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A Discussion on the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*

Terresa Fontana

University of Phoenix

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Dr. Janice Fipp

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The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, commonly referred to as NCLB, has drawn a vast amount of interest since its introduction to America by President George Bush in January of 2001. According to the NCLB Executive Summary produced by the U.S. Department of Education (2002), the Act was enacted in January of 2002 “to improve the performance of America’s elementary and secondary schools while at the same time ensuring that no child is trapped in a failing school.” This paper will present the writer’s opinion on the issue of *No Child Left Behind* and discuss the effects of NCLB on school choice and educational spending in America. Further, a discussion on the possible ramifications felt in teacher preparation programs as a result of the NCLB legislation will be presented. Finally, the writer will present her opinion on whether the policy does, indeed, serve the best interests of American students, teachers, local communities, and society in general.

Opinion on No Child Left Behind

The writer currently works in a private school that is not required to adhere to the guidelines and requirements of federal legislation such as the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. Therefore, she has had no personal experience in realizing the effects of the educational policy nor its constraints or benefits. Consequently, her very limited opinion has been formed only based on what she has found in current literature and discussions with colleagues who have had personal experience with the legislation.

The writer believes that there are most likely both positive and negative aspects of the legislation. However, many classroom teachers seem to find its overwhelming accountability measures to be time-consuming. Such measures are taking away from the daily and ongoing tasks of teaching and managing schools, and the effects of high-stakes standardized testing and

“Adequate Yearly Progress” are reported as detrimental to student success (Mendoza, 2006). The public sector and government officials, however, seem to believe such accountability is necessary to ensure that no child is, in fact, left behind (Paige & Gibbons, 2004). Due to the lack of personal experience with NCLB, the writer has chosen to reveal both positive and negative opinions about the Act found in a review of current literature as a supplement to her own limited opinion, which neither fully supports nor entirely opposes the legislation.

Throughout the literature, the various opinions on the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* are abundant. While the negative opinions reported in the literature far outweigh the positive, both are equally valid. The positive opinions include those touted by special education teachers who foresee opportunities for more collaboration and cooperation between themselves and general education teachers due to NCLB requirements (Neel, 2006, p. 533). Additionally, supporters of the policy claim that “[NCLB] will improve accountability standards in school districts and allow parents to choose which school their children will attend” (Agazie, 2007).

Still, there is a profusion of negative opinions in the literature. “NCLB is a politically-charged, top-down, hostile take-over of America’s schools that has, in effect, ignored progress of individual children in favor of closing gaps and emphasizing perceived proficiency scores for schools and groups of children using questionable standards and measures of achievement” (Gentry, 2006, p. 24). Such an adamant response may not be wholly representative of the negative opinions found in the literature. Yet the inclusion of such an opinion serves to illustrate the extent of the disparity between positive and negative attitudes expressed regarding the NCLB legislation.

School Choice, Educational Spending, and NCLB

According to *A Guide for Education and NCLB* prepared by former Secretary of Education Rod Paige (2004), “No child should be trapped in an underperforming school. Under *No Child Left Behind*, students...have the option of transferring to a higher performing public school or a charter school within their district. [Further,] the promotion of charter schools is an important component of *No Child Left Behind*” (p. 17). Paige goes on to assert that funding for school choice options will expand throughout the duration of the NCLB legislation to support American families in their quest to find schools that best suit the individual needs of their children (p. 17).

Although ample funding may be a critical component of the NCLB Act, some sources report that said funding is not being allocated to schools as assured in the legislation. According to a recent article in *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, “the law has not been fully funded as promised” (Agazie, 2007). Consequently, schools may be manipulating data concerning Adequate Yearly Progress in their annual reports or even compelling certain students, such as African-Americans or Hispanics, to drop out so that the school is not deemed a failure by NCLB standards (Agazie). Not only is this unethical, such practices enable these ‘failing’ schools to continue to receive funds for which they may no longer be eligible, which, in turn, denies funding to other, possibly more compliant and successful, schools.

Teacher Preparation and NCLB

A Guide for Education and NCLB asserts that, “Under No Child Left Behind, all teachers must be highly qualified. To be “highly qualified,” a teacher must (1) hold a bachelor’s degree, (2) hold a certification or licensure to teach in the state of his or her employment, and (3) have proven knowledge of the subjects he or she teaches” (Paige & Gibbons, 2004, p. 15). In addition

to such requirements, however, individual states have the ability to determine more stringent requirements on teachers (Kinsey, 2006, p. 154). As a result, teacher preparation programs must be better able to produce more highly qualified teachers.

There is an array of literature on the need to prepare teachers before they enter the classroom to be highly qualified as well as able to meet the various demands and requirements placed upon them by the NCLB legislation. One recent study of mentor teachers, who provide guidance to teacher candidates, indicates a discrepancy between the type of instruction the candidates receive in the college classroom and in their field experiences. In the university, education students are taught critical thinking skills and “active learning,” while mentor teachers are stressing standardized test “skills and drills” in the field (Snow-Gerono & Franklin, 2006, p. 21).

Snow-Gerono and Franklin further report that, to alleviate such disparate practices, it is important for teacher preparation programs to train future teachers to integrate curriculum and emphasize the importance of “real-life skills and experiences” in addition to teaching students the required test-taking skills. This would then enable children the opportunity to experience high-quality educational activities while also preparing them to achieve success on standardized tests as required by the NCLB legislation (p.23).

Effects of NCLB on Students, Teachers, and Society

A discussion on the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* would be remiss without a glance into the effects realized by students, teachers, local communities, and the American society at large. In theory, the legislation seems to have taken into account the best interests of all involved parties. The policy was created to ensure that all children receive the best possible education from the most qualified teachers available. However, it seems as if the ramifications of the

rigorous demands and requirements that are now placed on schools, teachers, and students to perform at higher levels may be more detrimental than beneficial.

The demands placed on students by the *No Child Left Behind Act* could be construed as severe and, therefore, inappropriate. Instead of high-stakes assessment (HSA) eliminating inferior instruction and allowing schools to work towards success as intended (Cooper, 2006, p. 18), it seems as if the results are highly unfavorable for everyone involved, most of all students. Students who are unable to show “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP) may be retained in their current grade level, regardless of the achievement shown throughout the entire school year (Gentry, 2006). Further, “drop-out rates have steadily increased while graduation rates have decreased” (Gentry, p. 25). Additionally, students who function at above-grade-level or those deemed ‘gifted and talented’ may not be receiving the enrichment or more complex activities necessary for their success. There are even reports of students who “had the ability to achieve proficiency but chose instead to drop out because school was unengaging [sic] and uninteresting” (Gentry, p. 26). Consequently, it seems as if the purpose of the legislation to leave no child behind is, in effect, leaving many behind, or simply leaving them out altogether.

The effects of NCLB on teachers and teaching practices are also documented throughout the literature. Instead of being able to teach high-quality lessons and provide interesting and engaging activities, it seems as if teachers are now required to spend more time assessing and documenting student achievement while also dedicating more instruction time to basic skills and test-taking strategies (Mendoza, 2006, p.28). Although the law now requires all teachers to become “highly qualified,” it also requires less application of the teaching strategies that would be highly effective in the classroom. Consequently, many teachers express growing dissatisfaction with and a strong aversion to the NCLB legislation (Mendoza).

When students and schools are unable to meet the rigid requirements of NCLB, the local community and the American society in general are also affected. Students who are retained because of low test scores demand more resources from the local school system, which may result in tax increases. Teachers deemed less than “highly qualified” may find themselves unemployed, which places additional stress on the economy, both in supporting the unemployed and in the additional use of local resources to find “highly qualified” replacements. Additionally, since the teacher attrition rate is estimated at 30 to 50 percent (Kinsey, 2006, p. 150; Gentry, 2006, p. 26), it may difficult for many school districts to find the “highly qualified” teachers necessary to fill all of the teaching positions needed for the number of students served. Furthermore, schools who are determined to be “failing” based upon these scores also place more demand on the local community as they receive less funding or may even lose much of their federal funding altogether (Jennings & Rentner, 2006, ¶15-16).

Conclusion

While the writer has previously reported a neutral position on the *No Child Left Behind* legislation, the effects of the policy on students and teachers as reported in current literature is now leading to a more negative viewpoint being established. Further, while she believes that the most important factor of any legislation regarding education should concern the need for all students to be successful, the writer further believes that the measures of accountability and student success cannot be established from a “one size fits all” mentality (Gentry, 2006) such as that found in the NCLB Act. Holding teachers and schools accountable for student success is, in and of itself, a critical component of education. However, when such accountability is determined by the students’ ability to pass standardized tests, it eliminates the ability of the classroom teacher to effectively address the individual needs and interests of his/her students.

When such legislation results in “the joy of teaching and learning being systematically removed from our classrooms” (Gentry, p. 26), then it is necessary to review, revisit, and revise such legislation to enable schools, teachers, and students to succeed with support from the government and society. In conclusion, the writer cannot help but hope that that the legislators who have recently taken control of the American government will choose to “makeover” the NCLB legislation as suggested in current literature (Agazie, 2007). Ideally, this will ensure that all children truly receive the education they need and deserve, and that all schools and teachers are given the support and resources needed to provide such an education for the students they serve.

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