

The Children Left Behind

NCLB is a Giant Step Forward—but a Mid-course Correction is Needed

Now it is certain, on its third anniversary, that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is a monumental achievement. The accountability provisions of the law shine a bright light on the performance of schools across the nation, forcing many of them to attend to long-ignored problems.

But new evidence confirms what was known when the law was passed: Fixing the American education system is an even more monumental task. Just as this issue was going to press, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) released the results of its latest triennial international math and reading survey, this one undertaken in 2003, the year NCLB was being fully implemented. American 15-year-olds, according to the report, ranked 24th in math among the students from 29 industrialized countries who were given the tests.

Given these results, President Bush is absolutely correct to focus on the American high school as the next target for reform. Students in the best-performing European and Asian countries must take well-defined examinations to achieve graduation. But most American high school students, to get a diploma, only have to earn barely passing grades until they finish their 12th year.

Externally set graduation examinations need to be the first order of business for Margaret Spellings, the new secretary of education. This will require a clear change in NCLB policy.

Up until now, NCLB has held schools accountable but has expected nothing directly from students. Instead, it treats pupils as widgets, objects to be manipulated by teachers, parents, and school administrators. Yet in the end adults can only guide and encourage youngsters, who must learn to take responsibility for their own education.

For that to happen, students should be told what material they need to learn, what examinations they need to pass, and what level they need to achieve on the exam if they are to earn the recognition that will give them access to decent jobs and good colleges.

Nor can the Bush administration push high school reform without at the same time repairing other defects in NCLB. Although the law does shine an intense light on school performance, that light is filtered by lenses that distort what is happening inside schoolrooms.

For one thing, the law requires only that schools make progress toward the proficiency standard established by each state. Once a student crosses the proficiency bar, the school has no incentive to encourage further improvement. The school can ignore the high-flying student and still win NCLB approval.

Yet the OECD study shows that the top students are flying low. Only 5 percent of Americans performed at the highest math level—compared with nearly a quarter of Finns, Koreans, Japanese, and Dutch. (For some of the reasons why, see in this issue the feature essay on the new “new math” by Barry Garelick, page 28.) Such a scandalously low performance leaves the country’s future at the mercy of the ever better educated competition beyond our borders (see review essay by Martin West).

Other changes in NCLB are needed as well. For one thing, definitions of proficiency vary widely from one state to another—and in most states fall well below the standards established by the National Assessment of Educational

Progress. (For details, see the figures and discussion in this issue’s *Forum*, page 8).

Also, schools should be held accountable for the gains of individual students. To do this effectively, states must create an information system that allows them to track individual student progress, then hold students, teachers, schools, and districts to account.

NCLB is a monumental first step. But it is only the first step. Much more needs to be done if the promise of accountability is to be fulfilled.

— PAUL E. PETERSON

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MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.
