

Learning From No Child Left Behind

Make no mistake: the United States has an education problem. American students trail students in many other nations in math and science achievement. Only one-third of American students achieve proficiency in reading and math by our nation's own standards. Two-thirds of African American and Hispanic students achieve well below grade level. Educational problems beget economic and social problems. The nation would be significantly richer, more competitive, and less divided were we better and more equitably educated.¹

But the nation is also making progress. We are starting to learn. Students are making gains, slow and uneven to be sure but gains

1. The achievement percentages reference the *National Assessment of Education Progress* (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics), the only nationally representative assessment of student achievement. As we shall discuss, state assessments report higher levels of achievement than NAEP but do so by setting lower performance expectations than NAEP does. We believe, with the support of international assessments such as Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Program for International Assessment (PISA) in math, science, and reading, that the NAEP judgments are close to the mark. Our evaluation is supported by other education indicators such as four-year-high-school drop-out rates, which show less than 50 percent of students completing high school in many urban areas. Drop-out rates such as these are consistent with

nonetheless. More important, at least for now, we are starting to understand much better than ever before how to help students learn. Over the last generation, the nation has been ambitious about school reform. Yes, a lot of traditional measures have been applied—more money, smaller classes—but so too have bolder, innovative ideas such as academic standards backed by meaningful accountability, report cards that make transparent school and potentially teacher performance, more opportunities for all families to choose their schools, and more competition for schools to satisfy students and parents. For these ideas, and many more, there is increasing evidence about what works, what does not, what is most important for student achievement, and what is less so.

A generation ago, achievement was worse than it is today, but worse still was our state of knowledge about how to improve matters. *A Nation at Risk*, now twenty-five years old, is widely regarded as the modern call to arms for school improvement.² It documented very ably just how dire the nation's achievement problem had become. American students performed in the middle of the pack internationally, domestic test scores—the SAT, the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP)—had been falling since the 1960s, and the country's economy had just been battered

NAEP estimates that two-thirds of black and Hispanic students, who predominate in urban areas, score “below basic,” meaning far below grade level. See also, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Programme for International Assessment, *PISA 2006: Science Competencies for Tomorrow's World*; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Programme for International Assessment, *Learning for Tomorrow's World: First Results from PISA 2003*; U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, *Trends in International Math and Science Study* (2007).

2. U.S. Department of Education, National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, D.C., April 1983).

by a decade of international competition. The situation was grave, the report argued, a veritable national security risk. In retrospect, its recommendations seem mild, focusing mostly on beefing up high school curricula. In its wake, high school requirements were raised, students began taking more academic courses, and schools received much more funding. Yet by 1990 achievement had not improved materially.

An important lesson was slowly being learned, however. Achievement was not going to rise without more creative and stronger measures. Throughout the 1990s, the country made more fundamental changes. The public school system was opened to alternative approaches largely through charter schools. Regular public schools faced competition for students and resources, as a matter of public policy, for the first time in history. Likewise without precedent, policymakers began to set standards for what students should learn and held schools accountable for results. Most of this action was taken by the states, with encouragement from the bully pulpit in Washington.

In 2002 the federal government returned to the forefront—in potentially historic fashion. With the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), supported by bipartisan majorities in Congress, the nation committed itself to the achievement of every student in America. The act set a concrete goal and deadline—universal proficiency in 2014. It backed its ambitions with a comprehensive system of accountability that was to touch every school in the country. For the United States, a federal system that has long reserved education for the states and school districts, NCLB was bold indeed.

However noble, firm measures often generate resistance. NCLB has faced controversy and criticism ever since it took effect. Educators largely do not like it. States chafe at the incursion on their historical turf. Because the law was vigorously advocated by President

George W. Bush, and implemented by his Department of Education, it has become something of a political lightning rod, easily attacked by opponents as a tool of a Republican president—and an unpopular one as well.

With the election of President Barack Obama, education will receive renewed attention in Washington. NCLB will inevitably be a focus. The law is due for reauthorization, operating now under a temporary extension, as Congress awaits guidance from a new administration. NCLB is the largest source of federal funds to school districts, itself a reauthorization of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, channeling some \$13 billion annually to schools with disadvantaged students. President Obama has expressed support for the law and clearly favors sending more federal dollars to needy schools.

President Obama also knows of the discontent with NCLB. The general public is losing faith in the law. A 2008 *Education Next/PEPG* survey found only 50 percent of the public favoring reauthorization, down from 57 percent in 2007.³ The same poll found nearly half of all public school teachers wanting the law abolished. Teacher unions were the largest institutional contributors to the new president's election. NCLB reauthorization faces a strong political headwind.

Yet NCLB has strong forces behind it. The law was a culmination of decades of education policymaking in Congress. Education leaders there take a balanced view of the law's first eight years. They worked long and hard to put in place the law's basic principles. In exchange for federal dollars, they want meaningful accountability for student achievement. If schools fail to become places where

3. William G. Howell, Martin R. West, and Paul E. Peterson, "The 2008 Education Next-PEPG Survey of Public Opinion," *Education Next* (Fall 2008, vol. 8, no. 4), p. 16.

students can receive a decent education, they want students to have alternatives and schools to face real sanctions. They want schools to measure up to high academic standards and their performance to be transparent to families and communities. In the end, they recognize that bold and innovative policies are bound to get some things wrong and require adjustment. NCLB is sound in its fundamentals, they believe, but its particulars need serious attention.

This viewpoint, we believe, is correct. Despite the controversy that NCLB has ignited, the law is making a positive difference. Students are learning. Policymakers are learning. Because of NCLB and the state laws that served as its precedent, our collective knowledge of how to make schools work has grown substantially. NCLB deserves to be reauthorized. It also needs to be improved. It contains elements of unfairness; several parts do not work well and require significant modification. At least one major piece should be scrapped altogether and replaced. The law requires more than minor fine-tuning, yet it also deserves credit and support. As we shall share, it has helped students achieve, and it has taught us how to drive educational improvement more successfully.