



Insight

No Child Left Behind, Ten Years Later

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Ten years ago this week, Pres. George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act into law, marking a new era for elementary and secondary education in the United States. On this anniversary, it's important to check in, assess where we are, and chart where we should go. Margaret Spellings, secretary of education under President Bush, recently stated, "Like it or hate it, the law has been a game-changer." Much has been accomplished due to NCLB, notably an illumination of our education problem-areas, but there is still a lot of work to be done going forward.

The most notable success of NCLB has been the vast amount of data we've collected. Student performance, particularly for disadvantaged students, now matters and has become the focus of national and state education policies. The debate shifted from focusing on inputs to focusing on student academic outcomes. Parents are no longer in the dark about how their child performs relative to their peers or how their school stacks up against others in the state. For the past decade, educators and policymakers have been held accountable to parents, students, and taxpayers for increasing or not increasing student performance.

Along with the data came opportunities to do something about the results. We now know what groups of students are underperforming and what schools they attend. Many of these underperforming schools have increased student performance in reading and math and those that consistently fail to make academic gains have been restructured to bring in new leadership to boost academic performance. Children attending low performing schools can now receive free tutoring to help them reach grade level and parents can choose to send their children to a public charter school or higher performing public elementary or secondary school if their school consistently fails to improve. Parents were given numerous options, previously unavailable to them, to help increase their child's academic performance.

However, it is not a perfect law. No law ever is. Two thirds of 4th- and 8th-grade students are still not performing at the “proficient” or “advanced” level in reading and math and only 75 percent of American students graduate from high school on time. Sadly, the data are worse for minority students, students with disabilities, and students who are English-language learners. The law’s adequate yearly progress accountability requirements are considered burdensome to lawmakers on both sides of the aisle. So, where do we go from here?

Many have called for a repeal of NCLB and President Obama has proposed that only the worst performing 5 percent of public schools be held accountable and subject to consequences for poor academic performance. But pursuing this path is a disservice to future generations and taxpayers who are footing the bill.

Changes do need to be made to NCLB to make it less complicated and easier to implement, so that American students can compete with other nations in this global economy. The U.S. needs to regain its position as the best educated in the world. Suggested reforms that keep the numerous benefits of NCLB intact include allowing states to use a grading system based on NCLB data to determine which schools need the most help and which schools do not. Teachers should be recognized and paid better if they teach in low performing schools and increase student academic achievement, in contrast, the law should make it easier to get rid of teachers with poor student performance. Also, there need to be more choices for parents with students in low-performing schools like private and charter schools and the option to transfer to higher performing public schools in another district. In addition, we should stop punishing schools and districts if all of their students do not meet the established academic targets yet they achieve significant academic gains in each student group. Finally, the law should rein in the Secretary of Education’s power over states that force them to adhere to his specific policies in exchange for waivers to the law’s accountability provisions.

The accomplishments of NCLB must not be lost in the name of providing more flexibility to states and reducing the federal role in education. The past decade has illuminated where our problems are and given us the tools to help improve those schools, provide choices to parents, or restructure or close altogether poorly performing schools. In this next decade, we should proceed forward, not backward, and amend NCLB to ensure states, school districts, and educators are still held accountable for increasing student performance, narrowing the achievement gap, providing choices to parents, and rewarding teachers who raise student achievement. Our students deserve that much.

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