

No Child Left Behind Reauthorization

NCLB and Children's Mental Health: Policy Recommendations for the Reauthorization of NCLB

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Executive Summary

Despite the good intentions surrounding the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) many scholars have provided numerous critiques of the law. This issue brief is a summary and expansion of the authors' published article on the topic.¹

Education is on the forefront of our national issues and a sound national policy is crucial in improving our country's schools. Previous criticisms of the NCLB Act have included overly ambitious goals and faulty implementation strategies which have resulted from attempting to meet these goals. This issue brief specifically reviews several criticisms and ultimately suggests how to remedy these problems.

A very large issue impacting education and achievement today is children's mental health. Governmental research reports and independent research studies indicate that children's social and emotional problems are increasing and negatively impacting our educational system. Although mental health is not the focus of the NCLB Act, the authors believe that consideration to this pressing issue should be made in reauthorizing NCLB. The suggestions made in this issue brief are therefore general and not limited to children with mental health problems, but will positively impact such students.

These suggestions include:

1. Changing the content of the exam to be more reflective of a standard academic curriculum, including subjects in addition to literacy and math.
2. Provide a standardized national test, which reduces bias and allows comparability between the states.
3. Ensure the content resembles the minimum information necessary to be considered for passing that child's grade in school. Ask that schools use performance on this test as one of the indicators that a student is ready to progress to the next grade, requiring students to take this test seriously and thereby becoming a better indicator of student achievement.
4. Include both an implementation (what a school does) and an outcome (how students score) component to NCLB, which will emphasize that *how* a school achieves progress is important as well.
5. Children with special needs should be exempted from taking the achievement tests as research indicates taking the test hurts these children's self esteem and fails to accurately estimate school progress.
6. Instead of punishing struggling schools, which consequently punishes their students, provide incentives or rewards for schools that meet process and product goals.
7. Broaden the types of services which can qualify for funding to include programs which improve social and emotional skills, as well as academics. This could include various after-school programs, as well as additional student support staff, such as school counselors and psychologists.

Background

Educators, researchers and policy makers agree that education reform is crucial to our nation's progress. With U.S. academic achievement falling to 18th behind other industrialized countries and a marked achievement gap between minority and white students, reforming our educational system must be a top priority.ⁱⁱ Although the intentions of NCLB are rarely challenged, there are two strong criticisms of NCLB: The specific goals and the implementation.ⁱⁱⁱ

The goal that by 2014, 100% of all children will be academically proficient is not only overly ambitious, it also ignores scientific facts.^{iv} It has been well established that children's academics are greatly influenced by factors outside of the school environment. Particular barriers to student's progress are poverty and disability. Schools should always be held to a high standard, but they cannot be held accountable for situations outside their control.

The issues with implementation focus on the standards the NCLB Act uses for success. The criticisms include only using test scores to measure school success and focusing only on reading and math, a narrow slice of the curriculum. Additionally, the NCLB Act has an equally narrow selection of criteria to define quality teachers, typically involving passing only a measure of their academic knowledge – not a measure of their teaching ability. Finally, punishing struggling schools by taking away much-needed resources will not increase their likelihood of success.^v

Mental Health Issues

When considering policies that impact children's education, it is important to pay attention to emerging issues in the field. One such issue is children's mental health. Approximately 20% of children have academic problems due to social and emotional difficulties, with rates continuing to increase.^{vi} Additionally, rates of violence and bullying are not only on the rise, they are regularly found within the school environment.^{vii} Research indicates that the increase in these disorders and the inability to adequately treat children and adolescents have devastating outcomes to the individual and society.^{viii} Suicide rates among children and adolescents increased by 109% from 1980 to 1997, which has also been found to be the third leading cause of death among adolescents.^{ix} Additionally, the number of children between the age of 7 and 12 appearing in juvenile courts has risen over 33%.^x Problems associated with mental illness are a financial burden on our economy.^{vii} Therefore, the social and emotional lives of children cannot be ignored when developing educational policy.

A child that is both socially and emotionally competent understands social norms and emotions and demonstrates self-esteem, self-confidence and the ability to cope with frustration.^{xi} Research indicates that children with high social-emotional functioning have better school attendance, positive classroom behavior, better grades, higher standardized test scores and higher graduation rates.^{xii} Conversely, poor social and emotional functioning has been linked to poor academic performance, absenteeism, truancy and dropout.^{xiii} Poor social and emotional functioning also affects the entire class; if a child is consistently exhibiting problem behaviors, it is distracting for both the teacher and other students.

Policy Recommendations for the Reauthorization of NCLB

Below are recommendations for the reauthorization of NCLB that apply to both the general criticisms of NCLB and the issues highlighted above in regards to children's increasing mental health problems.

Change the achievement tests

Currently students are required to take one content exam each year that illustrates their literacy and math competence. The content of these tests are determined by each state, and therefore, vary dramatically. Additionally, there is no stake for the student, meaning that if they do not want to take the test or apply no effort in taking the test, there are no individual consequences. Experts in measurement will all agree that this method is not a reliable or valid way of assessing student achievement.

First, the tests are limited in scope to only literacy and math. Unfortunately, this sends a strong message that nothing else is important. Schools are certainly interpreting this message in that manner and are focusing a tremendous amount of class time to only those subjects. How are we to be competitive in a global market if the next generation has lost all sense of history, science, geography, etc. Literacy and math must be part of these competency exams, but should not be the only academic subjects included. **The content of the exams should be based upon a standard academic curriculum** and indicate minimum achievement by grade.

Second, the fact that the tests are determined at a state level means that test results cannot be compared across states. This also means that a state could make it more probable for students to pass or fail based on the content of the test. If NCLB is to choose a valid and reliable measure of student success, **an unbiased national test** based upon each grade should be created for all students.

Finally, the fact that students do not have any stakes in the test-taking procedure is problematic. In many other countries (that educationally outperform the U.S. A.) these tests are **used as one of the indicators that a student is ready to progress to the next grade.**^{xiv} This requires the student to take the situation seriously which will provide a more valid assessment of their actual achievement. Additionally, if the tests were gauges of the minimum knowledge students should possess to progress to the next grade, more students would undoubtedly pass as most students do progress to the next grade.

Change the way progress is measured

Regardless of how much the tests are changed, one test will not be enough to appropriately measure schools' progress. Currently, NCLB compares annual progress on only one test to indicate achievement. These tests are not modified for children with special needs and only a small percentage of students can be excused from the exam.

The message that NCLB is sending by only using student achievement to rate schools is that we are only concerned with product and not process. The message that schools are clearly hearing is: "It is not important *how* you get there, but *that* you get there." Schools across the country have attempted to improve their scores by 'teaching to the test', only teaching reading and math, only focusing their efforts on children nearing proficiency and other unethical and counter-productive strategies.^{xv} The only way to prevent this from occurring is by **including a process component** to the evaluation of schools. A process assessment could include elements which research has indicated are related to the quality of the school: curriculum, pay and resources for teachers,

school climate, parent involvement, student support personnel (school counselors and psychologists) and after-school activities. Evaluating what schools are doing also provides concrete feedback on how a school could improve their outcomes.

Second, by requiring special needs students to take this exam, we are unfairly gauging the school's influence and setting up children for failure. Students with major intellectual impairments will not be able to achieve the same academic progress as other students nor will they progress at the same rate. This is inherent to their disability. Special needs students describe taking this exam as one of the most stressful experiences they endure in school.^{xvi} Many students report that they feel stupid because they cannot answer the questions, which in turn further damages their fragile self esteem. Therefore, **children with special needs should be exempted from taking the achievement test.**

Do not punish failing schools

Currently, schools are punished for not meeting proficiency goals by removing funding or ultimately, closing the school. This kind of consequence causes immense anxiety and stress among school personnel, which filters down to students. Students feel and react to this stress, which negatively impacts their academic performance and perception of school. In addition to the daily struggles that teaching staff face, they are increasingly worried about losing their jobs. This has also directly impacted the number of people planning to become teachers.^{xvii} Although schools need to take accountability for their students, by punishing schools in the way that the original NCLB suggests, we are also punishing the students. Instead, the reauthorization of NCLB should provide **incentives or rewards for schools** which meet process and product goals.

Provide more broad-based resources for schools

Currently, when schools are struggling to meet the proficiency requirements, the only additional funding that they can acquire is tutoring. If a student is having problems that are social and emotional, no amount of tutoring will help their academics. On the contrary, providing school services which address the student's emotional and social skills does actually increase their academic ability. One concrete way in which the NCLB reauthorization can support schools is by **broadening the types of services which can receive additional funding** to include programs which increase social and emotional skills, which will have an impact on academic performance.

This kind of positive programming can vary, but includes music, art, physical movement and other creative in-school and after-school activities. Even though research shows these types of programs to be incredibly successful for improving academics, they are currently being reduced or completely removed from schools because they are not directly related to the content of the test. This is again counterproductive to NCLB's goals.

Conclusion

A national educational reform law is very much needed as our country is falling well behind other countries in educational progress. However, a multitude of researchers and school personnel feel that the way that the NCLB Act was originally written and implemented has led to more problems, rather than less. The Reauthorization of No Child Left Behind is important and has an opportunity to not only correct some of these issues evidenced in the last 7 years, but also to create a strong policy, based on valid and reliable research.

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