

Paved With Good Intentions:

A critical analysis of the NO Child Left Behind Act of 2001

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Test driven accountability is now the norm in American schools, and this ubiquitous proliferation of educational policy is the result of the No Child Left Behind act. However, as an educator it is easy to have the sense that something is wrong with the direction the system has taken. It is not difficult to encourage teachers to start complaining about having to “teach to the test.” A recent Gallup poll demonstrated that most of the general public surveyed did not have a favorable view of the policy (*source: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/156800/no-child-left-behind-rated-negatively-positively.aspx>*). We hear vague references that NCLB favors white middle class students over minorities and the poor. However, finding an article or publication that sums up and articulates what exactly NCLB’s problems are and why it is bad policy can be elusive. The information mostly seems to be scattered among published works as a component of making some other point. This essay is an attempt to put a significant amount of information and rhetoric into a simple and easy to understand presentation.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 sought to address two main problems. One is a perception that America has “fallen behind in the world” in terms of education. The National Commission on Excellence in Education defined the purpose of our schools as an economic vehicle to compete globally. They claimed that the US was falling behind and in order to maintain our technological development and manufacturing base the US had to sublimate “softer” forms of education and concentrate on more technical aspects of knowledge. This led to a greater standardization of mathematics curriculum across the US and emboldened the trend of standardized testing. What also emerged was the institutionalization of “single-definition” curriculum, where all groups of students are taught the same things (Sleeter & Grant, 2009). The other issue it attempts to remedy is the gap in academic achievement between low income and minority students and their white, middle class counterparts (Rowley & Wright, 2011). How it

seeks to remedy the perceived problems is by mandating states to establish rigorous curriculum standards, which are to be confirmed by standardized tests. These tests are used to gauge whether schools are meeting their state's requirements for Adequate Yearly Progress, and schools which do not meet them are sanctioned. Finally, teachers must meet state requirements that they are "highly qualified" in the core subject which they are teaching.

An initial measurement on whether or not No Child Left Behind is good policy can be to assess if it meets the two goals pertaining to global competitiveness, and socioeconomic stratification. Data indicates that global competitors who practice the opposite educational strategy (constructivist) to the "teach to the test" approach mandated by our current educational framework outperformed us in the very same areas that concerned the NCEE (Sleeter & Grant, 2009). Rowley and Wright's (2011) study concludes that socioeconomic status is the main predictor of standardized test scores, and no significant progress has been made in closing this achievement gap. Since many minorities trend towards low SES, these findings do not support the effectiveness of NCLB policy in addressing racial and economic inequities in academic achievement (Rowley & Wright, 2011). Thus, by measuring NCLB against the success of its own stated objectives we can make our first argument against it.

A second approach is by evaluating whether or not standardized testing is an accurate means of assessment. If we are going to use standardized testing to determine educational quality, including sanctions, we need to ask if they are measuring what they are supposed to be measuring. Specifically, are they correctly assessing mastery of the curriculum, academic achievement, and annual progress? There is a significant amount of research that points to severe weaknesses in the way NCLB implements assessment.

First, if you implement a high stakes, winners/losers testing paradigm people will learn to game the system. *Score inflation* is the improvement of students' test scores with improving their underlying proficiency, which is a problem running rampant through our schools today (Murdane & Papay, 2010). According to Abram's(2004) national survey, 40 percent of teachers "reported that they had found ways to raise state test scores in ways without really improving learning" (Murdane & Papay). Examples of this include devoting significant class time to cramming immediately preceding the test, and or cases where states make their tests easier every year to give the illusion of meeting criteria for Annual Yearly Progress. Jacob's(2004) study highlighted four states where state scores had indicated significant AYP but the National Assessment of Yearly Progress showed no improvement (Murdane & Papay).

There is also reason to believe that whatever extent the standardized testing system is accurately measuring academic achievement, it is failing to do so for many groups of students. English language learners are not allowed to receive instruction or give answers in their native languages. This effectively turns every test into a test of their English mastery regardless of the content area it's intended to assess (Listen, Ullrich & Zeichner, 2012). Besides the linguistic attributes of standardized test we can also examine their cognitive features. Such tests appeal to a very specific analytical cognitive way of thinking, and individualistic problem solving skills. While this criterion works well for "mainstream" European academic sensibilities, many cultures approach problem solving in different ways. Even within our national identity, subcultures such as the African American community learn more synergetically or kinesthetically (Sleeter & Grant, 2009). Thus, the standardized testing format mandated by NCLB favors white students over minorities, especially ELLs.

A tool of measurement is only as useful as its accuracy. However, the uniformity of the assessment conditions mandated by NCLB is leading to many invalid assessments of students' academic abilities. In some cases the testing practices don't even take into account modifying conditions for students with disabilities. At some schools blind students have all been given "0" scores, because the state's guidelines would not allow for reading the test to them out loud (source: <http://www.nea.org/home/Statement-of-Patti-Ralabate.html>). It should be emphasized: *students, teachers, and schools are being penalized for low performance on these tests*. If the tests are not accurate then they are worse than useless; they can carry severe consequences to the invested parties (Sleeter & Grant, 2009).

Another important issue to examine is the effect of NCLB on teaching practices, both in terms of curriculum and the performance of individual teachers. Most teachers are generally philosophically aligned with the establishment of strong curriculums and accountability. Furthermore, many teachers believe that NCLB pressure to develop rigorous content standards is a positive outcome of the mandate (Murdane & Papay, 2010). Testing as a means to measure mastery of these standards is not at issue, and generally teachers consider them to be a valuable tool (Karp, 2012). The concerns that are raised are the singularity of importance which they have amassed, and the unintended negative consequences to individual students, groups of students, and the educational system as a whole (Sleeter & Grant, 2009). Pressure on schools to meet the testing requirements mandated by NCLB has focused effort and attention on test preparation to the point of crippling the education community's ability to utilize any other means of assessment or instruction. Many established means of teaching and assessment, such as performing practical tasks or utilizing multiple intelligence theory are no longer used (Sleeter & Grant). For instance, according to Howard Gardener (1995) the best way to teach is to delve

deeply into a few topics, rather than cover many topics superficially (Fenstermacher, Soltis, & Sanger, 2009). In contrast to this, while teachers value the increased attention to curriculum areas such as math they are concerned that NCLB has led to a “shrinking curriculum” that does not represent the diversities of content areas that students should master. While math instruction in some states increased by 40 percent, it was also found that instructional time on areas other than math and reading fell by one third (Murdane & Papay, 2012).

We should also consider the quality of the instruction provided. The approaches to teaching that utilize Grant’s Multiple Intelligence Theory have been effectively sidelined under the pressure to increase test scores (Sleeter & Grant, 2009). Back to the subject of grade inflation, the “teaching as telling” mode of this kind of instruction exacerbates all of the weakest aspects of the “Executive” approach to teaching (Sleeter & Grant ; Fenstermacher, Soltis, & Sanger, 2009). Cramming right before a test to boost the results brings to mind the humorous analogy Soltis made, where the Knowledge is like a frozen pizza one stores and brings out and without retaining the information (Fenstermacher, Soltis, & Sanger). Even worse there are cases where teachers assumptions about the singular nature of the tests were wrong, and taught their students only equations such that they could not solve well-written practical word problems on the standardized test (Murdane & Papay, 2010). The de-emphasis “teaching to the test” places on practical problem solving leads many teachers to be concerned that their students will not have the skill set needed to thrive in the twenty-first century (Murdane & Papay).

Apart from students’ with limited English proficiency being penalized while taking the test itself, No Child Left Behind’s influence on curriculum also diminishes their educational opportunities. In an effort to meet Annual Yearly Progress, many schools have reduced or eliminated bilingual and primary language instruction (Sleeter & Grant, 2009). Under NCLB the federal law

requiring that a student be given access to their native language as part of their instruction was lifted. This can be detrimental in many ways to children: it can limit their ability to learn curriculum that they have trouble de-coding, can be detrimental to a child's self image, and can create a linguistic rift between the child and their family (Sleeter & Grant).

Exacerbating this problem is the lack of support offered in the implementation of NCLB. They have essentially decreed that all tests must be taken in English but have provided no guidelines or financial support to help make this possible (Sleeter & Grant, 2009). The same theme is echoed across other curriculum areas, with teachers generally expressing that they are under greater scrutiny and pressure, but are not provided with leadership or instructional strategy (Murdane & Papay, 2010). A primary reason for the lop-sidedness of the policy is that NCLB is in many ways more of a political mandate than a policy designed and implemented by educators. The implementation of educational policy based on political ideology alone does little to help teachers with their day-to-day-responsibilities (Listen, Ullrich & Zeichner, 2012). "Top down" politically driven criteria de-professionalizes the concept of the teacher as an individual who is capable of assessing their students and adjusting curriculum to meet their needs (Sleeter & Grant, 2009).

One area where this is evident is how No Child Left Behind treats the issue of teacher competency. The NCLB act forces schools to evaluate teachers based solely on standardized test scores, and encourages the dismissal of "problem teachers." (Karp, 2012). One of the many problems associated with this is that low performing schools have a higher dismissal and voluntary transfer rate, which de-stabilizes the faculty and contributes to continued low performance (Murdane & Papay, 2010). Some school systems have taken a different approach and gotten better results in terms of teacher competency and academic achievement, even those

measure by standardized tests. For instance, the Professional Growth System (PGS) is a collaborative approach for improving teacher quality that balances testing and peer review, thus separating it from the “value added” or “student growth” approaches of NCLB (Karp). It should also be noted that teachers whose school has a strong peer evaluation network (formal or informal) tend to feel less intimidated by the more hierarchical evaluation system imposed by NCLB (Murdane & Papay, 2010).

The focus No Child Left Behind has placed on low performing demographics, and the idea of strengthening curriculum and accountability are all worthy goals for education reform. However the policy has been implemented in such a way that it fails that these goals at best, and at worst has intensified the problems it was created to solve. It hasn't narrowed the socioeconomic achievement gap, and has taken education for English language learners several steps backwards. The act promotes teaching styles and use of class time that contribute to superficial and non-meaningful learning. The education system's most vital resource, its teachers, have been devalued and to some extent persecuted as a result of NCLB. With the act already well past its 2007 expiration date, we need to lobby our government enact education reform based on best teaching practices rather than standardized testing.

References

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