

September 10, 2007

Will “No Child Left Behind” Be Left Behind?

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Congress is considering whether to reauthorize “No Child Left Behind.” The law has had some minor benefits, though on the whole it’s been a costly trouble-filled endeavor filled with winks and nods

What’s wrong with the law? It further inserts the federal government into a policy area that has historically been the responsibility of state and local governments. While a perfectly executed national policy might widespread excellence, there’s a snare. As authority for an issue becomes more centralized, the damage from faulty policy design and implementation becomes wider.

Another problem is that NCLB, as the law is commonly known, promotes mediocrity. Schools have responded to the call to bring the lowest achievers up to grade level by diverting attention away from talented and gifted students.

Finally, the data used in the law are manipulated to serve political purposes. As Education Sector (www.educationsector.org) points out, schools can use a variety of [statistical tricks](#) to ensure they meet “Adequate Yearly Progress. In a 2003 report, for example, the institute said that graduation rates are [much lower than commonly assumed](#).

A comparison of state and national assessments performed by the National Center for Education Statistics (<http://nces.ed.gov>) shows another problem: Over half the states grossly overstate the proficiency levels of their schools.

Look on the Sunny Side

So what’s to like about the law? It focuses attention on student performance. You may argue that the standardized tests are ill-fitting measures or that the metrics should be changed. But the law does promote the idea that performance does matter. For too long, discussions in education policy have focused on inputs such as teacher pay or number of students in a class.

Equally useful is the fact that NCLB provides help, right now, for some students. Reform plans are cast in years, but under specific conditions, students now qualify for supplemental tutoring, free of charge. Talk about small class sizes.

Schools that fail targets for student achievement are supposed to give families a list of qualified tutoring organizations. As result, parents receive a measure of consumer choice and sovereignty in what is, for too many people, a take-it-or-leave-it proposition.

Moving Forward

The reauthorization debate gives everyone a chance to recommend changes to the law. The Education Commission of the States (www.ecs.org), an official organization of state governments, has compiled a list of recommendations from the education establishment.

One widely endorsed idea is to use student growth models for evaluating schools. In other words, look at whether each student knows more at the end of the year than at the beginning. Schools get judged then on whether they are contributing to the development of each student, not just the lowest performing ones.

The National Education Association ([NEA](http://www.nea.org)) agrees with the need to use longitudinal data. But it also uses the law as an occasion to lobby for its favorite causes, such as lighter workloads (i.e., class-sized reduction).

Outside the world of public managers and the teachers union, the Cato Institute (www.cato.org) delivers a stern rebuke. It says “NCLB does not improve academic achievement, fails to deliver meaningful parental choice, and impedes truly effective reforms -- all while costing taxpayers tens of billions of dollars each year.”

The Urban Institute (www.urban.org) finds that the law hasn't worked out as intended. The tutoring option, for example, [is scarcely used](#). The institute says that parents don't trust the law's “adequate yearly progress” ratings. Parents also receive the information about tutoring or transfer options too late in the school year to make plans for the next one.

The institute says also that several features of the law meant to grant [flexibility](#) to schools aren't being widely used. Sometimes an option duplicates an option a school already has. At other times, there isn't enough money to take advantage of the option. Still other schools aren't aware of their options. Right hand, meet left hand.

Because the criticism comes from many quarters with varying and even competing interests, the prospects for significant change are uncertain. Everyone, it seems, dislikes the law, but for different reasons.

Will the act be reauthorized? Yes. President Bush wants it as part of his legacy. The education establishment and its defenders will welcome the cash, even if they complain about the strings that come with it. And the endeavor we call “public education” will muddle through, substantially on its present course.

As often occurs in the world of public policy, we'll end up muddling through down a path that finds few fans.