

Unintended Consequences: Fundamental Flaws That Plague the No Child Left Behind Act

Author(s): *James E. Schul, PhD*

Affiliation: Ohio Northern University

2011

Abstract

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was a well intentioned piece of bipartisan legislation with the primary aim of ensuring equitable educational opportunities for all students in the American public education system. However, it was devised without a consideration toward how it might actually harm the public school experience. Subsequently, NCLB currently operates with many fundamental flaws that are now damaging American public education. This article succinctly discusses four of these fundamental flaws.

Unintended Consequences: Fundamental Flaws That Plague the No Child Left Behind Act

It has been nearly a decade since the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) affixed itself to American public schools. Republicans and Democrats alike hailed it as being the landmark legislation needed to finally hold American public schools accountable for educating all of its children, especially the minority and underprivileged. It was under this banner of fairness and equity that NCLB rode its way as the most significant and controversial change in federal education policy since the days of the Great Society (Sunderman, Kim & Orfield, 2005). Yet to quote the words of the old proverb: "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." Even some prominent figures who once held NCLB in high regard, such as Diane Ravitch (2009), have now gone on the record to say that it was a monumental mistake. NCLB is currently up for Congressional reauthorization, but the Obama administration and Congress have currently placed it on the legislative sidelines. NCLB, contrary to its title, is damaging public education in many fundamental ways and there is still time to fix its fundamental flaws before the public is duped once again. In this essay I aim to shed light on four of the fundamental flaws of NCLB that I believe are its most blatant blemishes. It is my hope that this essay provides the public with a succinct critique of NCLB resulting in legislators and policy makers reauthorizing NCLB with a greater consideration toward stifling its unintended ill-effects.

Flaw #1: Overemphasizing Standardized Testing

NCLB put test-based accountability into federal law, subsequently solidifying the state standardized test as the sole benchmark through which all schools are measured. The consequences of this cannot be underestimated. As the annual progress of schools is judged by single standardized tests in reading and mathematics, the panic created by such a policy has had a snowball effect of emphasizing passing the test over the general quality of the school experience: the more emphasis placed on test scores, the less emphasis placed on the general school experience. Once tests have such high stakes attached to them, instructional time is supplanted by test preparation resulting in a shortened and weakened classroom experience. In a thoughtful editorial from a few years back, curriculumist Peter Hlebowitsh (2007) noted upon this damaging effect that high stakes standardized testing can have on the school curriculum:

We have known for years that school experiences in high-stakes-testing environments generally reduce themselves to what is being tested. The effect is that art, music, and such skills sets as critical thinking, creativity, cooperative behavior, and many others get short shrift in the classroom, primarily because such matters typically have little or no place on the exams. (p. 28).

As a case in point of what Hlebowitsh spoke of, social studies educator Thomas Misco (2007) brought

forth the grim reality that "the change in educational culture also neglects the development of dispositions of life as a moral citizen, which is often considered an expendable luxury in an era of accountability" (p. 267). NCLB's overemphasis on standardized tests has predictably narrowed the school curriculum to what is measured on the test.

High-stakes testing not only has dramatic curricular effects, but there's also reason to believe that it diverts the attention of school leadership from the educative mission of the public school experience. Rather than focusing upon ways to provide a quality civic apprenticeship for students, school administrators across the nation have been distracted by the need to avoid the bite of NCLB's high-stakes accountability requirements through what have been coined within the circle of education policy makers as "gaming strategies." One such gaming strategy that school districts have used to meet NCLB's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements is exemption of students deemed as likely to struggle with taking the test. Exemption of this sort typically means placing students in special education where their test scores aren't included in the school's AYP data. Because the schools are more likely to exclude students who are low-performing on high stakes-tests, minorities and the economically disadvantaged are once again neglected by the system (Booher-Jennings and Beveridge, 2008). Ironically, with districts using such gaming strategies, NCLB ends up hurting the very students it intended to help.

Thanks to NCLB, a test score became the lone determining factor of academic success for students and schools alike.

Flaw #2: Deprofessionalization of Teachers

According to NCLB, ineffective teaching methods are among the chief reasons for the failure of schools. To thwart this diagnosis, NCLB prescribed the use of scientifically-based research (SBR) in teaching methods. The prescription is more than a suggestion, it implies a demand. In fact, the U.S. Department of Education's website asserts an explicit solution to the growing problem of poor academic performance in public schools: [to] "demand that instructional practices be evidence-based, and direct funding so only the best ideas with proven results are introduced into the classroom." [1] NCLB confidently issued the edict to use SBR in the classroom with hope that it would vastly improve teaching. However, this confidence is without grounding as this stance toward one preferred method of teaching totally ignores the local inheritance from which teaching derives.

Dewey (1938/1991) claimed that "the principle of interaction makes it clear that failure of adaptation of material to needs and capacities of individuals may cause an experience to be non-educative quite as much as an individual to adapt himself to the material" (p. 27). A demand to use something that may not work in a particular environment, as is the case with SBR-based teaching, fosters an environment within the administration of schools that restricts the teacher's creative power. Great teachers rely on good judgment that may go against the averages. For instance, some students may be better suited to learn how to read through a phonics-based approach while others may be better served using a whole language approach. The point is that while the averages may reflect the majority of students, a teacher must respond to the needs of all learners. NCLB's infatuation with SBR leans toward telling the teacher what to do versus suggesting certain practices to the teacher. A teacher should be informed by all kinds of research, not just those formed through isolated experiments (St.Pierre, 2006). For example, NCLB's exclusive funding of quantitative experimental studies totally ignores the valuable contributions that qualitative research can have upon improving practice in schools. Qualitative research is perfectly suited for studying the context of environments in which a practice takes place, yet it isn't considered "scientific" in the research paradigm of NCLB. Teachers know their students better than anyone else and should be empowered through research-based suggestions by NCLB and not disempowered by a prescription to follow the conclusion of one narrow line of research.

Thanks to NCLB, teachers have been stripped of their professional judgment.

Flaw #3: Disregard of Education Schools

A major component of NCLB has been its call for each classroom to be led by a highly qualified teacher. A highly qualified teacher, through the eyes of NCLB, is one who is trained in their particular subject matter and has obtained full state certification or has passed a state teaching licensing exam. However, nothing in the legislation mentions college or university-based teacher education as a necessity for the qualification of teachers. Thus, alternative routes which bypass teacher education schools are latently legitimized and the role of the schools of education are rather ambiguous and quite possibly superfluous in the qualification of teachers under NCLB (Cochran-Smith, 2002). Such a smug attitude toward education schools is nothing new. Teacher education schools have been popularly branded as anti-knowledge in their nature and approach (Hirsch, 1996). To be sure, evidence exists to support such a view. According to a national study conducted by the Education School Project a few years ago, eighty percent of principals in a national poll stated that "education schools were too detached from what went on at local elementary and secondary schools" (Winter, 2005). However, such beliefs should instigate reform, not total disregard.

Contemporary educational policy makers must realize that teacher education schools are like other professional schools in that they offer specialized training to prepare their students for the demands that await them in a particular working environment (Sottile, Williams, McKee, and Damron, 2005). Teachers need the professional training that informs them how to understand the experiences, knowledge backgrounds, and various approaches from which his or her students approach learning, all of which make up the peculiar call of the educational school. The capacity to understand one another is not innate; it is developed through intentional study, guidance, and reflection (Darling-Hammond, 2000). The point is that education schools must play an important role in improving the preparation of the nation's current and future teachers.

Thanks to NCLB, teacher education schools have been disregarded from the national conversation on how to improve American schools.

Flaw #4: Marginalization of Social Studies Education

The broad field of social studies education has historically led the charge of citizenship education in the American public schools. Beginning in 1916, with a report from the National Education Association's Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, the secondary social studies curriculum was granted with the conscious and constant purpose of the cultivation of good citizenship (National Education Association, 1916). However, as a result of NCLB's preference to only test for reading, mathematics, and science, social studies education is on the verge of peril in some of the nation's school districts.

The negative effect of standardized testing on social studies education was the motivator behind a relatively recent position statement issued by The National Council for the Social Studies that declared "one of the consequences of No Child Left Behind has been a steady reduction in the amount of time spent in the teaching of social studies" (National Council for the Social Studies, 2008, p. 211). For example, Maryland, California, and Illinois have seen social studies instruction decline in their states in favor of an increase in reading instruction since the passage of the NCLB (Manzo, 2005). What should we make of the bewildering absence of social studies in the NCLB testing requirements? It is conceivable that this omission is connected with the history of social studies as being "a story of turf wars among competing camps, each with its own leaders, philosophy, beliefs, and pedagogical practices" (Evans, 2004, p. 1). Such contention may likely make it difficult for policy makers and legislators to come to a national agreement as to what constitutes citizenship proficiency. What may be more likely, however, is that economic preparation is the beating pulse of NCLB. With outspoken proponents of school reform, such as Microsoft's Bill Gates and author Thomas Friedman (2006), espousing the improvement of reading, math,

and science as pivotal for the United States to succeed in the twenty-first century's global economy, it is little wonder that social studies education is struggling to survive in the midst of such a public discourse. Public rhetoric surrounding the future of education surmises that economic production has overtaken civic competency in national priority and purpose. Although social studies education is deeply rooted as being culturally significant to the school experience, its advocates currently find themselves in the awkward position of defending its place in the school curriculum (Misco, 2005).

Thanks to NCLB, social studies education has been marginalized.

Conclusion

NCLB was a misguided, though well intentioned, attempt to improve situations for the disadvantaged students within our public schools. NCLB, as I have explained in this essay, actually created more problems than it resolved. As is always the case with public policy, it is much easier to criticize work already done than it is to construct solutions. Still, NCLB was inceptioned in haste. Its reauthorization must be done with a careful eye toward the nature of public education, its place in our democracy, and the professions that support it. The task for us now is to steer the ship back on course with sensible solutions while still keeping intact the noble vision of equitable education.

References

Booher-Jennings, J. and Beveridge, A. (2008). Who counts for accountability? High-stakes test exemptions in a large urban school district. In A. Sadovnik, J. O'Day, G. Bohrnstedt, & K. Borman (Eds.), *No Child Left Behind and the Reduction of the Achievement Gap: Sociological Perspectives on Federal Education Policy* (pp. 77-96). New York: Routledge.

Cochran-Smith, M. (2002). What a difference a definition makes: Highly qualified teachers, scientific research, and teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(3), 187-189.
doi:10.1177/0022487102053003001

Darling-Hammond, L. (2000). How teacher education matters. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51(3), 166-173. doi:10.1177/0022487100051003002

Dewey, J. (1938/1991). *Experience and education*, In Boydston, J.A. (Ed.). *John Dewey: The later works, 1925-1953: Vol. 13* (pp. 3-62). Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.

Evans, R.W. (2004). *The social studies wars: What should we teach the children?* New York: Teachers College Press.

Friedman, T. (2006). *The world is flat: A brief history of the twenty-first century*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux.

Hirsch, E.D. (1996). *The schools we need and why we don't have them*. New York: Anchor Books.

Hlebowitsh, P. S. (2007, November 11). First, do no harm. *Education Week*. p.28.

Manzo, K.K. (2005, March 16). Social studies losing out to reading, math. *Education Week*. pp. 1, 16, 17, 24, 25.

Misco, T.J. (2005). In response to NCLB: A case for retaining the social studies. *Essays in Education Online Journal*. Retrieved from <http://www.usca.edu/essays/>

Misco, T.J. (2007). Did I forget about the dispositions? *The Clearing House*. July/August. 267-270.

National Education Association (1916). The social studies in secondary education, Bulletin 28.

National Council for the Social Studies (2008). Curriculum guidelines for social studies teaching and learning: a position statement of National Council for the Social Studies. *Social Education*. May/June. 211.

Ravitch, D. (2009). *The Death and life of the great American school system: How testing and choice are undermining education*. New York: Basic Books.

Sottile, J. M. Jr., T.L. Williams, J.G. McKee, & N. Damron. (2005). The impact of a teacher education program: A critical review. *Hawaiian International Conference on Education*.

St.Pierre, E.A. (2006). Scientifically based research in education: Epistemology and ethics. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 56(4), 239-266. doi:10.1177/0741713606289025

Sunderman, G.L., J.S. Kim, G. Orfield. (2005). *NCLB meets school realities: Lessons from the field*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Winter, G, (2005, March 15). Study finds poor performance by nation's education schools. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>