



## POINT OF VIEW

# NCLB: Fix It, Don't Nix It

There is both good and bad in the No Child Left Behind Act, Ms. Butzin argues. Aspects of the law that benefit children should be retained, but those aspects that encourage corruption and stifle creativity should be removed.

BY SARAH M. BUTZIN

**T**HE GOOD, the bad, and the ugly. As the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act comes up for reauthorization in Congress this year, everyone is taking sides. The detractors believe the law should be called “No School Left Standing” and fear that its real intent is to destroy public education. The supporters believe that NCLB has banished mediocrity and exposed the dirty little secret that poor and minority children were being passed along and left behind as teachers made excuses and blamed the children for their poor performance. No one seems ambivalent where NCLB is concerned.

Some have observed that support for NCLB increases the further one gets from the classroom. Politicians and busi-

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ness leaders love it. Teachers are nearly unanimous in their opposition. Typically, no one asks the students. But I'm guessing they, too, would not speak highly of the pressure and stress placed upon them to test well.

I fall somewhere in the middle of the debate. As a long-time educator who now works with elementary educators across the country as they are trying to teach “outside the box” using an instructional method called Project CHILD (Changing How Instruction for Learning is Delivered), I have been observing the implementation of NCLB up close and personal. It hasn't been a pretty sight. NCLB has been stifling innovation, rather than encouraging it, as the law had intended. And it needs to be fixed.

The original aims of NCLB were to provide standards, accountability, and choice. The idea was to establish a set of basic academic standards that all students should achieve, hold schools accountable for meeting these standards for all their students, and then give educators the choice of how to meet the standards. In addition, parents of students attending failing schools would be given choices to obtain free supplemental tutoring or to use vouchers to send their children elsewhere. These are noble goals and seemed to offer hope for transforming the old style of education for the 21st century.

But something else happened along the way. The educational bureaucracies at the U.S. Department of Education and state education agencies added more rules and regulations than ever, even micromanaging the number of minutes of reading that had to be taught each day and prescribing certain textbooks that had to be used. Likewise, the hustlers and unscrupulous vendors seized on the opportunity to game the system and rake in millions of tax dollars for their untested ventures and ill-conceived charter schools that became virtual cookie jars for some charter operators.

But it's not too late to return to the original intention of NCLB and fine-tune it. Fix it, don't nix it. It would be a shame to return to the old days of low expectations and one-size-fits-all teaching. But NCLB, as it is currently administered and implemented, must be fixed before all our creative teachers leave the profession in disgust and more children drop out of the system altogether. Here are a few suggestions.

*Standards.* Redefine the basics to incorporate the research on multiple intelligences, while admitting the commonsense

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notion that not every child has the aptitude for subjects like advanced algebra. Children are talented in different ways, from athletics to the arts, interpersonal skills, and the like. Insist that every child who has the intellectual capability must be able to read, write, and do basic math by the time he or she leaves elementary school. If some children continue to struggle with the basics despite extra time and help, do not retain them for multiple years in the third grade as happens now. Instead, start those children on a different path so they can be successful according to where their talents lie.

Beyond elementary school, give students more choices to explore multiple subjects. High school needs to be completely revamped to take advantage of technology and the world beyond the classroom. As one bright student I know told his dad, "High school is killing my mind." The idea of "majors" in high school that Florida is starting to put in place is one step in the right direction.

Continue to insist on "highly qualified teachers," but broaden the definition to include experience and pedagogical skills, rather than solely credentials and coursework. There are many successful teachers who have been deemed "unqualified" and unfairly stigmatized under NCLB. Reward teachers based on student outcomes that are more broadly defined, as discussed above.

*Accountability.* Continue to rely on well-designed tests to measure certain academic skills, but broaden the notion of accountability to include affective measures, such as school climate, safety, and job satisfaction of the faculty and staff. Tweak the measures of AYP (adequate yearly progress) for all subgroups of students in order to take account of the reality that children who do not speak English, who come from homes with no parental support, and who are influenced by other factors outside the school's control may not progress at the same rate as more fortunate students. These are not excuses; these are realities.

Level the playing field to ensure that all entities that accept public tax dollars are held to the same standards as the public schools. The belief that private schools and home schools can be monitored and held accountable by parents alone is nonsense. Not all parents make good choices, as evidenced by the tragic numbers of abused and neglected children in our foster care system. And there is a compelling public interest in protecting children from the bad schools that bad parents choose for them. Not all choice is good.

Tighten up accountability for the private providers of supplemental educational services (SES). They should receive tax dollars only on the basis of student outcomes. How do we know that all these funds diverted from the public schools to private vendors have paid off in improved student performance? The entire SES program is ripe for an auditor gen-

eral's inspection, including an investigation of reports of vendors paying off parents to choose to enroll their children in particular programs.

*Choice.* Broaden the definition of choice to include opportunities to choose innovation over stagnation. Remove the restrictive requirements that stifle proven programs and methods that work. For example, several schools in Florida have been forced to abandon using our Project CHILD program despite the schools' 99% success rate on the third-grade Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. It seems that the teamwork and specialized methods of Project CHILD fall outside the 90-minute rule for uninterrupted reading instruction and the rule that every elementary teacher must teach reading. Other successful programs have experienced the same fate if they are not on the "approved" list of textbooks that each district is required to purchase. And why require textbooks at all? Is this the standard we want to set for children in the age of technology?

Continue to offer parents the choice to have their children attend high-quality schools that meet their needs and to escape failing schools. Competition is good, for it alerts schools to the reality that what they are offering is not satisfying to their clients. Charter schools also need to be freed from the curriculum regulations and restraints that limit their ability to innovate.

Public education today is at a crossroads. I hope our leaders have the wisdom to keep the good in NCLB, fix the bad, and throw out the ugly. **K**

File Name and Bibliographic Information

**k0706but.pdf**

**Sarah M. Butzin, NCLB: Fix It, Don't Nix It, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 88, No. 10, June 2007, pp. 768-769.**

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