In the NCLB era, accountability has focused almost exclusively on basic academic skills. It is time, Mr. Rothstein and Ms. Jacobsen believe, to ask if the accountability system we have is producing the kind of graduates we want.

BY RICHARD ROTHSTEIN AND REBECCA JACOBSEN

N O CHILD Left Behind (NCLB) holds all elementary schools, regardless of student characteristics, accountable for achieving proficient student scores in reading and math. By demanding that schools report achievement for racial, ethnic, and economic subgroups, the accountability system aims to shine a light on schools that "leave children behind."

At first glance, this approach seems reasonable. But few who debate the details of implementation have considered how this accountability system has begun to shift how we think about what schools should do. By basing sanctions solely on math and reading scores, the law creates incentives to limit — or in some cases to eliminate entirely — time spent on other important curricular objectives. This reorientation of instruction disproportionately affects low-income and minority children, so achievement gaps may actually widen in areas for which schools are not now being held accountable.

The shift in curricular coverage is also at odds with the consensus about the goals of public education to which Americans historically have subscribed. More surprisingly, it is also starkly at odds with the apparent intentions of school board members and state legislators, who are responsible for implementing the policy, and with the intentions of the public whom these leaders represent. We will discuss the evidence with regard to these intentions later in this article. For now, let us begin by documenting the goal displacement stimulated by NCLB.

The federal government’s periodic national survey of teachers demonstrates the curricular shifts. In 1991, teachers in grades 1 to 4 spent an average of 33% of their classroom instructional time on reading. By 2004, reading was consuming 36% of instructional time. For math, average weekly time went from 15% to 17%. Meanwhile, time for social studies and science decreased. Since 1991, instructional time spent on social studies went from 9% to 8%, and time spent on science went from 8% to 7%.

These seemingly small average changes mask a disproportionate impact on the most disadvantaged students. The Council for Basic Education surveyed school principals in several states in the fall of 2003 and found that principals in schools with high proportions of minorities were more likely to have reduced time for history, civics, geography, the arts, and foreign languages so that they could devote more time to math and reading. In New York, for example, twice as many principals in high-minority schools reported such curricular shifts as did principals in mostly white schools. In high-minority elementary schools, 38% of principals re-
ported decreasing the time devoted to social studies (usually meaning history), but in low-minority schools only 17% reported decreasing such time.  

A 2005 survey by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) found that 97% of high-poverty districts had new minimum-time requirements for reading, while only 55% of low-poverty districts had them. The CEP had previously found that, where districts had adopted such minimum-time policies, about half had reduced social studies, 43% had reduced art and music, and 27% had reduced physical education.

Thus, although NCLB aims to narrow the achievement gap in math and reading, its unintended consequence is to widen the gap in other curricular areas. This is how one former teacher describes her changed classroom activities:

> From my experience of being an elementary school teacher at a low-performing urban school in Los Angeles, I can say that the pressure became so intense that we had to show how every single lesson we taught connected to a standard that was going to be tested. This meant that art, music, and even science and social studies were not a priority and were hardly ever taught. We were forced to spend ninety percent of the instructional time on reading and math. This made teaching boring for me and was a huge part of why I decided to leave the profession.

These distortions did not begin with NCLB. They developed gradually in the 1990s as states implemented similar accountability policies. A 2001 analysis by researchers at the University of Colorado found positive effects of higher math and reading standards, but these gains were offset by losses in other areas, especially in activities that developed citizenship, social responsibility, and cooperative behavior. One Colorado teacher reported:

> Our district has told us to focus on reading, writing, and mathematics. . . . In the past I had hatched out baby chicks in the classroom as part of a science unit. I don’t have time to do that. I have dissected body parts, and I don’t have time to do that. . . . We don’t take as many field trips. We don’t do community outreach like we used to, like visiting the nursing home or cleaning up the park because we had adopted a park and that was our job to keep it clean. Well, we don’t have time for that anymore.

Some from outside the world of education have expressed concern about these developments. In testimony before a U.S. Senate committee, the historian David McCullough observed, “Because of No Child Left Behind, sadly, history is being put on the back burner or taken off the stove altogether in many or most schools, in favor of math or reading.” Retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor now co-chairs a “Campaign for the Civic Mission of
Schools,” which laments that, under NCLB, “as civic learning has been pushed aside, society has neglected a fundamental purpose of American education, putting the health of our democracy at risk.” And U.S. Senator Robert Byrd (D-W. Va.) has reacted to the insufficient attention civics receives in public schools by successfully sponsoring legislation requiring that every educational institution in the nation teach about the federal Constitution each September 17. It can hardly be considered a reasonable solution to have Congress mandate specific days of instruction for each of the many education goals now being deemphasized under the testing pressure of NCLB.

The growing national diabetes epidemic also shows how accountability for math and reading alone can exacerbate inequity in other important aspects of schooling. On average, blacks are 60% more likely to have diabetes than whites of similar age. (The incidence of the disease is even higher for Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans.) One cause of this epidemic, though not the only one, is the decline in physical activity among young people, particularly minority youths. This, in turn, results partly from the substitution of greater test preparation in math and reading for gym classes. Black elementary school children are 50% more likely to be overweight than their white peers, while white children are twice as likely as black children to take part in organized daily physical activity.

In 2004, the Centers for Disease Control noted that 20% of black children in elementary schools were overweight, compared to 14% of white elementary-schoolers. Not surprisingly, 47% of whites in fourth to eighth grades (the years of NCLB testing) participate in organized daily physical activity, while just 24% of blacks do so. Meanwhile, 18% of black high school students and 12% of white high school students are overweight. From 2001 to 2003, as academic standards were raised and high school exit exams developed, the proportion of white high school students participating in daily physical education was essentially unchanged, but the proportion of blacks participating in daily physical education declined substantially.

It is clear that black students, whose academic performance, on average, is lower and who have been enrolled, on average, in fewer academic courses, are more likely to be affected by increased academic requirements. But because black students are less likely to have opportunities to participate in out-of-school sports, they also are more dependent on adequate physical education programs in school to protect their health. Overall, considering both in- and out-of-school exercise, the CDC found that, in 2003, 65% of white high school students participated in a sufficient amount of strenuous physical activity (such as playing basketball or soccer, running, swimming laps, bicycling fast, dancing fast, or engaging in similar aerobic activities) for good health, while only 55% of black high school students did so.

NCLB’s role in distorting the curriculum is not recognized by those who promoted and continue to support the law. Consequently, some may be having second thoughts. Robert Schwartz, for example, was the founding president of Achieve, Inc., the joint business/governors’ group that was largely responsible for the testing and accountability demands that culminated in NCLB. He now writes:

The goal of equipping all students with a solid foundation of academic knowledge and skills is leading to an undue narrowing of curricular choices and a reduction in the kinds of learning opportunities for academically at-risk students that are most likely to engage and motivate them to take school seriously. This is a painful acknowledgment from someone who considers himself a charter member of the standards movement.

But other NCLB supporters take pride in how the curriculum has been reshaped by testing, notwithstanding the loss of attention to important, but nontested, subjects. Responding to a report by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation showing how NCLB’s focus on math and reading has led schools to diminish the time devoted to science instruc-
tion, Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings boasted, “I’m a what-gets-measured-gets-done kind of gal,” and claimed that the solution was to test science as well. Yet, while science tests are to be added to NCLB in 2007-08, schools will not be held accountable for the results. Even in the unlikely event that tests created for informational purposes only would serve as incentives to redirect teaching time back to science, the Spellings approach says nothing about the many other areas of knowledge and behavioral traits that are being dropped from curricula by schools held accountable only for math and reading.

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The current overemphasis on basic academic skills is a historical aberration. Throughout American history, we have held a more expansive set of goals for our public schools.

When the Founders endorsed the need for public education, their motives were mostly political. Learning to read was less important than, and only a means toward, helping citizens make wise political decisions. History instruction was thought to teach students good judgment, enabling them to learn from prior generations’ mistakes and successes and inspiring them to develop such character traits as honesty, integrity, and compassion. The Founders had no doubt that schools could produce students who exhibited these traits, and it would never have occurred to them that instruction in reading and arithmetic alone would guarantee good citizenship.

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As for academics, Franklin thought history particularly important, because “questions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, will naturally arise” as students debate historical issues “in conversation and in writing.” Students, Franklin insisted, should also read newspapers and discuss current controversies, thereby developing their logic and reasoning.

George Washington’s goals for public schools were also political and moral. In his first message to Congress, he advocated public schools that would teach students “to value their own rights” and “to distinguish between oppression and the necessary exercise of lawful authority.” His farewell address warned that, because public opinion influences policy in a democracy, “it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened” by schools that teach virtue and morality. He wanted to go even further, but his speechwriter (Alexander Hamilton) cut from the farewell address a plea for a national public university that would encourage tolerance of diversity, bringing together students of different backgrounds to show them there is no basis for their “jealousies and prejudices.”

Thomas Jefferson, the Founder most often linked with education in the public mind, thought universal public education needed primarily to prepare voters to exercise wise judgment. He wanted not what we now call “civics education” — learning how government works, how bills are passed, how long a President’s term is, and so on. Rather, Jefferson thought schools could prepare voters to think critically about candidates and their positions and then choose wisely. Toward the end of his life, he proposed a public education system for the state of Virginia:

To give to every citizen the information he needs for the transaction of his own business; to enable him to calculate for himself, and to express and preserve his ideas, his contracts and accounts in writing; to improve, by reading, his morals and faculties; to understand his duties to his neighbors and country, and to discharge with competence the functions confided to him by either; to know his rights; to exercise with order and justice those he retains, to choose with discretion the fiduciary of those he delegates; and to notice their conduct with diligence, with candor and judgment; and in general, to observe with intelligence and faithfulness all the social relations under which he shall be placed.

As the 19th century progressed, the earliest labor unions insisted that public schools promote social reform. Anticipating by nearly two centuries our contemporary accountability policies, union leaders of the time feared that public schools for the poor would include only basic reading and arithmetic and not the more important intellectual de-
velopment that could empower the working class.

In 1830, a workingmen's committee examined Pennsylvania's urban public schools, which mostly served the poor while rich children attended private schools. The committee denounced the urban schools for instruction that "extends [no] further than a tolerable proficiency in reading, writing, and arithmetic." The committee added: "There can be no real liberty without a wide diffusion of real intelligence. . . . Education, instead of being limited as in our public poor schools, to a simple acquaintance with words and cyphers, should tend, as far as possible, to the pro-

duction of a just disposition, virtuous habits, and a rational self governing character." Equality, the committee concluded, is but "an empty shadow" if poor children don't get an "equal education . . . in the habits, in the manners, and in the feelings of the community."19

In 1837, Horace Mann was elected secretary of the newly created Massachusetts Board of Education and thereafter wrote 12 annual reports to encourage support for public schools. One report stressed the importance of teaching vocal music. Another, following Mann's visit to Europe, concluded that universal basic education in reading and arithmetic did not alone ensure democratic values. Prussian students were literate, after all, but supported autocracy. Mann concluded that schools in a democracy could not be held accountable for academics alone but must inculcate democratic moral and political values so that literacy would not be misused. In his last report, Mann articulated a list of goals for education that included health and physical education, intellectual (academic) education, political education, moral education, and religious education (by which he meant teaching the ethical principles on which all religions agreed).

As schooling expanded in the early 1900s, the federal Bureau of Education commissioned a 1918 report, the Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education. Although some contemporary academic historians have popularized the notion that the Cardinal Principles turned American education away from academic skills, this is an exaggeration. In fact, the commission that produced the document asserted that "much of the energy of the elementary school is properly devoted to teaching certain fundamental processes, such as reading, writing, arithmetical computations, and the elements of oral and written expression" and that the secondary school should be devoted to the application of these processes.20 But the document argued that academic skills were not enough; it continued in the tradition of the Founders and educators like Horace Mann by urging a balanced approach to the goals of education.

As its first goal, the commission listed physical activity for students, instruction in personal hygiene, and instruction in public health. Its second goal was academic skills.

The Cardinal Principles report devoted more space to civic education than to any other goal, stressing that schools should teach "good judgment" in political matters and that students can learn democratic habits only if classrooms and schools are run by democratic methods.

Third was preparation for the traditional household division of labor between men and women. Fourth was vocational education, including the selection of jobs appropriate to each student's abilities and interests, as well as maintenance of good relationships with fellow workers. Like the Founders, the commission emphasized in its fifth goal the need for civic education: preparation to participate in the neighborhood, town or city, state, and nation. The Cardinal Principles report devoted more space to civic education than to any other goal, stressing that schools should teach "good judgment" in political matters and that students can learn democratic habits only if classrooms and schools are run by democratic methods. Even the study of literature should "kindle social ideals."

The sixth goal was "worthy use of leisure," or student appreciation of literature, art, and music. And last, the seventh goal, ethical character, was described as paramount in a democratic society. It included developing a sense of personal responsibility, initiative, and the "spirit of service."21 Two decades later, the National Education Association (NEA), then a quasi-governmental group that included not only teachers but all professionals and policy makers in education, was considering how public schools should respond to the Great Depression. Its 1938 report, written by a federal education official, set forth what it called the "social-economic goals" of American education.

Echoing Horace Mann's reflections following his visit to Prussia, the NEA report proclaimed: "The safety of democracy will not be assured merely by making education universal"; in other words, simply by making all Ameri-
cans literate. “The task is not so easy as that. The dictatorships [Germany, Italy, Japan, and the Soviet Union] have universal schooling and use this very means to prevent the spread of democratic doctrines and institutions.” Teaching democratic values and habits had to be an explicit focus of schools and could not be assumed to flow automatically from proficiency in reading and math. The essential ability to distinguish between demagogues and statesmen “demands the ability to read accurately, to organize facts, to weigh evidence, and to separate truth from falsehood.” Schools, it went on, should also develop students’ morality: justice and fair dealing, honesty, truthfulness, maintenance of group understandings, proper respect for authority, tolerance and respect for others, habits of cooperation, and work habits such as industry and self-control, along with endurance and physical strength.

The report argued that school time for social studies should be increased and should include room for a broad background in social and economic history, as well as ongoing discussion of current affairs. “Good teaching demands that pupils be habituated in weighing the evidence on all sides of a question,” it said. Schools should also develop a commitment to support social and economic equality. School-sponsored extracurricular and community activities might be the most effective ways of reaching these goals, the report said.

Prefiguring our contemporary dilemmas, the 1938 report went on to warn:

Most of the standardized testing instruments [and written examinations] used in schools today deal largely with information. . . . There should be a much greater concern with the development of attitudes, interests, ideals, and habits. To focus tests exclusively on the acquisition and retention of information may recognize objectives of education which are relatively unimportant. Measuring the results of education must be increasingly concerned with such questions as these: Are the children growing in their ability to work together for a common end? Do they show greater skill in collecting and weighing evidence? Are they learning to be fair and tolerant in situations where conflicts arise? Are they sympathetic in the presence of suffering and indignant in the presence of injustice? Do they show greater concern about questions of civic, social, and economic importance? Are they using their spending money wisely? Are they becoming more skillful in doing some useful type of work? Are they more honest, more reliable, more temperate, more humane? Are they finding happiness in their present family life? Are they living in accordance with the rules of health? Are they acquiring skills in using all of the fundamental tools of learning? Are they curious about the natural world around them? Do they appreciate, each to the fullest degree possible, their rich inheritance in art, literature, and music? Do they balk at being led around by their prejudices?

This broad consensus that schools should be accountable for more than just the basic skills was also supported by the conservative economist Milton Friedman, who in 1955 first called for vouchers to permit any student to attend any public or private school. But unlike today’s privatization advocates (who claim him as their intellectual father), Friedman specified that schools participating in his plan must meet minimum goals established by the public. He distinguished between outcomes that exclusively benefit students themselves (in higher earnings) and outcomes that benefit the community, for which all schools should be accountable. Friedman wrote, “A stable and democratic society is impossible without widespread acceptance of some common set of values and without a minimum degree of literacy and knowledge on the part of most citizens.” In elementary school, “the three R’s cover most of the ground,” but secondary schools must show that they train students “for citizenship and community leadership” as a condition of receiving public funds.

Shortly after Friedman’s call, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund convened leaders from many fields to make public policy recommendations. Nelson Rockefeller (subsequently New York’s governor and Gerald Ford’s vice president)
 chaired the overall project, with Henry Kissinger (who later served as secretary of state) as its staff director. The Rockefeller Report, as it was known, asked, How “may we best prepare our young people to keep their individuality, initiative, creativity in a highly organized, intricately meshed society? . . . Our conception of excellence must embrace

many kinds of achievement. . . . There is excellence in abstract intellectual activity, in art, in music, in managerial activities, in craftsmanship, in human relations, in technical work.”

The Rockefeller Report recognized that testing would gain importance for sorting future scientists and leaders. But, the panel warned, “Decisions based on test scores must be made with the awareness of the . . . qualities of character that are a necessary ingredient of great performance[:] . . . aspiration or purpose . . . courage, vitality or determination.”

For the last 20 years, lawsuits have argued that states have an obligation to finance an “adequate” education, and state courts have had to define what this means. True to American traditions, the courts have proposed definitions that extend far beyond adequacy as measured by test scores alone.

The earliest decision in this line of cases was issued in 1976 by the New Jersey Supreme Court, which found a constitutional requirement for the state to provide a “thorough and efficient education” that enables graduates to become “citizens and competitors in the labor market.” The court later elaborated:

Thorough and efficient means more than teaching . . . skills needed to compete in the labor market. . . . It means being able to fulfill one’s role as a citizen, a role that encompasses far more than merely registering to vote. It means the ability to participate fully in society, in the life of one’s community, the ability to appreciate music, art, and literature, and the ability to share all of that with friends.

These are goals sought by wealthy districts, the court said, and must be pursued in low-income urban areas as well.

Three years later, in 1979, the West Virginia Supreme Court issued a decision that became a model for other states. It defined a “thorough and efficient” education as one that develops “the minds, bodies, and social morality of its charges to prepare them for useful and happy occupa-

The exclusive emphasis of NCLB on basic academic outcomes is not entirely new. There have been previous efforts to assert the primacy of academic training. Yet most Americans have wanted both the academic focus and the social and political outcomes. Holding schools accountable only for math and reading is an extreme position, which rarely has enjoyed significant support.

(1) literacy; (2) ability to add, subtract, multiply and divide numbers; (3) knowledge of government to the extent that the child will be equipped as a citizen to make informed choices among persons and issues that affect his or her own governance; (4) self-knowledge and knowledge of his or her total environment to allow the child to intelligently choose life work — to know his or her options; (5) work-training and advanced academic training as the child may intelligently choose; (6) recreational pursuits; (7) interests in all creative arts, such as music, theater, literature, and the visual arts; (8) social ethics, both behavioral and abstract, to facilitate compatibility with others in this society.

The Kentucky Supreme Court followed with a similar ruling, one subsequently cited by many other state courts.

BALANCED ACCOUNTABILITY

We should not conclude from this review that the exclusive emphasis of NCLB on basic academic outcomes is entirely new. There have been previous efforts to assert the primacy of academic training. Yet most Americans have wanted both the academic focus and the social and political outcomes. Holding schools accountable only for math and reading is an extreme position, which rarely has enjoyed significant support.

Last year, we attempted to synthesize these goals for public education that had been established over 250 years
of American history. We defined eight broad goal areas that seemed to be prominent in each era, although certainly emphases changed from generation to generation. We then presented these goals to representative samples of all American adults, of school board members, of state legislators, and of school superintendents, and we asked the respondents to assign a relative importance to each of the goal areas. Average responses of all adults, board members, legislators, and superintendents were very similar. Table 1 shows how the surveyed groups of Americans would structure an accountability system if its aim was to hold schools responsible for achieving a balanced set of outcomes.

What is most curious about these survey findings is that they take account of the goals of state representatives and school board members, two groups of public officials who have been aggressive in the past two decades about establishing school accountability systems that expect performance only in basic skills. This gap between the preferences that respondents expressed in our surveys and the educational standards established through political processes reflects a widespread policy incoherence.

American schools should be held accountable for results. But an accountability system consisting almost exclusively of standardized tests is a travesty and a betrayal of our historic commitments. What would an accountability system look like if it created incentives for schools to pursue a balanced set of goals?

Such a system would certainly include standardized tests of basic academic skills, but it would also include some standardized measures in other areas. For example, tests of physical fitness (measuring things like upper body strength) and simple measures of body weight should be added to shed light on the efficacy of schools’ physical education programs. Under a balanced accountability system, schools that sacrifice essential physical education for excessive drill in math and reading would lose their incentives to undertake such distorted practices.

A balanced accountability system would also make use of measures that are more difficult to standardize but equally valid. Student writing and analysis of contemporary issues, as well as student performances in the arts, in scientific

| Table 1. Selected Americans’ Views on Relative Importance of Public School Goals |
|-----------------------------------------|------------------|
| **Goal Area**                          | **Relative Importance (%)** |
| Basic Academic Skills in Core Subjects  | 22                             |
| Reading, writing, math, knowledge of science and history. | |
| Critical Thinking and Problem Solving   | 18                             |
| Ability to analyze and interpret information, use computers to develop knowledge, apply ideas to new situations. | |
| Social Skills and Work Ethic            | 12                             |
| Good communication skills, personal responsibility, ability to get along well with others and work with others from different backgrounds. | |
| Citizenship and Community Responsibility| 11                             |
| Knowledge of how government works and of how to participate in civic activities like voting, volunteering, and becoming active in communities. | |
| Preparation for Skilled Work            | 10                             |
| Vocational, career, and technical education that will qualify youths for skilled employment that does not require a college degree. | |
| Physical Health                         | 9                              |
| A foundation for lifelong physical health, including good habits of exercise and nutrition. | |
| Emotional Health                        | 9                              |
| Tools to develop self-confidence, respect for others, and the ability to resist peer pressure to engage in irresponsible personal behavior. | |
| The Arts and Literature                 | 9                              |
| Capacity to participate in and appreciate the musical, visual, and performing arts. Development of a love of literature. | |

* Respondents were asked to rate the relative importance of each goal area by assigning percentages to each. If a respondent’s choices summed to more or less than 100%, the software program rejected this error and asked for a revised set of choices so that the sum would equal 100%. The percentages shown are simple averages of the average responses for each of the four surveyed groups — U.S. adults, school board members, state legislators, and school superintendents.
experimentation, and in debates, would also be included. School accountability does not require such assessments of every student every year. A random sample of students, drawn periodically, would suffice.

Accountability also requires less immediately assessable measures that nonetheless are reflections of school adequacy. Shouldn’t we judge a school’s civics program by whether young graduates register and vote, participate as volunteers in their communities, or contribute to charity? Shouldn’t we judge the adequacy of students’ literacy instruction as much by whether, as young adults, they read for pleasure and to stay well informed as by whether, as young children, they scored well on tests of decoding? Shouldn’t we judge the adequacy of students’ physical education by whether, as young adults, they exercise regularly?

A balanced accountability system also requires school inspections that cannot be organized from Washington, D.C. Teams that visit schools for accountability purposes should differ from today’s accreditation teams by including, in addition to professional educators, political appointees, members of the business community, and representatives of labor and community groups. These teams should judge not only the quality of school facilities, but also the quality of instruction. They should examine whether students are engaged in the kind of group activities likely to develop the team work so valued by employers. They should observe classroom discussions to determine if these are likely to develop the kind of critical thinking that leads to intelligent voters.

Today, we are a long way from establishing an accountability system that is true to American traditions and to our contemporary goals for public schools. We could move toward such a system, but NCLB is taking us in the opposite direction.


3. From the Capital to the Classroom: Year 4 of the No Child Left Behind Act (Washington, D.C.: Center on Education Policy, 2006), Figure 4-A, p. 97.

4. From the Capital to the Classroom: Year 3 of the No Child Left Behind Act (Washington, D.C.: Center on Education Policy, 2005), Table 1-1, p. 22.


21. Ibid., pp. 11-16.


23. Ibid., pp. 153-54.


26. Ibid., p. 29.


29. Because giving weights to eight categories is too cognitively complex a task for a telephone interview, respondents worked over a secure website or, if they were not computer literate, over a device provided to them that could be attached to their television sets. A full description of the survey methodology and detailed results will appear in a forthcoming publication by the authors.