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An Examination of the No Child Left Behind Act

by

Christopher F. Grasta

Spring 2008

**An Analytical Review submitted to the
Department of Education and Human Development of the
State University of New York College at Brockport
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Education**

An Examination of the No Child Left Behind Act

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Introduction

A controversial topic in education today is the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which was passed by Congress in late 2001. This act, which was signed by President George W. Bush one year after his inauguration, is in constant political debate. This law, which aims to improve America's public schools, directly affects politicians, parents, students and teachers, and is creating much controversy on the Internet, newspapers and television. Currently it is a major topic of political debate among the presidential candidates and is up for renewal by Congress. Members of Congress who support the legislation's goals anticipate a major makeover of the law (Miners, 2007). The NCLB Act is a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act first enacted in 1965.

The NCLB Act is intended to build skills such as higher level thinking to improve our workforce by guaranteeing that all children receive a fair and just education. The world is constantly changing and citizens entering the workforce are experiencing this change. Businesses are looking for highly skilled people.

The NCLB Act is providing the government information about how students are performing in mathematics and reading; however, it is not telling how much work students are actually doing (Finn, 2006). As a result, it may actually be harming high-performing students from working families. The standards of the NCLB Act are set in an

effort to raise the lowest performing students to proficiency level set by the state (Carnevale, 2007). By school districts setting these standards, they are not challenging the higher-level students that are already proficient and therefore these students may fail to gain additional knowledge throughout their academic careers (Carnevale, 2007).

Another issue surrounding the NCLB Act is the fact that teachers are likely to teach to the test (Moore, 2007). Since students must be tested in grades three to eight in mathematics and reading under the NCLB Act, much emphasis is being put on test scores. This testing is supposed to help school districts identify where students are having trouble learning. The results of these tests affect how much funding a school will receive in order to improve student's proficiency (Moore, 2007). Even though students may be able to answer multiple-choice questions, do their answers to these questions really show an ability to think?

Controversy with the process used to measure adequate yearly progress (AYP) is also in constant debate (Olson, 2005). Adequate yearly progress is a measurement used by the federal government to determine how public school districts are performing. Students that begin the year far below proficiency level and make progress to slightly below proficiency are put in a group of "non-proficient students." This means that these students have not met the requirements set by their state in order to match the standards of the NCLB Act. Supporters of the NCLB Act, such as some teachers and parents, argue that this dramatic growth should and does reflect the schools success. Also the

AYP focuses on students that are slightly below proficiency level. Those that have fallen far behind or are advanced often are given less attention by educators. Therefore, schools must adopt a more rigorous set of principles that hold themselves accountable for all students' academic growth (Olson, 2005).

The NCLB Act is a constant issue of debate in education. It is because of this, and my passion for education, that I chose to compile a comprehensive review of literature as the topic of my paper. In the following chapter I will present the background, guidelines and role that the NCLB Act has in education, and the strengths and concerns of the Act. I have also included the political views of current presidential candidates as they directly relate to the direction this act will be heading in the immediate future. Finally, based on this research, I will present my own position on the NCLB Act.

II

Review of Literature

1. Origin of NCLB

The quest for accountability in schools goes back many decades, according to Cool (2002). A report on the state of education entitled, "A Nation at Risk," worried politicians, educators and business leaders (Cool, 2002). The report was about the growing population of illiterate Americans, and the realization that other countries are beginning to match and surpass our educational attainments (A Nation at Risk, 1983). Politicians, educators and business leaders believed that our way of life was being threatened by the poor quality of our school system. As this report spread, more states began spending more money on education. They also created new graduation requirements. Eventually, politicians decided the United States needed to set national standards. They also agreed that students needed to be evaluated by the use of standardized testing. This ensured that students from every state would be evaluated in the same way. For example, receiving a grade of a B in Georgia will be the same as receiving a B in Colorado (Cool, 2002).

In early 2001, President George W. Bush presented a plan to the Congress to help ensure that all students receive an equal education. President Bush believed that the

quality of public schools directly affected all citizens of the United States. In the constantly changing world, education needed to be a main focus for our country. Low expectations, illiteracy, self-doubt and a workforce that required its employees to be prepared with complex skills, were some of the issues in which a better education would benefit all citizens of our country. President Bush presented a framework from which all citizens, lawmakers and Congress members could work together to strengthen schools. Bush's goal was to build the mind and character of every child, from every background, in every part of America (Bush, 2002).

On January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act into law. His goal in doing this was to put American schools on a new path of reform, which would lead to equal education for all students (Office of the White House Press Secretary, 2002). Representatives of Congress from both the Democratic and Republican parties were in attendance supporting the President just months after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. Members of both parties showed enthusiasm for the bill, as Congress had passed the law with a 468-61 vote (Hess, 2006).

This NCLB Act reauthorized the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Each state sets its own academic standards and school districts would be accountable for meeting these standards. The Federal government would then help those school districts

by increasing resources in order to meet the standards set forth by the state. The ultimate goal of the NCLB Act is to produce steady gains academically until all students can read and do math at or above grade level (Building on Results, 2007). The NCLB Act set the objective of having every child meet the educational standards set by the state at or before the 2013-2014 school year. To reach this objective each state developed its own plan to meet the newly required standards. The ideas set forth by the state measured how students were improving and ensured that each child was learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Setting these standards would in turn close the nation's achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers (Building on Results, 2007).

The NCLB Act introduced new terminology in education in the United States. Some of the terms in the NCLB Act that are now used more frequently are accountability, adequate yearly progress and highly qualified teacher (Chrismer, 2006). Adequate yearly progress (AYP) is the measurement system used to evaluate each state's progress with respect to its educational goals. AYP is the minimum level of improvement school districts and schools must achieve (Just the Facts, 2003). States set academic goals for the percentage of students reaching proficiency each year with the goal of one hundred percent proficiency by the 2014 academic school year. If the schools do not reach their AYP they are put on a school improvement list. If a school fails to meet its AYP for two consecutive years, the students at that school are given the option

to transfer to another school. After three consecutive years of failing to meet AYP a school is required to provide additional services to their students, such as tutoring or after school programs. Once a school fails to meet AYP four consecutive years drastic changes must take place at the school. Some of these changes could include using a new curriculum, extending the school year or appointing outside experts to help manage the school (What is the “No Child Left Behind” Law, 2008).

At a recent forum held in Rochester, NY, Interim City School District Superintendent William Cala spoke about other measures that can and have been taken by school districts that have failed to meet their AYP (W. Cala, personal communication, November 19, 2007). Cala told those in attendance that in some states, districts have removed staff members whose students’ test scores had not met the state’s level of proficiency. Cala also mentioned that some states had set up charter schools as a way of dealing with schools that failed to meet the AYP. Charter schools are publicly funded schools that are accountable for producing specific results through rules, regulations and changes to existing rules. These guidelines are established on a state-by-state basis and are subject to federal civil rights laws. The State Board of Education or the Board of Trustees gives these schools contracts in order to meet the states’ AYP. Finally, Cala spoke about how schools that are on the failing list for five years may face drastic restructuring. This includes such measures as firing staff, states taking over of the school

or possibly being shut down due to lack of improvement (W. Cala, personal communication, November 19, 2007).

2. Benefits of the NCLB Act

There are many benefits to the NCLB Act. These include increasing federal funding for public schools, improving students test scores, ensuring each classroom has a highly qualified teacher, and rewarding the success and achievement of students and staff. The evidence shows that the NCLB Act benefits children, empowers parents, supports teachers and strengthens schools. Under the NCLB Act, all children are counted and schools are responsible for making sure every child is learning. Parents are given information and new options for their children including free tutoring. Teachers are utilizing assessment data and teaching methods to improve instruction in the classroom. Finally, schools that are identified as in need of improvement receive the extra help and resources that they need to raise student's achievement (No Child Left Behind is working, 2006).

The NCLB Act requires more testing in third to eighth grade each year in reading and math (Johnson, 2005). According to Johnson, testing students annually is useful because the data will show where improvement is necessary before students fall too far below state standards. Lewis states that a statistician, who has developed procedures for tracking students' growth, has confirmed that the scores of the lowest-achieving students are moving up. Since more states are tracking data on test scores, statisticians can document these results for the lowest-achieving students. This shows that the NCLB Act

is having its desired effect. By using similar data, states are able to see where improvement is needed. Maine's State Commissioner of Education, Susan Gendron, confirmed that the NCLB Act has furthered the standards movement. Longitudinal data systems are being developed by aligning standards and accountability (Lewis, 2007).

The NCLB Act requires that elementary and middle schools have an attendance rate of at least 85 percent or show growth from the prior year. When asked if this percentage was just, Allen found that 83 percent of Wisconsin School Superintendents agreed that this goal was fair and attainable (Allen, 2007). The NCLB Act also requires districts to have a graduation rate of at least 80 percent, or show progress from the prior year. When asked if this graduation rate was attainable, Allen discovered that 80 percent of these same superintendents agreed with this requirement for their district. A third positive feature of the NCLB Act requires at least 95 percent of all students be tested each year. When asked this question, 52 percent of superintendents agreed with this requirement (Allen, 2007).

Every state, including the District of Columbia, is held accountable for improving academic achievement. Now, under the NCLB Act, each school district tests their students to be sure they are held to academic standards set forth by the state. Before the NCLB Act was signed, less than half of the states had academic standards which students were required to meet. The NCLB Act also allows policymakers to compare progress

among states. Each state is part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation's Report Card. According to the NCLB Act, states must report their progress to the NAEP (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). The NAEP contains student achievement data broken down by race, ethnicity, gender, English language proficiency, migrant status, disability status and low-income status. The NAEP also contains important information about the professional credentials of teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Student achievement is rising across America (No Child Left Behind is Working, 2006). In July 2005, the long-term Nations Report Card results were released. These reports showed that reading and math scores were at an all time high and the achievement gap was closing. Nine-year-olds, in reading, made more progress in the past five years than in the previous 28. Reading scores for African Americans and Hispanic nine-year-olds were at an all-time high. Also, achievement gaps in reading and math between white and African American nine-year-olds and between white and Hispanic nine-year-olds were at an all-time low in 2005 (No Child Left Behind is Working, 2006). The state-by state Nation's report card released in October 2005 showed students in fourth grade also made improvement (The Nations Report Card, 1995). Since 1992, improvements in students performing at or above basic in mathematics increased in 23 states (The Nations Report Card, 1995). Students' performance also improved in 15 states in Reading (The Nations Report Card, 1995). Finally, the Nation's Report Card

found academic gains by fourth-graders in science. Fourth graders improved four points in science. African Americans and Hispanic students showed significant gains, thus narrowing the achievement gap (No Child Left Behind is Working, 2006).

Since the NCLB Act went into effect, every public school and district across the nation has been affected in its accountability provisions. Schools that do not perform to the state standards are held accountable. Schools must provide students with free tutoring. A second option is that students are able to transfer to a better performing public school to ensure success (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Reviewing the Nation's report card is important for parents. They are able to see clearly whether or not they want their child to go to a specific school. Doing this puts a stronger emphasis on making parents and schools partners in improving achievement for all children (Lewis, 2007).

Ensuring a highly qualified teacher is present in the core subjects in every classroom is also part of the NCLB Act. Virginia McLaughlin, dean of the School of Education at the College of William and Mary, welcomed the idea as found in Lewis, (2007). She, however preferred to use the word "competent" rather than "highly qualified." The term "competent" means that the teacher presents the material in a way that all students comprehend. The term "highly qualified" means the teacher may have

the education to teach a subject, but not necessarily the skills as a teacher to clearly present the material in a way that meets the needs of all students.

States that perform to a higher standard by closing the achievement gap are rewarded (Bush speech, 2003). States that establish assessments in grades three to eight, within two years of enacting the NCLB Act plan are also offered a one-time monetary incentive. Another monetary incentive is given to schools that make the greatest progress in improving the achievement of disadvantaged students (Bush, 2003). An example of this is the Teacher Incentive Fund. This fund helps states reward teachers and principals who help students raise their achievement levels and close achievement gaps within their schools (Helping Teachers Close the Achievement Gap, 2007). These funds are used as a tool to encourage states to meet the NCLB Act requirements and reach their AYP for the year.

Finally, federal funding for education has been increased in support of the NCLB Act. Between 2001 and 2006 federal funding of education rose 34 percent. There has been an increase in the number of schools in the United States that serve low-income students. The nation saw funding for these schools rise nearly 45 percent between 2001 and 2006. This funding was used by states and school districts to help promote academic growth (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Schools must show that they are making new plans on increasing reading and literacy in their schools in order to receive this money. The NCLB Act also aimed at establishing a relationship between the subjects of

math and science, since math is used in chemistry and physics throughout high school education (Bush, 2003). New federal funds could be used to strengthen the quality of math and science instruction, including such activities as making math and science curricula more rigorous. The funding also aimed at improving math and science professional development for teachers, attracting math and science majors to teaching, and aligning the standards in math and science.

President Bush wanted proven methods of reading instruction to be used in schools. Through his Reading First Initiative he was able to accomplish this goal and increase funding to many schools. (Bush, 2002). The funding increased from \$300 million to \$900 million. The goal was to ensure that every child is reading by the third grade. States participating in the Reading First program were eligible to receive funding to implement pre-school reading and Head Start programs. William Cala believes that the NCLB Act focuses too much time and resources on students in grade three and above. “We need to focus on students from the time they are born to grade three in order to promote success” (W. Cala, personal communication, November 19, 2007). Recent research has shown that children taught pre-reading and math skills prior to entering school, are more prone to learning to read and learning mathematics (Bush, 2003).

3. Concerns over the NCLB Act

Despite the fact that the NCLB Act has great goals that many people strongly support, there are some limitations. Some people believe that the law needs revision to be truly effective. Educators, parents and many citizens of the United States believe that the NCLB Act has unrealistic goals, inadequate funding, and favors federal over local control (No Child Left Behind, 2004). The main reason for testing and evaluating students in every school district must be to improve student learning (Readiness Tests, 2007).

Interim Superintendent of the Rochester City School District, William Cala, believes that, “The three purposes of education are to make good people, make good citizens and tap the unique skills of the individual” (W. Cala, personal communication, November 19, 2007). He asked, “Where are those in the standards, where are those in the tests and where are those in AYP; they don’t exist.” He now believes that the NCLB Act has created a fourth purpose, the business of schooling, which sets goals and standards. Those standards serve two purposes. The first is to serve the purpose of business and industry. This means that school districts are educating students to become part of the work force, which now consists of many low paying jobs.

The standards also serve the purpose of government. According to Cala, the military officials expect schools to report their academic scores and assessments (W.

Cala, personal communication, November 19, 2007). Cala wonders why such reporting is needed since this has little to do with what goes on in an English or mathematics classroom. He feels this reporting of a student's scores is unnecessary and has little to do with furthering a student's education. Cala states, "This fourth purpose has subsumed one, two, and three, all of the values of education" (W. Cala, personal communication, November 19, 2007).

One major concern of the NCLB Act is that the law focuses mainly on test scores. The National Education Association (NEA) strongly agrees with the fact that the goals of the law to raise student learning, close achievement gaps, and ensure that every child is taught by a highly qualified teacher are important (No Child Left Behind, 2007). The NEA believes that performance must include multiple measurements for students, not just a single standardized test. Standardized tests are tests where all students answer the same questions. These tests are usually multiple-choice format in which each question has only one correct answer (What's wrong with, 2007). Teachers believe that they are now required to simply teach to the test (Moore, 2007).

A test can be completely reliable if you get the same results the second time you administer the test. All tests have "measurement error". Measurement error means that an individual taking the test on one day may receive a different score when taking it on another day. These variations in test scores may be due to multiple reasons. One reason may be testing conditions (What's wrong with, 2007). The test taker may have learned in

a setting that was a comfortable temperature. Upon arrival to the testing site, it may be many degrees above or below the test-taker's comfort level (What's wrong with, 2007).

Another major reason that tests scores vary is based upon a test-taker's emotional or mental state (What's wrong with, 2007). Dr. Ana Krieger, Director of the New York University Sleep Disorder Center says that children under the age of 21 that receive one hour less of sleep per night on a consistent basis can have real effects on the way the body works (Sweet Dreams Make, 2007). Studies at the University of Virginia have shown that sleep deprived elementary students lose an average of seven points on vocabulary tests. Dr. Krieger believes advancements in technology and the Internet have caused students to sacrifice sleep in order to talk with friends online (Sweet Dreams Make, 2007).

Another major reason that test scores may vary is that some students do not test well. For one, students may be seated in hot gymnasiums where they must sit for long periods of time to take standardized tests (Achievement Tests for Young Children, 2007). Students also suffer from test anxiety, which is a direct effect of other factors. Many school districts have poorly funded schools, large class sizes, teachers without subject certification, and inadequate books. These are just a few factors that adversely affect a student's education. Test anxiety may also be a result of home life. Students that come from low-income families with housing problems may suffer from poor nutrition or

health care. Factors in which students cannot control put them at a disadvantage when being administered high-stakes tests (The Dangerous Consequences, 2007).

Finally, there are many parts in the scoring, make up and administration of standardized tests that cause concern. First, the only part of standardized tests that is objective is the scoring. This is due to the fact that all scoring is done by machine. Second, test-makers assume that all test-takers have been exposed to a white, middle-class background when making the test (How standardized testing, 2007). Therefore, items to include on the test and wording content could be made by a biased individual. Finally, the way the test is administered and the use of the results are also decisions that these people make (What's wrong with, 2007).

Moore (2007) believes the NCLB Act causes critical thinking by students in science and social studies to decrease. This is because of all the time spent on teaching students techniques specifically designed for standardized multiple-choice tests (Moore, 2007). These tests reward a student's ability to quickly answer questions that do not require real thought (Moore, 2007). These tests do not measure a student's ability to think or create in any field (What's wrong with, 2007). With the fact that the NCLB Act has encouraged focusing on standardized testing techniques, Moore believes that the joy of learning has been taken from the classroom environment (Moore, 2007). He feels

classroom time has been subsumed by test taking strategies, which leaves less time for enrichment activities (Moore, 2007).

Cala believes that educators need to make students whole (W. Cala, personal communication, November 19, 2007). Cala said, “the NCLB Act is producing robots, young adults that do not challenge authority nor challenge us by asking why?” He went on to say, “We must create in students a discontent to bring about change. If you are content, nothing will change.” (W. Cala, personal communication, November 19, 2007). Cala believes that things must change. By creating a discontent for students, educators are pushing students to want better circumstances and a better life for themselves (W. Cala, personal communication, November 19, 2007).

Educators critical of the NCLB Act feel that many students are being turned off to learning because of the need to excel on these high-stakes tests (Cool, 2002). In one school district students spent 17 days taking standardized tests in five different subject areas. A teacher in this district observed that many of the students would do the minimal amount of work because they were mentally fatigued from all of the testing (Cool, 2002).

Parents are also concerned about the amount of standardized testing that takes place and are critical of the NCLB Act (Moore, 2007). Some parents believe their children are quizzed and drilled in grades one and two for the third grade assessments in mathematics and English. One parent noticed that his son came home from school upset because of minor errors he made on a worksheet (Moore, 2007).

Another complaint of the NCLB Act is that some subjects such as art and music are being cut short because of the practicing and drilling for standardized testing (Moore, 2007). Jambor says the NCLB Act is making school districts focus their resources on language arts and math. Activities that produce well-rounded children such as physical education, arts and music are being cut back (Jambor, 2007). These activities, which support a student's physical and emotional well being, are being cut in order to make room for mathematics and reading. Cala tells how some schools are doubling periods of English and mathematics so teachers have more time to prepare students for the regent's examinations (W. Cala, personal communication, November 19, 2007). Jambor believes that doing this will promote students that can read and write, however leave students at a loss when imagining, creating, or even having fun (Jambor, 2007). In some school districts the amount of recess time allowed is being cut back. Going outside for recess is taking away much needed time that can be used to help students prepare for the standardized tests. In return, Jambor believes that the United States is a growing nation of obese children (2007).

The NCLB Act is also causing teachers to put less emphasis on subjects such as social studies and science (Jambor, 2007). Nancy Kirten a fourth grade teacher in Fairfax County, Virginia used to make her history class more enjoyable to students by having them write stories for an imaginary Civil War newspaper. Unfortunately there is

no time in the school day for that now. She now has to help students memorize large numbers of detailed facts so they can pass the state social studies test (Moore, 2007).

A consequence of not allowing teachers to make learning enjoyable is that many teachers leave the profession. Teachers who believe that schooling has been reduced to test preparation and how well their students do on standardized testing become disgusted and discouraged. Often times this overemphasis on testing and the pressure put on teachers to have their students meet state standards, is too much for them to handle and they choose a new field of work (The Dangerous Consequences, 2007).

Another criticism of the NCLB Act is the process used to measure the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) of students (Olson, 2005). The AYP identifies schools as successful or unsuccessful. It is based on the percentage of students who have attained the minimum proficiency level set forth by the state. Olson believes that there are two problems to this approach.

The first problem with the process used to measure AYP is that it ignores the progress many students make throughout the school year. Olson believes students should be tested at the start of the new academic school year (2005). Standardized tests are only given once throughout the year. Therefore, school districts are not able to see the progress of students during that year. Students that begin the year far below the proficiency level, but progress to only slightly below that level, will still be put into the “non-proficient” grouping (Olson, 2005). States and districts looking at these test scores

do not see the growth students make throughout the school year. This is the growth on which educators and districts should be measured.

According to Olson, a second problem is that AYP focuses only on a narrow group of students (2005). Schools are pressured to put more focus and use more resources for students likely to attain the rating of “proficient.” Often, students who are just below the proficiency level are benefited most. Students who are far below proficiency and those who are advanced often receive less attention. Therefore even though schools meet AYP requirements, they may have students above academic standards insufficiently challenged or at risk students that are at the bottom (Olson, 2005).

William Cala believes a problem with testing students to meet AYP is that all students must be tested one year after coming to the United States (W. Cala, personal communication, November 19, 2007). He tells of how many students who come to the United States from different countries know very little, if any, of the English language. They are expected to take these tests only one year after coming to the United States. He believes that it is impossible for these students to be at the same academic level as their peers who have lived in the United States and attended schooling for their whole lives. Cala asked the audience to imagine they were a United States born citizen that moved to China. One year upon arriving to China, they would be forced to take a test written in

Mandarin Chinese. Cala went on to say that these foreign born students do not meet the proficiency levels set forth by the state. This is causing principals and districts to question whether or not they should allow entry of foreign students in their schools.

Cala further mentioned that students in special education programs are also expected to take the same tests as their peers. He believes this also contributes to the increase of schools failing to meet their AYP. Once a school is labeled as failing, these students are allowed to move to a new school. Principals of those schools are becoming worried that, in turn, their schools' scores may suffer and they may be labeled as a failing school (W. Cala, personal communication, November 19, 2007).

Using standardized tests to measure performance encourages the use of a narrowed curriculum. These tests use outdated methods of instruction and harmful practices. The use of retention and tracking are just a couple of examples of these outdated and harmful practices (Carnevale, 2007). Carnevale (2007) believes that the NCLB Act may actually be harming high-performing students from working families.

Carnevale also states that standards set by states are in place to raise the lower performing students (2007). Since many educators feel pressured to teach to the test, in order to raise students to the level of "proficient," higher performing students may be pulled down. Resources are no longer used to challenge these higher performing students. This in turn can cause the higher performing students to be exposed too less

than their abilities. This can become a more serious problem to school districts that have large numbers of students that do not meet proficiency levels (Carnevale, 2007).

There are many concerns with the idea of tutoring, transferring students and funding in the NCLB Act that have caused people to question this law. When schools do not meet the AYP they offer students tutoring opportunities. Often times, private firms are brought in to help assist with these measures. School districts must use parts of their budget to help pay for these private firms (No child left behind after four, 2007). In turn, the districts are often forced to layoff staff members and cutback on services to students who most need extra help. Sometimes private tutoring firms are not held accountable for the quality of instruction they offer to the students. Therefore, tutoring focuses on test preparation and rarely connects to the curriculum. Student's attendance for these tutoring sessions is often very low (No child left behind after four, 2007).

Allowing students to transfer schools is also creating many problems for both the home and receiving schools. Transferring students overwhelm receiving schools, as these schools are not equipped to handle the number of students being transferred. Parents are refusing to allow their children to transfer to neighboring schools or better schools within their home districts. Parents believe that communities need to help out and create better schools for all students (No child left behind after four, 2007).

The transferring of students is also having an impact on the staff in school districts. Many experienced, highly qualified teachers are recognizing that schools in

which they work are destined for failure because of low-test scores and not meeting AYP. In turn, some of these teachers are transferring to higher performing schools. The schools that were abandoned by these teachers are being forced to find replacement teachers that are highly qualified. This is making it very hard for school districts to meet their AYP requirements (No child left behind after four, 2007).

Finally, many see the failure to fully fund the NCLB Act as its major flaw. Funding for this law has not increased in the last few years. The funding for the NCLB act is actually tens of billions of dollars below promised levels. In 2002, Congress promised 26.4 billion dollars would be used to fund the NCLB Act. The actual funding for 2002 however was 22.2 billion dollars. This was 4.2 billion dollars less than promised funding. In 2007, the promised level of funding was 39.4 billion dollars. The actual funding allowed was 23.7 billion dollars. This was 15.8 billion dollars less than promised (Tell congress oppose the Bush budget, 2008). People also believe those promised levels are tens of billions of dollars away from what is needed to help every child reach meaningful educational goals (No child left behind after four, 2007).

4. Suggestions for Improving NCLB

Thirty percent of the nation's schools failed to make the adequate yearly progress set forth by the state in the 2005-06 academic school year (No Child Left Behind After Six, 2007). Some educators, researchers and U.S. citizens believe that eventually nearly all schools will be labeled as schools in need of improvement. Schools with a more diverse student population are more likely to fail because of the population they serve. Different demographic groups meeting the mandates set by the NCLB Act is nearly impossible, since each student and teacher has their own way of learning and teaching. Researchers also consider the way AYP is calculated plays a major role in why these schools are labeled as failing. (No Child Left Behind After Six, 2007).

A number of educators think that the NCLB Act will never be reauthorized. Some are giving suggestions on how the law can be improved (Leaving No Child Behind, 2007). Alternatives to help schools in need of improvement will require individuals, community, district, state and federal to help. Improvements in assessment, professional development, curriculum and goals are just a few suggestions being proposed (No Child Left Behind After Four Years, 2007). Doing this will prepare all students for the future, create enthusiasm for learning, and engage all students. Achievement will be raised while closing achievement gaps. Finally, teaching resources, including technology and manipulatives, in order to get the job done will be provided to all educators (ESEA: It's time for a Change, 2006).

Improvements required to meet AYP must entail rich assessments such as portfolios, projects, quizzes and other forms of testing students (No Child Left Behind After Four Years, 2007). Currently AYP is based upon one standardized test (Authentic Accountability, 2007). If states want to know how students are performing they must look at a range of “real work” completed by the students. In turn, feedback, suggestions and extra individual help must be given to teachers and students to help with the ultimate goal of improving students learning (Authentic Accountability, 2007).

When looking at assessment, Olson believes that technology can and must play a major role in students learning (2005). Olson suggests computerized adaptive testing (CAT) be added to classrooms. Using CAT can provide a multitude of purposes. For example, CAT enhances the ability for quick and accurate information about students. This program can measure a student’s level of proficiency and growth in certain subject areas. CAT also adjusts the difficulty of questions as a student takes the test; this in turn reflects what the student’s capabilities are and how they are performing (2005).

Olson also explains how CAT increases student’s engagement in learning. With their interest in computers and television, teachers are having trouble keeping students engaged (Olson, 2005). Once a student answers a question incorrectly, the following question becomes slightly easier. With every incorrect answer, the questions decrease in difficulty until the student begins to answer correctly. Upon doing this students feel

encouraged because the questions being posed are now appropriately challenging for them (2005).

Olson suggests the use of CAT because this program shows the measure of growth of an individual's achievement. This data can be used to rank students relative to peers within the classroom and school. The data from CAT can also be used to rank students relative to proficiency standards of the state. This is useful because teachers and districts can determine if the student's progress is on track to meet AYP, graduation, or other requirements (2005).

Another suggestion supported by some educators is the idea of targeted professional development and time for educators to plan improvements in the curriculum and instruction (No Child Left Behind After Four Years, 2007). Olson explains how CAT can provide information about skills needed for instruction and training that can help teachers address a student's areas of weakness. Since CAT is tailored to each individual student, teachers can more effectively identify gaps in learning. Spending time during professional development on these skills will boost student achievement and improve school performance (2005).

William Cala believes that, currently, professional development is instructing educators in strategies to help their students pass exams. Much time is wasted on learning techniques about test taking. Cala believes that professional development should tell us and be used to develop new curriculum to help students learn, rather than

just teaching ways of passing tests (W. Cala, personal communication, November 19, 2007).

Professional development time must also be used for teachers to collaborate with colleagues (Olson, 2005). Olson writes about how in Idaho's Meridian School District teachers share strategies based on data received from CAT. Based on this data they work together to regroup students according to their instructional needs. Teachers work together to realign how they teach a subject and also share strategies about what teaching methods are most effective, along with what methods should be eliminated (2005). This change in culture has led to school wide improvement.

Accountability systems must also ensure that schools are a safe place to be. They must contain healthy, supportive, and challenging environments so that success for each student is possible (Authentic Accountability, 2007). Time and teaching resources must also be supplied to teachers in order to share knowledge and become better at what they do (Authentic Accountability, 2007).

People most closely involved in the accountability system must form relationships in order for the NCLB Act to be effective (Authentic Accountability, 2007).

Relationships between educators, parents, students, and the local community must be formed in order to promote a child's learning. This must be a participatory process using such measures as local school councils, annual reports and meetings to review school and student progress (Authentic Accountability, 2007). Parents must become real partners in

students learning, not just consumers of test scores. Community members must use data to help improve schools to ensure that they are serving all students. Local communities need to target those in need of the most assistance. Serious sanctions should only be used if schools demonstrate they cannot or will not improve (No Child Left Behind After Four, 2007).

William Cala believes that students need to form relationships with teachers. He suggests that class sizes become smaller. Having smaller classes will allow teachers to become more familiar with their students and form closer relationships. Cala also explained that having a teacher for more than one year could be very beneficial for students and teachers. The students begin to know and trust the teacher, thus forming a stronger relationship. Teachers would be able to know their students and their learning styles. In turn, teachers could use this knowledge to help students reach their maximum potential, by using a variety of methods to match their students' styles of learning. Cala further believes this idea would be especially beneficial for high school students (W. Cala, personal communication, November 19, 2007).

Federal, state and local governments must work together. The ultimate goal should be to provide an opportunity for all children to learn. The environment should be supportive, yet challenging and each district should have a rich curriculum. The state government's primary responsibility should be to provide support for school districts and

their staff. The federal and state government should only get involved if districts have been given resources and support and still fail to improve (Authentic Accountability, 2007).

Finally, researchers, educators and people that oppose the current NCLB Act are in agreement that the NCLB Act must have more funding in order for it to be effective (NCLB-Let's get it Right, 2007). When President Bush's NCLB Act came into effect, Congress knew it needed to set aside additional funding each year. President Bush's plan for 2008 is to increase funding by \$1 billion. Many still believe the budget is shortchanging the NCLB Act by more than \$79 billion. By adding \$79 billion to the budget it could improve the more than 1,700 secondary schools and 7,000 elementary schools that are struggling to meet standards (NCLB-Let's get it Right, 2007). This money could create smaller class sizes and provide after-school tutoring programs. In addition, this would allow schools to hire specialists in reading and math instruction. These specialists would be able to provide model lessons and train teachers in research based instructional techniques. High-speed Internet connections could also be purchased for teachers. This would allow teachers to have many resources available to them while planning lessons. This would also allow them to share ideas and feedback with other teachers in other districts (NCLB-Let's get it Right, 2007).

5. Presidential Candidates' Views on the NCLB Act

As a new era in politics approaches, and the United States ushers new leaders in the executive and legislative branches, both capable of leading our school systems to achieve success for all students, citizens are left with many unanswered questions. Is NCLB Act an effective policy for all learners? What can be done to change NCLB in an attempt to inspire educators, students and parents? What direction is education in our country heading? Who is really to blame for the current decline in educational achievement? Who is the best person to help answer these questions? Here is what the 2008 Presidential Candidates had to say about the NCLB Act.

Democrats

Senator Hilary Clinton believes that the United States needs to put an end to the NCLB Act (Hilary Clinton on Education, 2008). She believes that it is “unworkable” for teachers, principals and students. Clinton agrees that every child learns differently and the one-size-fits all approach is not working in education. She believes that districts need more flexibility in how they measure success. Her campaign offers a few ideas on how to help children succeed in our global economy. First, Hilary Clinton proposes more funding for schools, since one of the main problems with the NCLB Act is that schools were not given enough money. Second, Clinton says that standards need to be aligned with college-prep with the ultimate goal of having kids attend college. Clinton also

proposes efforts to improve to keep and recruit outstanding teachers. This must be done especially in under-resourced areas. Additionally, Clinton believes that after school programs must increase and pre-kindergarten programs will be offered to all four-year olds (Candidate opinions on, 2008). Finally, Clinton believes that school drop out rates are too high. To lower these drop out rates, mentoring for at-risk youth must be offered along with multiple pathways to graduation.

Senator Barack Obama believes that the goal of the NCLB Act is correct, however unfulfilled funding promises have limited its effectiveness (Barack Obama on education, 2008). Obama offers many suggestions in order to limit the problems of high dropout rates, teacher retention and soaring college costs caused by the NCLB Act. He suggests the expansion of Head Start programs in order to improve academic success rates for young learners. He also proposes to make math and science a national priority. He wants schools to recruit math and science teachers with graduate degrees to learn from others in the education field. These teams of teachers along with parent involvement will help student's achievement. Senator Obama also supports English Language Learners and will hold schools accountable for making sure these students complete school. Finally, Obama believes teachers must be recruited, prepared, retained and rewarded. He believes in creating new Teacher Service Scholarships, accrediting all schools of education, mentoring programs pairing newly recruited teachers with

experienced teachers and reward teachers for work in underserved districts and those who consistently excel in classrooms (Barack Obama's plan, 2008).

Republicans

Mike Huckabee supports the accountability measures of the NCLB Act, however he believes the program needs adjustment (Mike Huckabee on Education, 2008).

Huckabee believes that the NCLB Act does not take into account those schools with a high percentage of ESL and special needs students. He strongly supports music and the arts. These are important in creating well-rounded students and should not come at the expense of raising reading and math scores. Huckabee promotes an education plan focused on learning, and thinks that schools must not teach solely to standardized tests (Mike Huckabee on Education, 2008). Finally, he feels that in addition to students testing, teachers should be tested as well (Education and the arts, 2008). Based on the results of these tests, school districts need to replace teachers who are not competent and have reasonable waiting periods for teachers to get tenure. He believes education to be a noble profession, and monetary bonuses along with forgiving student loan debts should be given to those teachers working in low-performing schools (Education and the arts, 2008).

John McCain states that the NCLB Act must be improved, not discarded (John McCain on Education, 2008). He says that parents should be empowered by allowing

them to choose among schools for their children. If schools do not change, then parents will have the power to move their children. McCain says that school districts should no longer focus their attention on how students are performing on a common standard. Instead, school districts should evaluate students on a variety of work, rather than one standardized test. He also maintains that parents and school systems should not accept lower standards for some students and higher standards for others. McCain also wants to increase the number of Head Start programs. He is making this a priority because research has shown that students that are not in these programs are falling further behind their peers who have been enrolled in these Head Start programs (Excellence, Choice and Competition, 2008).

As stated, the NCLB Act is a controversial topic in education today. Some people believe the NCLB Act should be put to an end. Supporters of the NCLB Act believe in the goal of improving education for all students in the United States, however some improvements need to be made in order to be more effective. Regardless of which candidate is chosen as President of the United States, changes to the No Child Left Behind Act are imminent.

III

Reflection

The No Child Left Behind Act has been the source of much controversy among public schools, politicians, educators, parents and students. Educators struggle with the mandates imposed by this law everyday. School districts struggle with how to pay for these mandates. The ultimate goals of education should be to discover students' unique skills, encourage them to become good citizens, and help them learn. The main reason for testing students in schools should be to foster these goals.

I think that the NCLB Act brings some benefits to the American education system. I also agree with some of the critics and will present my opinions via suggestions for improving the NCLB Act.

One beneficial outcome of the NCLB Act is that all children are accounted for and held to the same academic standards set forth by the state. Through annual testing in math and ELA students are expected to score a 3 or 4 on tests to demonstrate mastery. Doing this, allows school districts to see where students are having problems and offer help where it is needed for those students scoring 0, 1 or 2 on the state tests. School districts may offer free tutoring to those students failing to meet the standards. They may also provide additional help during the school day. Math and reading specialists work

with students and teachers to provide additional support and resources both within classroom and resource rooms.

NCLB has helped to increase accountability of the school systems. The emphasis here is on making parents and schools partners in the child's education. Close relationships between parents and teachers are a must. Parents are increasingly interested in reviewing the report card for their child's school that is printed in many local newspapers. These "report cards" show parents how the school is progressing in comparison to neighboring districts. Parents can utilize information to determine what they can do at home to help their child. An example would be if the child is weak in math, this gives parents the incentive to help the child in math. Parents can also schedule a conference with the district to investigate what sources might be available for their child. The school districts have also responded to the increased attention to the scores. Test practice has become an important part of school curriculum. Teachers must spend time on this so that students are comfortable with the test format and content.

The NCLB Act also ensures that a qualified teacher be present in the classroom. I agree with Virginia McLaughlin when she states that classrooms need "competent" teachers. Teachers must know the subject matter and also be able to teach using different methods. Being qualified means having the education, not necessarily having the proper tools to teach.

As an educator, I have my own personal views for improvements to the NCLB Act. The first improvement that I believe needs to be made, is to allow multiple methods of assessment. Quizzes, projects and portfolios should be used in combination for measuring school and student progress. These assessments would provide a much more comprehensive view of a districts progress. Educators need to be able to use a variety of methods to match different students' learning styles. The NCLB Acts dictates standardized testing for all students third grade and above. Since assessment is a key component of the NCLB Act, districts have created assignments to prepare students well before third grade. This method currently in use by school districts, will not work long term. Every child learns at different paces and to have a single day of testing be the most important measure of an entire year of schoolwork seems short sighted.

For the past three years I have worked as a substitute teacher. Working in a variety of different classrooms including those identified as "inclusion classrooms" helped me see that all students have the ability to learn. I have observed that many of the students in the classes learn at different paces and in different ways. Some of the students retain the most information by reading, some students learn better by visual exercises, and still other students learn by hands on activities. I have learned that it is the teacher's responsibility to try and help each student benefit from the instruction given. This is why I believe that classrooms must have competent, creative teachers skilled in

teaching to multiple learning styles. Giving students options, especially on projects, is a great way to motivate them. I can remember allowing students to do a presentation for social studies in a format of their own choice. I gave a few examples and allowed the students to choose. After viewing a variety of models, the students chose to create powerpoint presentations, some wrote their presentation, some made posters, and, yet others, performed a skit. Encouraging and allowing teachers to assess students in different ways will provide school districts a more complete understanding of whether or not a certain student, or students, are meeting state standards.

A second improvement that needs to be made to the NCLB Act involves funding. I believe that Congress must listen to states in order to discover the obstacles such as the lack of trained professionals and lack of teaching resources that exist within school districts. The states must listen to educators and parents who are most directly involved in the education process. Congress must make sure that school districts have the resources needed for offering a better education for its students. These resources include modern textbooks, computers and other related technology. School supplies, and better learning facilities, are also part of this improvement. Teaching to multiple learning styles, teacher to student ratios, differentiated instruction and an environment in which the teacher is responsive to students needs rather than what is on the test needs to be made.

A final improvement that I feel can be made to the NCLB Act is the expansion of Head Start Programs and the offering of universal pre-kindergarten programs for all four year olds. I agree with Hilary Clinton and Barack Obama's opinions with these improvements. As a nation, drop out rates and students falling behind in schools are too high. School districts need to foster academic success early in a student's education. Expanding Head Start Programs and offering pre-kindergarten programs to all four year olds will help with this goal. I believe doing this will also reduce drop out rates, and decrease the number of students that fall behind.

As a result of my research of the NCLB Act, I believe the goals of building the minds and character of every child, having all students receive an equal education, and having every child meet educational standards set by the state at or before the 2013-2014 school year, have noble intentions. With such diverse learners present in every public school, I believe having every child meet standards by the 2013-2014 academic school year seems hard to attain. The NCLB Act has created standards in education that are nearly impossible to reach. In order for the United States to reach the goals set by President Bush in 2001, improvements must be made to the current law. Federal, state and local governments must work with school districts to ensure that every student receives a fair and just education.

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