numbers derived from a specific paper-and-pencil exercise has outraged a large number of noneducentric, nonreductionist Americans, and they have been willing to speak out against the No Child Left Behind law. These are educators, parents, researchers, and reformers who are grounded in the new research realities and embrace a far more expansive vision of the child as a human being, the richness and diversity of human talent and interests, and what learning is and can be. Their enlarged vision also encompasses how humans actually learn, the challenges and conditions we modern humans face in the volatile world in which we live, the inherent value of human relationships and connection, humanity's inborn spiritual nature, meaningful and fulfilling life performance, professionalism and the conditions needed to foster and sustain it, and the very concept of education itself. If anything, their criticisms can be summarized as a rejection of the excessively narrow, quantitative character of the federal law, and its distinctively impersonal, insensitive, and myopic orientations, values, and processes.

Phase 4: Ignoring the Evidence on the Ground

Critics of the law also can point to frightening evidence about the effects on schools and students of mandated testing-and-accountability programs that had emerged before the law was officially enacted and has been borne out since. These include lower educator motivation and morale; the loss in droves of talented and creative educators who retire or leave the system; a severe narrowing of curriculum offerings; major increases in student stress, dysfunctional behavior, failure rates, and dropout rates; and the wholesale suppression of nontraditional educational approaches.

From intellectual embarrassment, to operational travesty, to national tragedy in 20 short years—quite remarkable for something we've seen as a reform movement. But the ability of the No Child Left Behind law's chief advocates to ignore all this is even more remarkable. They wrap themselves in the patriotic mantle of educentric excellence and standards; pursue their goal of imposing a narrow, standardized,

assembly-line, one-size-fits-all system of testing and accountability on every child, educator, and school in the country; and relentlessly move America and its education system toward the greatest box of all: the total-control box.

And if they succeed, we really will be a nation at risk.

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