

## EDUCATION WEEK

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COMMENTARY

### Good Intentions, Bad Results

#### A Dozen Reasons Why the No Child Left Behind Act Is Failing Our Schools

By Robert J. Sternberg

The federal No Child Left Behind Act mandates national testing in our nation's schools in order to assess the quality of those schools. It was a well-intentioned piece of legislation passed by Congress to improve education. The act recognized the need for accountability in schools, as well as for educational practice to be based upon scientifically rigorous educational research. But it is having and will continue to have the opposite effect. The reason is that it flies in the face of much of what we know about the science of education. Here are a dozen reasons why the act is failing:

Forcing upon schools standards dreamed up by politicians never has been, and never will be, the right way to create the best education for our children.

**No accountability for standards of accountability.** *The New York Times* recently reported that schools are in a state of chaos regarding how they are doing academically. State standards may show the schools to be excelling, while under the No Child Left Behind law, they are failing. The problem? There is no clear standard of accountability for the standards of accountability. The standards in the law, despite all the hoopla, are largely arbitrary and potentially even punitive. So schools are being held accountable to standards that themselves meet no standard of accountability.

**Penalizing schools with children from diverse backgrounds.** We would like to believe that schools are exclusively responsible for the learning of pupils. But years of research have shown that, for better or worse, one of the best predictors, if not the best predictor, of achievement in a school is the socioeconomic status of the parents. Schools with children of lower socioeconomic status will be at a disadvantage in almost any rigid standard of accountability. The same will be true for schools with many children for whom English is a second language.

**Penalizing schools with children having diverse learning skills.** Schools having many children with learning disabilities or other diverse learning needs will almost inevitably fare poorly in a rigid accountability system that expects to have a single yardstick for all students. So these schools, too, will be penalized.

**Encouraging cheating.** Because the stakes for high scores are so high, schools are inadvertently encouraged to fudge the data, give children answers to tests, or make various attempts to exclude children from testing who, according to the act, should be tested. The result is that schools are now under the same pressure students feel in high-stakes testing, and act similarly. They have started to cheat. There are many ways to cheat. For example, one is purposely to exclude scores of children with special needs and thereby "fudge" the data.

**Encouraging schools to promote dropping out.** Ironically, the "No Child" law inadvertently encourages schools to encourage their weaker students to drop out. In this way, those students' test scores will not reduce scores for the school. Student dropouts among low scorers actually have been increasing, arguably as a direct result of the legislation.

**The assumption that what matters is what students know rather than how they use it.** The tests assessing achievement under the No Child Left Behind Act largely measure knowledge rather than how knowledge is used. As a result, the emphasis in schools regresses to that of the drill-and-kill education of many years ago. That is, schools are starting again to emphasize rote learning instead of meaningful

understanding and use of the knowledge students learn.

**The assumption that knowledge of the three R's is supreme.** Schooling is more and more emphasizing the traditional three R's of reading, writing, and arithmetic. There is nothing wrong with the three R's. But they are not all that matters to a sound education. Children, more and more, are being deprived of learning in art, music, history and social sciences, physical education, special programs for the gifted, and the like. In general, anything that might enrich children's education in a way that would make the children knowledgeable as well as wise and ready to make complex decisions in today's complex world is largely gone.

**The assumption that good science should be politically guided.** The act specifies that educational practice be guided by good, rigorous science. But what is good science? The current administration, to an unprecedented degree, has decided to play an active role in deciding what it means by "good science." Some of the science thus supported may indeed be good science. But science has always proceeded best when it is left totally independent of the political process, and when competing schools of thought are left to slug it out on the scientific battlefield free of political influence or interference.

**The view that conventional tests are some kind of panacea for the nation's educational woes.** Relatively few countries in the world use the kinds of multiple-choice and short-answer tests that are so popular in the United States. They believe that such tests can measure only superficial levels of knowledge. There is nothing wrong, in principle, when these tests are used in conjunction with other kinds of tests. But when used alone, they trivialize the testing of children's skills, leading to an advantage for children who are skilled in the kinds of questions that appear on the tests.

**Turning our schools into test-preparation courses.** Our schools have become, to a large extent, test-preparation courses. At one time we worried that high schools were becoming test-preparation courses for college-entrance tests. Now schools at all levels are enduring the same fate. Worse, scores on one test often do not transfer to another test, so that schools are teaching very specific skills that will be of relatively little use outside the statewide testing program that has promoted them.

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**Insufficient funding.** The No Child Left Behind Act is essentially an unfunded mandate from the federal government. The federal government is now piling up record deficits and is unlikely to put in the money the act would need to succeed in any form. But states are also in the red. So we find ourselves, as a nation, stuck with an act that no one can afford but that the states are required to enact.

**Dividing rather than unifying the world of education.** The act, originally passed with bipartisan support, no longer has the support of many Democrats and some Republicans. Moreover, it does not have the support of many of the nation's schools that are being forced to adhere to it. Forcing upon schools standards dreamed up by politicians never has been, and never will be, the right way to create the best education for our children.

In sum, No Child Left Behind is an act used to produce the nation's educational report card. But it, itself, receives a failing grade. Schools are being straitjacketed in attaining what is best for our children, and straitjackets cannot produce the kind of flourishing education system our children need and deserve.

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Does the nation need a national educational reform act? One could debate the merits of any such legislation. But if the United States is to have such an act, here are some guidelines for what it should look like:

- All major stakeholders should have a role in formulating it, to ensure buy-in from all those who will be affected. To unify the world of education, a new act must be formulated in a totally consultative way, rather than be imposed from above.

- The act should have a clear rationale for its standards of accountability.
- Any mandates of the act should be fully funded.
- The act should recognize that different schools face very different situations with regard to the skills and knowledge base of the student body, level of parental support, funding, educational resources, experience of the teaching staff, and many other variables. These variables must be taken into account in generating expectations for schools.
- The act should have as its priority rewarding success rather than punishing perceived failure. It should not be perceived primarily as punitive.
- The act should recognize the wide range of student accomplishments that are important for success in school and in life—the three R's, but also progress in fields such as the natural and social sciences, the arts (including musical and dramatic ones), and athletics, among other things.
- The act should recognize that achievement is not just about what one knows, but about how one analyzes what one knows, creatively goes beyond what one knows, and applies what one knows in practice.
- The act should recognize that the best testing uses a variety of different kinds of assessments, including conventional assessments as well as assessments that emphasize performances and portfolios.
- The act should indeed stress the importance of science to the practice of education, but scientists alone should decide what constitutes good science. And we must recognize that science is not prepared at this moment to provide answers to all of the problems schools and the teachers in them face.

Most importantly, schools should be places that optimize education—that provide each student with the best possible education. They should not become test-preparation centers.

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**FROM THE ARCHIVES**

**"This Just In: 'No Child' Law Works Well, Says Ed. Dept. 'News' Video,"** October 20, 2004.

**"GAO: States Struggling to Meet School Law,"** October 13, 2004.

**"No Child Left Behind Act Changes Weighed,"** September 22, 2004.

**"Former Ed. Secretary Riley Says Law Needs Change of Emphasis,"** July 30, 2004.

**"Bush Takes On Critics of No Child Left Behind Act,"** May 19, 2004.

**"Federal Law Is Questioned By Governors,"** March 3, 2004.

For background, previous stories, and Web links, read **No Child Left Behind**.

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