
NCLB and the Competitiveness Agenda:

Happy Collaboration or a Collision Course?

Some see the Administration's American Competitiveness Initiative as the perfect complement to NCLB's equity focus. Mr. Hess and Mr. Rotherham, however, are not so sanguine about the prospects for synergy.

BY FREDERICK M. HESS AND ANDREW J. ROTHERHAM

AMERICAN SCHOOLS have spent the last five years under the spotlight of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The statute's relentless push to close the racial achievement gap and pursue universal proficiency in reading and math has focused unprecedented attention on basic instruction.

However, this push has also raised concerns about a slighting of high-achieving students and about inattention to advanced instruction and the dictates of national "competitiveness." These concerns have taken on a more pressing cast in the past three years, a period backlit by Thomas Friedman's best seller, *The World Is Flat*, and by the growing recognition that modern communications, transportation, and financial markets have created an increasingly global economy in which high-level science, math, and language skills are crucial to national well-being.

Of course, for all the popular attention that Friedman has garnered, his point is hardly new. Robert Reich, secretary of labor under President Bill Clinton, made many of the same arguments in his influential 1992 book, *The Work of Nations*. The fears about China and India today are more than a little reminiscent of — and tinged with the same hysteria as — discussions of "Japan, Inc." in the 1980s. Nonetheless, the shrinking American manufacturing sector and the accelerating "off-shoring" of service jobs — including a growing number of white-collar positions — have sparked much concern about the rate at which America is producing engineers, scientists, and graduates conversant in multiple languages.

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In 2005 the National Academy of Sciences reported, "Having reviewed trends in the U.S. and abroad, the committee is deeply concerned that the scientific and technical building blocks of our economic leadership are eroding at a time when many other nations are gathering strength."¹ In 2006 ETS reported that 61% of opinion leaders identify math, science, and technology skills as the most important ingredients in determining whether the United States will continue to compete successfully in the global economy.²

Addressing such concerns, the Bush Administration launched its "American Competitiveness Initiative" (ACI) in early 2006. The Administration announced at the time:

The President has launched the ACI to help our students do better in math and science. We will train 70,000 high school teachers to lead Advanced Placement courses in math and science, bring 30,000 math and science professionals to teach in classrooms, and give early help to students who struggle with math. If we ensure America's children have the skills they need to succeed in life, they will ensure America succeeds in the world.³

What does this new emphasis on competitiveness mean for schooling? Is it consistent with the requirements of No Child Left Behind that have so thoroughly dominated education policy for the past five years? Are the two agendas on a collision course? And what are the implications for the future of federal education policy?

A BIT OF HISTORY

Historically, there always has been an unavoidable tension between efforts to bolster American "competitiveness" (read: efforts to boost the performance of elite students, especially in science, math, and engineering) and those to promote educational equity. Champions of particular federal initiatives tend to argue that the two notions are complementary, but history shows that the ascendance of one tends to distract from attention paid to the other. For instance, the great investment of energy in high achievers in math, science, and language by the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 largely dissipated when the Johnson Administration and the Washington education community turned their attention to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the equity agenda of the Great Society.

Congress enacted the NDEA at the height of the Cold War as a hurried response to the Soviet Union's 1957 launch of Sputnik I. Intended to ensure the U.S. an adequate supply of scientists, engineers, and individuals with specialized

training, the law included money for college loans and graduate fellowships; funds for improving science, math, and foreign language instruction, especially in elementary and secondary schools; and resources for expanded vocational and technical training.

Seven years later, in 1965, ESEA signaled a new direction in federal policy. Specifically, it aimed to expand and improve opportunities for America's "educationally disadvantaged children" through compensatory programs for the poor.⁴ ESEA did not provide blanket grants to all schools; instead, it allocated extra funding to districts with the highest proportion of low-income students. This focus on bridging the achievement gap between the "haves" and "have-nots" was central to the Johnson Administration's War on Poverty, and it couldn't have been more different from the dictates of "national defense" that had shaped NDEA seven years earlier.

Johnson claimed that ESEA, through its Title I provision, would help "five million children of poor families overcome their greatest barrier to progress: poverty."⁵ ESEA provided funding to develop school library resources, buy textbooks and instructional materials, establish after-school programs of enrichment and remediation, enhance professional development, recruit and train personnel, and improve the health and safety of urban schools.

By the 1980s the zeitgeist had once again shifted. Amid concerns that "Japan, Inc." was consigning the U.S. to history's dustbin, policy makers picked up the competitiveness banner. In 1983 *A Nation at Risk* challenged states to raise achievement across the board and reinvigorate programs for high-achieving students. This influential report fretted that the U.S. had engaged in "unilateral educational disarmament" while competing for markets against other industrial, educated nations. In 1984 President Reagan declared, "Strengthening values also demands a national commitment to excellence in education. . . . [America's schools] need tougher standards, more homework, merit pay for teachers, discipline, and parents back in charge."⁶ In the 1980s the standards movement was born in answer to this challenge.

In 1989, at the Charlottesville Summit, the first President Bush and the nation's governors assembled to map out a set of ambitious goals that embraced both equity and achievement. In doing so, they gave a national platform to contemporary notions of standards and accountability. The dual focus on equity and achievement did not last long. The end of the Cold War and the rapidly receding threat posed by Japan led federal policy makers to put the competitiveness agenda on the back burner and turn their attention to more salient concerns, particularly the desperate condition of urban schooling. The "rigor-centric" reforms of the 1980s were

dropped or defanged in all but four or five states, while “adequacy” lawsuits and growing attention to “achievement gaps” elevated the equity agenda.

That push for equity culminated in 2001 with congressional enactment of No Child Left Behind (the reauthorization of the old ESEA), a law marked by its relentless attention to elementary and middle school math and reading achievement, race- and income-based achievement gaps, and “universal proficiency.” Today, once again, there is concern that we are failing to attend to the dictates of competitiveness.

NCLB AND ACI

In some form or other, NCLB was a necessary and inevitable development. For too long, inadequate instruction in essential skills and abysmal performance by poor, black, and Latino children have been tacitly accepted as the status quo. At the same time, in 21st-century America it’s more than a little unfortunate that NCLB has largely reduced the education debates to questions of proficiency in reading and math, testing, and achievement gaps. It’s worth noting, however, that this unfortunate development has as much to do with questionable school and district management as with the law itself.

NCLB was largely the product of frustration. It was crafted by Washington policy makers fed up with the seeming refusal of educators to accept responsibility for mediocre performance or to concede the need to address schools that were massively failing black, Latino, and poor children. As analysts have explained,

Democrats and Republicans grew increasingly angry with state and local officials whom they saw as endlessly demanding more money, committed to explaining all the reasons why high expectations were unrealistic, and overly occupied with explaining why standards, testing, pay-for-performance, and accountability systems were incredibly difficult to implement. In a real sense, NCLB was a mighty yawp of frustration uttered by Washington policy makers tired of nicely asking educators to cooperate — and ready to ruffle some feathers.⁷

On the strength of its bipartisan support, NCLB passed the U.S. House on a 381-41 vote and the U.S. Senate, 87-10.⁸

The Bush Administration’s assertive stance on NCLB was defined by the President’s fervent embrace of test-based accountability, his denunciation of the “soft bigotry of low expectations,” and his declaration at the signing ceremony that the law would set America’s schools “on a new path of reform, and a new path of results.” Bush’s enthusiasm

was equaled on the other side of the aisle, where such leading Democrats as Massachusetts Sen. Ted Kennedy and California Rep. George Miller echoed the President’s rhetoric and hailed the law as a signal victory for poor and minority children.

Aside from the inclusion of science in NCLB, this mighty congressional “yawp” swamped sensible concerns that NCLB might shift attention from or undermine support for advanced instruction. Today, 71% of adults think that U.S. high schools are falling behind when it comes to helping students compete for scientific and engineering jobs against students from other countries, and 64% reportedly think that education reform is necessary if America is to remain globally competitive in the next decade.⁹ Sen. Kennedy has declared, “Perhaps nowhere is it more obvious that we are falling behind than in math and science. For a nation that prides itself on innovation and discovery, the downward slide is shocking.”¹⁰

Amidst this atmosphere of urgency, President Bush unveiled his American Competitiveness Initiative in January 2006. The plan called for \$5.9 billion in new spending in fiscal 2007 and more than \$136 billion in spending over the course of the next decade. Despite the rhetorical centrality of education in the policy debate on “competitive-

ness," the vast majority of this new money would fund not K-12 schooling or teacher preparation but research agencies and R&D. Over 10 years, the Administration proposed \$50 billion in new spending for the National Science Foundation, the Department of Energy's Office of Science, and the National Institute of Standards and Technology; \$86 billion to fund the research and development tax credit; and \$380 million to support math, science, and technological education in K-12 schooling.

While the push for math, science, and engineering has proved popular, the long-term agenda has proved to be a tough sell. The Administration has had trouble winning support for even the modest new expenditures it has proposed. The ACI has fallen prey to political infighting among various members of Congress, and the initial bipartisan support that surrounded the legislation has waned amid quarrels over jurisdictional issues, funding, and specific provisions.

In fact, doubts have emerged regarding the Administration's commitment. Although President Bush has repeatedly touted the legislation, he has made it only a limited priority on his wide-ranging education agenda and has earned criticism for a lack of leadership as Congress has failed to enact the plan's major components. Today, as politicians, scientists, and concerned citizens struggle to rekindle interest in ACI, many are worried about the seeming indifference of key officials. As Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY), former chair of the House Committee on Science, has remarked, "I'm concerned about this. We must push, push, push the American competitive agenda. We simply can't outswear the low-wage countries. We have to outthink them."¹¹

DIFFERENT DIAGNOSES

Is meeting the "global competitiveness" challenge to train elite scientists and engineers compatible with No Child Left Behind? The preferred line for school reformers — both Right and Left — is to deny any real conflict between the NCLB and competitiveness agendas. The popular refrain is that addressing the education "pipeline" will both promote social equity and bolster the national economy. Advocate Charles Kolb, president of the Committee for Economic Development, explains:

We can no longer afford the inequities that have long characterized our system of education. As our need for educated workers grows, the American work force is going to come increasingly from the ethnic groups that have been least well served at all levels of American education. By 2020, some 30 percent of our working-age population will be African-Ameri-

can or Hispanic, nearly double the percentage in 1980.¹²

The claim is that continuing NCLB's focus on equity will ultimately strengthen the economy. However, for all those who have argued that ACI is the natural next step to "build upon" NCLB, neither history nor recent experience supports such rosy scenarios. A skeptic may well wonder whether the twin projects are likely to create serious conflict over priorities and resources.

The equity camp postulates that America's biggest source of untapped talent resides in its cities and that it is the poor, generally minority students who fall out of the education pipeline before they ever get a chance to see what they can do. By giving these students a solid education and then providing them with access to college, equity-based reformers argue, the nation will dramatically broaden the extent of the nation's development of human capital. They suggest that focusing on affluent students fails to address the crux of the problem because, unless a substantial number of these students are failing to choose math, science, or engineering careers for want of proper inducements, the scarce resources devoted to new scholarships and similar programs of the competitiveness agenda may well reward people of means for choices they would have made anyway.¹³ It is notable, though, how narrowly the equity camp has focused on urban and minority achievement in the past decade and how this focus has tended to dictate strategies geared to minority and urban students (e.g., disaggregation, school choice) rather than their rural counterparts. This has marked a sharp departure from the Great Society's dual focus on urban and rural poverty and illustrates just how readily an effort to tackle one social ill can push another to the back burner.

The competitiveness camp is less explicit about its theory of action, but it goes something like this. There are many kids in the U.S. who lose interest in math and science or who never develop the essential skills necessary for advanced study because of inadequate programs or poor teaching. Consequently, there is a need to invest in better curricula, better math and science teachers, and better programs and schools, so as to attract students to and prepare them for these fields. Such an approach obviously can benefit from the larger pool of students that a successful equity approach would provide, and low-achieving students may benefit as well. But the approach is focused on dealing with the ranks of "potentially high-achieving math and science" students rather than on figuring out how to increase their numbers.

The tension between the equity and competitiveness agendas is made more poignant because influential state-

level actors — including key governors, such powerful philanthropies as the Gates Foundation, and such business-oriented groups as Achieve, Inc. — have prioritized high school standards and math and science education. So, while the federal pressure is focusing on bringing up the bottom in K-8 reading and math, these state-level actors are focusing on raising the level of high school achievement. The implication is that policy can do both, but, in practice, the emphasis on gap-closing necessarily shifts attention from higher-end skills, at least in the short term.

In this context, it's worth noting the meager dollars attached to the ACI. Not only does the proposal call for relatively small outlays, but there is little evidence in this fiscal environment that others are eager to up the Administration's bid. The new Democrat-led Congress might focus on fulfilling pledges to "fully fund" NCLB and other commitments, leaving it unclear how many resources it would be prepared to devote to competitiveness. After all, it was President Clinton's work force and economic "investments" that got slashed by 50% or more in his 1993 and 1994 budgets, even with a Democratic Congress.

THE POLITICAL TENSION

While major national voices from the Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights to the Education Trust to the Business Roundtable are unanimous in preaching the happy gospel that NCLB and ACI fit hand in glove, the reality is that inevitable tension is already present if barely visible — in Washington and across the land.

On one side is the marker that many policy makers and educators have placed on gap-closing and the moral authority of equity-oriented groups like the Education Trust and the Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights. These parties will seek to maintain a focus on the achievement gap, which will — despite protests to the contrary — ensure that high-achieving students remain a secondary concern.

Meanwhile, although business and civic leaders offer rhetorical nods to the gap-closing agenda, they may instead prefer to focus on the real, more readily addressed problems of advanced math and science than on the endlessly frustrating, politically contentious, and seemingly intractable problems of equity. Frankly, the most straightforward and effective solution to the practical needs of the American economy and its hyper-competitive technology, investment, and engineering interests is to dramatically relax restrictions on H1-B visas, permitting a wealth of European, Indian, and Pacific Rim engineers and scientists eager to work in America to be hired.

From any short- or even medium-term perspective, K-12

schooling is a flimsy tool for addressing competitiveness in science and engineering. It is akin to signing promising preschoolers to a baseball team's farm system rather than bringing in top-tier free agents — even when those free agents make it clear they're eager to sign with your team at a discounted price. The reality is that today's third-graders won't be receiving their first Ph.D.s in engineering until about 2025.¹⁴ Consequently, the ability of NCLB to gradually broaden the pipeline is more relevant to our competitiveness in 2030 than to our standing in the next decade or two. This helps explain why even those most ardently focused on America's "economic well-being" sometimes see the K-12 debate as less than urgent.

Nonetheless, whatever the substantive merits of the strategy to pursue competitiveness through the schools, it has immense political appeal. First, investing in high-achieving students, advanced math and science courses, foreign languages, and Advanced Placement programs allows politicians to cater to the demands of educated, high-income, suburban families. This demographic group is both politically active and ambivalent about or hostile to NCLB-style reform, which focuses on boosting performance in low-achieving schools through increased testing, standardized curricula, and other measures that may alienate high-achieving communities.

Second, whereas NCLB-style accountability requires reformers to challenge existing routines, identify low-performing schools, and force change upon resistant educators, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) proposals are more manageable and engender less conflict. Rather than trying to change the way schools serve overlooked students, the pursuit of competitiveness focuses on improving the quality of advanced instruction for a subset of high-achieving students. Rather than demanding that teachers do a better job of boosting performance among the hard-to-educate, the competitiveness agenda calls for giving more resources and training to teachers who instruct students who are already highly successful. A competitiveness strategy focuses on augmenting the status quo rather than remaking it, and this is an easier task — substantively and politically — for legislators, governors, superintendents, and school boards.

Third, while raising the performance floor can be a grudging and thankless task, addressing science, math, and engineering may produce more tangible and visible rewards. A handful of successful classes, programs, or curricula can yield contest winners, Ivy League admissions, prestigious scholarships, or a bump in AP results — in short, a public relations bonanza. Targeting the needs of high achievers has the virtue of being easier to do and more popular.

In light of the challenges, it's surprising how effectively the redistributive focus of NCLB has dominated the agenda in the past five years. This dominance is a testament to the Bush Administration's efforts, the moral power of the declaration to educate the children "left behind," the odd coalition of Left and Right that has resolutely supported the law, and the frustration of the public and policy makers with the seemingly intractable troubles of low-performing schools and districts.

This debate is playing out in an environment in which federal spending on K-12 education rose sharply over the past six years. Massive federal budget deficits, coupled with a bipartisan refusal to rein in entitlement programs and public resistance to tax increases, mean there is little likelihood of significant new federal spending on education. Meanwhile, at the state level, continued growth in Medicaid is squeezing state budgets, an aging population looms, and concerns about college affordability are competing with K-12 spending. Consequently, school spending in the coming decade is unlikely to grow at a rate that exceeds the familiar trend.

This means that expenditures for competitiveness will have to come at the expense of ongoing NCLB efforts and in an environment where critics argue that schools lack funds to achieve the performance targets set by the law. As the equity and competitiveness agendas joust for resources in a tight fiscal environment, it's going to be increasingly difficult for partisans of education reform to merely endorse both. Will middle-class voters and business leaders support tax measures intended to devote more resources to schooling, and will they acquiesce to having the majority of those resources fund the NCLB agenda?

WHERE THE PUBLIC STANDS

Efforts to rally the public behind NCLB and the equity agenda must contend with the fact that NCLB's public appeal is mixed, at best. NCLB has been a source of much unrest among teachers and principals. It has prompted nine states to engage in some form of statutory resistance, though none of those states has actually refused to accept federal education dollars and the accompanying conditions.

The general public endorses the ambitious goals of NCLB and the effort to shrink the racial achievement gap but is less enamored with key provisions of the law. In fact, the public is uncertain that schools are really responsible for the existence of the gap. The PDK/Gallup poll has reported that 67% of the public believes it is "very important" to close the achievement gap between white students and black and Latino students and that 88% think it "very" or "some-

what" important.¹⁵ Given this concern with equity, one that has been aggressively pushed by leaders on the Left and Right, there are political difficulties in making the case for putting new dollars into programs that will predominantly aid more advantaged students from more educated families.

At the same time, 81% of adults believe the achievement gap can be "narrowed substantially" even while maintaining high standards for all children. Just 17% doubt that this can be done.¹⁶ Such responses constitute massive support for the "no tough choices" strategy. Unanswered is whether the public is right and, if so, whether it is willing to support the actions necessary to narrow the gap. For instance, just 19% of respondents think the racial achievement gap is "mostly related to quality of schooling," while fully 77% believe it is primarily due to "other factors."¹⁷ This suggests a public open to arguments that schools cannot and should not focus relentlessly on achievement gaps and one that may not welcome painful reforms designed to address those gaps.

Moreover, Americans are persistently skeptical about the importance of academic excellence. For instance, when asked whether they would prefer that their oldest child get "A grades" or make "average grades and be active in extracurricular activities," just 29% of Americans opted for A grades.¹⁸ That figure has been static over the past decade. This preference is an inconvenient reality for those promoting an "excellence" agenda.

Both the NCLB and ACI agendas call for more work, more discipline, and more rigor in schooling. However, a substantial portion of the population is skeptical of such pleas and sympathetic to critics, such as Alfie Kohn, Nel Noddings, and others, who argue that America's children are already overworked and overtested. For instance, 26% of adults oppose requiring students in their local public high schools to take four years of math, 30% think elementary students are required to work too hard today, 49% reject proposals to extend the school year or school day in their community, 39% think there is currently too much testing in their community's schools, and 67% think more testing will lead teachers to teach more to the test (which three out of four respondents think is a bad thing). These figures suggest that a quarter or more of voters may resist calls for more intensive schooling, longer school days, extended school years, more homework, or beefed-up accountability — whether for closing the achievement gap or for competitiveness.¹⁹

2008 AND BEYOND

What does all of this mean for the future of federal poli-

cy and its effect on America's students, teachers, and schools?

For NCLB, reauthorization looms. In theory, it is scheduled for reauthorization in 2007. Practically speaking, it's an open question whether the Administration and congressional leaders will ram it through as an exhibit of bipartisan comity this year or whether it will ultimately sit and await the Administration that takes office in 2009. In the interim, the Bush Administration is gearing up to hold its ground on the law, with the President asserting that reauthorization is a priority and Education Secretary Margaret Spellings insisting, "I like to talk about No Child Left Behind like Ivory soap. It's 99.9% pure. There's not much needed in the way of change."²⁰

Meanwhile, both the Democrats and Republicans number among their ranks competing factions on the equity and the competitiveness agendas, putting this issue very much in play within the parties, as well as between them. As NCLB comes up for reauthorization and as both parties face open fields for their 2008 Presidential nominations, this will be an opportunity to sort through and influence thinking in both parties.

Among Democrats, there are two primary coalitions. The first is the generally pro-NCLB coalition made up of centrist reformers or "New Democrats" and liberal reformers like Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.) of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce. This coalition believes that NCLB-like accountability is the most effective equity strategy that the federal government can pursue. The pro-NCLB Democrats are more fragmented on the competitiveness agenda, though both the moderates among them and most Democratic governors, who generally have closer ties to business groups, are more likely to regard it as a priority.

There also exists a liberal anti-NCLB coalition, one united by the belief that NCLB-like policies are damaging to teachers, schools, and students. Some members are simply following the lead of the National Education Association, parroting the union's resistance to testing, accountability, and disruption. Others believe the argument put forward by Richard Rothstein and others that it is folly to hold schools accountable for closing the academic achievement gap absent massive changes in social policy. Inattention to such issues as health care, they say, invalidates the NCLB policy, whatever its other merits might be. And some members of this group have an aversion to federal testing requirements that dates back to the 1994 debates about ESEA. Though often more antagonistic toward business interests, this coalition reads Tom Friedman, too, and its members are not uniformly hostile to the competitiveness agenda — especially if supporting it means dropping the current empha-

sis on universal testing and coercive accountability.

Republicans are split as well. While the GOP let President Bush plant the party's flag on closing the achievement gap through No Child Left Behind, many Republicans only grudgingly supported the President's strategy of expanding the federal role in education. For instance, former Majority Leader Tom DeLay, a Republican from Texas, confessed to Rush Limbaugh that he "voted for that awful education bill" only to support President Bush. He explained to Limbaugh, "I came here to eliminate the Department of Education, so it was very hard for me to vote for something that expands [it]."²¹

As President Bush recedes from the national political scene, three factions are likely to emerge within the Republican Party with regard to education policy. Business-oriented Republicans who have championed the President's education policies since he was a governor are likely to be squeezed by the tension between the competing agendas. And while they have strongly backed NCLB, they may benefit more — at least in the short term — from ACI. Then there are the more traditionally conservative Republicans. In the wake of the rough 2006 midterm election, which many on the Right are interpreting as the comeuppance for undisciplined spending and "big-government" Republicanism, these small-government conservatives are likely to reemerge as a force demanding a reduction, rather than an expansion, of the federal role in education. Finally, religious Republicans, particularly the evangelical Right, may see an opportunity to draw attention to such issues as prayer in school and school vouchers, which have been largely sidelined by the gap-closing and competitiveness agendas.

The politics at work resemble the politics of the late 1990s more than those of the first few years of the Bush Presidency. Consequently, moderates in both parties — and perhaps especially the New Democrats — may again emerge as a fulcrum of education policy making if stark Left/Right divides again stymie reform efforts. Which agenda the moderates embrace most enthusiastically could prove decisive. In 2009 the new President may have a sufficient mandate to advance his or her own agenda on education.

For the foreseeable future, elected officials will continue to be cross-pressured by the two agendas. Business interests, notably the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable, and such coalitions as Achieve, Inc., and TechNet will continue to work to keep competitiveness on the policy-making agenda. Meanwhile, the equity coalition is unlikely to give an inch of ground in its efforts to keep the focus of public policy on gap-closing.

However, NCLB is at its core an attempt to transform the provision of schooling and to ensure that more atten-

tion is paid to low-performing students — meaning that its benefits are diffuse and targeted upon a disorganized and frequently voiceless population, while its costs are concentrated among potent constituencies, particularly teachers, school administrators, and high-achieving communities.²² Consequently, for the same reason that inefficient agricultural subsidies persist — namely, pressure from the constituencies that are most directly affected — it’s a safe bet that some of NCLB’s sharp edges will be dulled over time. Considering the appeal of the competitiveness agenda, the gloomy fiscal picture, and the inability of policy makers to stay focused for long, proponents of the equity agenda ought not take recent gains for granted. This does not mean, as some hope, the imminent repeal of NCLB. Rather, it is more likely to portend accommodations that weaken the parts of the law that energetic special interests find most objectionable. Conveniently for lawmakers, the competitiveness agenda could provide ideal cover for such efforts.

CONCLUSION

For schools, teachers, and students, this rhetorical confusion and the ongoing debate about goals and strategies, coupled with the continued drumbeat of support for NCLB from the Bush Administration and its allies, are likely to produce a frequently frustrating parade of mismatched goals, expectations, and rhetoric. Through NCLB, the overwhelming emphasis of federal policy will remain gap-closing and focusing on students in the lowest-performing schools. Meanwhile, prominent members of the business and political communities will continue to fret that schools are failing to prepare America for the competitive challenges we face. It is a confused state of affairs, one that is understandably frustrating for America’s educators.

Ultimately, the seeming inability to settle on a coherent agenda is due to a simple truth: schools exist to serve both these agendas and many others besides. Our desire to ignore this banal reality, to “fix” the equity problem and then to “solve” the competitiveness problem, fosters grandiose ambitions and hyperbolic claims that will inevitably come up short. Schools exist to serve a staggeringly diverse population of students and a raft of competing needs. Buckling down somewhere will almost inevitably mean easing up elsewhere. The best we can hope for is an incremental, awkward stagger toward meeting a stew of public and private objectives.

But would-be reformers routinely ignore or forget this fundamental truth, inviting confusion, mixed messages, and facile talk. The ugly truth is that we cannot do everything; this means we must choose what we can and should do at a given time. It means accepting disagreement and aban-

doning the tempting dream that we might reach consensus on what needs to be done if only good-hearted souls would examine the right data. And it means acknowledging that every policy decision will yield both winners and losers. What we need in 2007, 2008, and beyond is not bland reassurance or misguided efforts to paper over real divides, but honest and informed debate about whose needs take precedence at a given moment, what to do about it today, and what to leave for tomorrow.

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11. David Hess, “Bush’s ‘American Competitiveness Initiative’ Push Language,” *National Journal’s Congress Daily*, 4 August 2006.

12. Charles E. M. Kolb, “Cracks in Our Education Pipeline,” *Education Week*, 12 July 2006.

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14. Today’s third-graders will be graduating from high school in about 2016, graduating from college in 2020, and, among those who pursue an engineering Ph.D. directly after college, finishing in about 2025.

15. Lowell C. Rose and Alec M. Gallup, “The 38th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 2006, p. 46, table 18.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 47, table 19.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 44, table 9.

18. Lowell C. Rose and Alec M. Gallup, “The 37th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 2005, p. 53, table 39.

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