**Topic Page: No Child Left Behind Act of 2001**

Definition: **No Child Left Behind (NCLB)** from *The SAGE Glossary of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*

Public Law 107-110, signed on June 8, 2002, with the stated purpose of providing every child with equal access to a high-quality education. The NCLB Act is built on four principles: (1) accountability for results, (2) more choices for parents, (3) greater local control and flexibility, and (4) an emphasis on doing what works based on scientific research. For more information, see U.S. Department of Education.

**See also**

Educational Policy, Elementary Education, Literacy/Illiteracy

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Summary Article: **No Child Left Behind Act of 2001**
From *Encyclopedia of Diversity in Education*

As part of his “War on Poverty,” President Lyndon B. Johnson proposed and signed into law the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965. Enacted in order to improve equal educational access across socioeconomic strata for students attending public schools, the ESEA directed additional federal funding to schools with large percentages of economically disadvantaged students. Since its passage, the ESEA has gone through several reauthorizations and modifications. One such transition occurred in 1994, when, largely in response to *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, a report by President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education, and the concerns it raised about the teaching profession, school curricula, and other schooling issues, the ESEA was reauthorized by the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA). Among other changes, the IASA, along with the Goals 2000 Act, required more tightly defined standards of student learning but afforded state- and local-level flexibility on how to meet those demands.

Drawing on and expanding the corporate-style, standards-centered model for education and educational assessment introduced by the IASA, President George W. Bush's administration proposed its reauthorization of the ESEA in the form of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) within months after his election. Coauthored and endorsed widely across party lines, the bill passed in the House of Representatives (by a vote of 384 to 45) and the Senate (91 to 8) and was signed into law by President Bush on January 8, 2002.

Like the IASA, NCLB endorses standards-based schooling and assessment. NCLB differs from its predecessors, though, in the extent to which it relies on standards and standardized assessment data to measure the effectiveness of schools. It differs, as well, in the specificity with which it directs schools to collect and analyze data about various populations of students, the way it requires similarly standardized assessments of future teachers, and the penalties with which it threatens schools that do not meet certain standards of progress. Due to these and other aspects of the act, many educators, education activists, and advocates for educational equity have raised questions about the motivations behind and implications of NCLB, debates about which were reignited as President Barack Obama's administration—under the guidance of Education Secretary Arne Duncan—prepared to propose further

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Overview of NCLB

Several of NCLB's core goals, as described by the Bush administration, are described explicitly in the language of the act. These include increased accountability, increased parent and student choice, a more intensified focus on reading, and the guarantee that all students will be taught by "highly qualified teachers." These requirements are meant, according to the Bush administration, to ensure equal access to quality education by all students.

Increased Accountability

Under NCLB, each state that receives federal funds for public education is required to complete annual statewide mathematics and reading proficiency assessments in every public school. Although states may develop their own assessment programs, with approval from federal education agents, these assessments universally are implemented in the form of standardized tests. States are required at the very least to test all students, regardless of English language proficiency or (dis)ability, in Grades 3 through 8 in mathematics and reading annually. Although individual schools, districts, and states interpret these categories differently, they are required, as well, to report disaggregated data on students of color, low-income students, students with (dis)abilities, and students who are learning English. NCLB requires that, overall as well as within each of these groups, all schools demonstrate "annual yearly progress" (commonly called AYP). In other words, schools must show that they are improving the extent to which their students, overall and within these groups, are achieving "proficient" test scores toward the goal of 100% proficiency by the year 2014. Recently, several states have opted to adopt or consider national standards as developed by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, a process supported by President Obama's administration.

Schools that do not demonstrate annual yearly progress are subject to "corrective action," including restructuring, such as the removal of teachers and administrators or what has been called school "takeovers" by state education agencies wherein those agencies assume decision-making power at the school level. For example, schools that do not meet annual yearly progress standards for 5 consecutive years could face, under NCLB, reconstitution under a federal- or state-imposed restructuring plan.

Critics of NCLB, including many educational equity advocates, commonly argue that the nature of accountability required by the act may increase inequity and result in less access to effective education for some of the students it purports to help. A common criticism, for example, is that NCLB's focus on standardized testing encourages teachers to "teach to the test," enacting the sorts of lower-order thinking pedagogies that already have been documented as being more common at schools with high levels of students of color and low-income students than at predominantly White and wealthier schools. Others have raised concerns that these conditions negatively affect teachers, as well, removing their abilities to draw on a range of pedagogical approaches in order to provide the best possible learning experiences for all students.

An additional popular criticism of the corporate-style standardization endorsed by NCLB is that standardized tests can be culturally biased, and that demanding that all students across all contexts within a state take the same test is inherently inequitable. The tests can be language-biased, as well, as most states do not test any of their English language learners in their native languages. Some argue that these conditions may intensify feelings of exclusion among students who already are most likely to...
feel alienated at school.

A third common criticism of the act’s reliance on standardization raises questions about the extent to which the educational effectiveness of a teacher, school, district, or state can be measured adequately by what some believe to be methodologically narrow standardized testing of students.

**Parent and Student Choice**

Another provision of NCLB requires states to provide students who attend schools that have been identified as needing “corrective action” the choice of attending a better performing school in the district. In addition, districts must provide transportation for this purpose and dedicate, at minimum, 5% of their Title I funds to facilitating this option. Meanwhile, schools that have failed to meet annual yearly progress standards for at least 3 of the 4 most recent school years must allow families who so request the use Title I funds in order to access supplemental educational services such as tutoring. The purpose of these requirements, as described by the Bush administration's executive summary of NCLB, is to provide an incentive for schools that are not meeting annual yearly progress standards to improve their test score results, because not doing so could bring about a loss of students and, as a result, a loss of funding.

Critics of NCLB, including educational equity and diversity advocates, have raised concerns that these provisions are increasing public school segregation across both socioeconomic status and race. For example, because low-income students are more likely than their wealthier counterparts to attend schools that do not meet annual yearly progress standards, their schools are more likely to be identified for corrective action. When families are afforded by NCLB the opportunity to send their children to a different school, such as a charter school, those with high levels of cultural, economic, and political access to the education system are more likely to do so than their less-privileged peers.

In addition, according to some critics, the incentive system and punitive nature of these provisions of NCLB have been shown to motivate some schools and teachers to manufacture higher test scores. Some have done so by cheating or strategically misclassifying low-scoring students. Others have done so by encouraging low-scoring students to drop out or transfer to different schools.

**Greater Emphasis on Reading**

NCLB insists that all students learn to read by the end of third grade. In order to accomplish this goal, it endorses a Reading First initiative, investing in what it describes as “scientifically-based reading instruction programs” in the early grades. States adopting these programs are eligible for federal grants and awards meant to support literacy and language development in children before preschool age (although NCLB does not provide funding to ensure universal access to preschool), and particularly those from low-income families, so that they are better prepared for literacy and language instruction by the time they reach kindergarten. Grants and awards also support professional development related to curricular and pedagogical implementation of what the act refers to as “scientifically-based reading instruction.”

Some of NCLB's critics have raised concerns about how its emphasis on reading and mathematics—in combination with its punitive nature—is eroding liberal education and, in some cases, threatening the inclusion of art, music, physical education, social studies, and other subjects that historically have been core components of public schooling. In some schools and districts, students whose test scores are seen as detrimental to their school's averages in mathematics and reading are held out of other classes.
in order to take additional remedial classes in these areas. Because African American, Latina/o, American Indian, and low-income students, and students who are learning English score, on average, lower than their White or wealthier peers, they are more subject to being denied opportunities to engage with subject areas that are not tested.

**Highly Qualified Teachers**

Just as states and districts are required to demonstrate yearly progress in student test scores, they are asked to demonstrate annual improvement in ensuring that all core subject teachers are “highly qualified.” Although states are afforded the opportunity to define and assess what it means to be “highly qualified” in ways that meet their own needs, many have responded, in part, by developing standardized tests for teachers or by requiring that future teachers take the Praxis exams designed by the Educational Testing Service. NCLB’s Teacher Quality State Grants Program provides complying states support for implementing teacher preparation practices deemed to be “scientifically based” in their recruitment, preparation, and ongoing development of teachers.

Like student standardized tests, those tests meant to measure teacher qualification have been criticized as methodologically narrow and culturally biased. According to some critics of NCLB, such narrow measures for teacher qualification fail to take into account myriad important teacher competencies, such as the ability to relate to students and their families, the ability to engage students across cultural differences, or the ability to create an equitable learning environment for all students.

Another concern raised by critics of NCLB about these provisions is that, in order to train teachers for the educational contexts in which they will be teaching, schools of education have begun to modify their programs in ways that remove attention from diversity and equity to focus on creating classroom “technicians” who can deliver prescribed curricula and prepare students for tests.

**NCLB and Neoliberalism**

Although some scholars and observers describe the increased attention to the schooling of historically disenfranchised communities as one way in which NCLB has improved educational equality, critics—including many equity and diversity advocates—have raised several concerns, not only about its content, but about its motivation. Some have argued, for instance, that NCLB reflects growing corporate-friendly neoliberal influences in the United States in its measures, such as the diversion of public school funds to charter schools or private tutoring companies, which contributes to the privatization of public schools. They point, as well, to provisions of the act that they claim have little to do with equal educational access, such as the requirement that all public high schools provide military recruiters with contact information for all students upon request.

**The Future of NCLB**

On March 13, 2010, President Obama released a blueprint for the reauthorization of the ESEA through modifications to NCLB. Along with his Race to the Top initiative—which provides funding for states that produce plans for systemic education reform consistent with the vision endorsed by the Obama administration—the proposed modifications to NCLB are focused on maintaining and broadening standards-based assessment, raising standards so that fewer students require remedial coursework upon entering college, and investing in professional development for teachers and principals. Although President Obama’s blueprint addresses some of the inadequacies of NCLB as identified by critics of the act, many of these critics have expressed concern that it retains the incentive-and-punishment system of its predecessor.

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