NCLB: Is There Life Beyond Testing?

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Only multiple measures of achievement can provide an accurate picture of student learning and school success.

If you asked a roomful of educators which word or phrase best sums up No Child Left Behind (NCLB), some educators would say accountability. Others might propose student achievement, proficiency, or raised expectations. But perhaps the most accurate word to encapsulate the United States' most ambitious federal education law—which proposes to close achievement gaps and aims for 100 percent student proficiency by 2014—is testing. Certainly, the focus on holding schools accountable for student achievement on standardized assessments sets NCLB apart from previous versions of the law.
NCLB Timeline 1965–2014

1965: The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is enacted to provide money to help low-income students.

1968: Congress adds the Bilingual Education Act to ESEA.

1970: ESEA funding must “supplement, not supplant” other education spending at the state and local levels.

1978: ESEA allows Title I money to be spent schoolwide when 75 percent of the school’s students are low-income.

1986: ESEA requires districts to use standardized test scores to assess schools.

1994: ESEA is re-authorized as the Improving America’s Schools Act. States must identify schools that are not making “adequate yearly progress.”

2002: President George W. Bush signs No Child Left Behind NCLB into law.


2002–2003: Reading and math tests must be given once in each of three grade spans (0–5, 6–9, 10–12).


2002–2003: Title I schools identified as “in need of improvement” for two consecutive years must offer students the option of transferring to a higher-performing school.

2002–2003: Title I schools identified as “in need of improvement” for three consecutive years must offer supplemental services to eligible students.

2002–2003: At least 15,644 schools nationwide fail to make adequate yearly progress; at least 11,000 schools are identified as in need of improvement.
NCLB is the newest iteration of a decades-old education law, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The original law provided funding to school districts to help low-income students. Today, NCLB holds Title I schools that receive this federal money accountable by requiring them to meet proficiency targets on annual assessments.

U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings has called testing the “linchpin of the whole doggone thing.” The law requires tests in reading and math for students annually in grades 3–8 and once in high school. In 2005–2006, 23 states that had not yet fully implemented NCLB needed to administer 11.4 million new tests in reading and math. When science testing begins in 2007—one test in each of three grade spans (3–5, 6–9, and 10–12)—the number of tests that states will need to administer annually to comply with NCLB is expected to rise to 68 million.

These tests carry consequences for the schools and districts that administer them. Schools that fail to bring enough of their students to proficiency face escalating requirements, such as having to offer public school choice or provide supplemental education services. If the school is considered “in need of improvement” for five consecutive years, it risks being restructured or taken over by the state.

January 2007 marks the law's fifth anniversary, so the more severe consequences for schools loom just around the corner. Many educators are concerned that these sanctions and others, such as establishing a new curriculum, replacing school staff, or decreasing managerial authority at the school, have not been proven to raise student achievement. Others say that the need to comply with the law stifles innovation and that the limited focus on a small subset of subjects narrows the curriculum.
Secretary Spellings often remarks, “What gets measured gets done.” If nothing else, NCLB has launched an unprecedented focus on the reading and math abilities of previously marginalized students. By requiring the disaggregation of test scores by subgroups of students—such as English language learners, racial minorities, and students with special needs—NCLB ensures that schools don’t bury these students’ test scores in schoolwide and gradewide averages or gloss over the achievement gaps that those scores reveal.

Teaching to the Test

In this culture of “What gets measured gets done,” the question that begs asking is, What happens to what doesn’t get measured? In an NCLB-driven world, the list of what’s not measured far exceeds any list of what is measured. This list includes such subjects as history, art, civics, music, and physical education as well as intangibles like school culture and student health and well-being. Some of these factors are hard to measure, but they nevertheless have a large effect on student achievement and are a significant piece of what we want our students to know and be able to do well.

Education sociologist David Labaree once posited that an overreliance on testing causes students to care only enough to ask, “Will this be on the test?” NCLB seems to have transferred this problem from students to teachers, who may well approach teaching with the same attitude: “Whatever is not on the test is not worth knowing, and whatever is on the test need be learned only in the superficial manner that is required to achieve a passing grade” (Labaree, 1997, p. 46). Under NCLB, teachers feel great pressure to focus their energies solely on preparing students to excel on standardized tests.

But standardized assessments tell us only so much. The U.S. Department of Education claims on its Web site that annual testing helps teachers improve student performance and diagnose weaknesses, but assessment expert W. James Popham disagrees. Popham (2006) has found that most of the tests used under NCLB are “unable to detect even striking instructional improvements when such improvements occur” (p. 82).

Fixing the Flaws

Substantial problems exist with the NCLB testing and accountability structure. For example, researchers have identified work-arounds that states, districts, and schools can use to raise test scores without actually improving student learning. These methods cheat students by making changes at the state level (making test items easier, lowering cut scores); at the school level (excluding low-performing students, tutoring students just below the cut score who are more likely to move to proficiency); and at the teacher level (encouraging or discouraging certain students to attend on test day) that trick the accountability system. These work-arounds raise test scores but do nothing to help students (Laitsch, Lewallen, & McCloskey, 2005).

Spellings has attempted to address some of the concerns about the way NCLB uses test scores to determine adequate yearly progress (AYP) by altering requirements and introducing new flexibility. For example, states can now count students in the English language subgroup for up to two years after they have attained proficiency in English, a move that cuts back on the instability of that subgroup. States can also create modified assessments for some students with special needs who are neither at grade level nor in the official category of significant cognitive impairment.

The U.S. Department of Education is also exploring a growth model pilot program that would enable some states to track individual student progress. This will ensure that schools get credit for helping their lowest-performing students improve as long as those students are on track to pass the test within several years. In a change to the law’s scheduled sanctions, the department has proposed flipping the order so that schools may offer tutoring first and hold off on providing school choice options until the following year. ASCD and other educators advocate this approach.
What Next?

The future will likely include more of this kind of tinkering to fix the most obvious flaws of NCLB, which is due for reauthorization in 2007. For example, in addition to switching the order of tutoring and school choice, NCLB may allow schools to offer these options only to the subgroup that did not pass the test or possibly even to individual students. Many educators will push for more significant changes, particularly to the AYP structure that relies so heavily on testing.

As the reauthorization of NCLB approaches, we must ask ourselves how we can encourage innovation so that we can measure student learning in a way that supports each student's future success. The answer is not to keep doing what we're doing or to add tests in every subject. We need a more sophisticated assessment system that places less emphasis on standardized assessments and incorporates more meaningful assessment data at the school level, such as portfolio assessments, demonstrations, oral presentations, and applied projects.

To imagine what a brighter future might hold, consider Mission Hill School, a Boston public pilot school founded by Deborah Meier. Instead of relying on standardized tests, teachers at Mission Hill listen to tape recordings of each student reading aloud several times each year, starting in kindergarten. These performance assessments not only more directly measure student learning but also provide a wealth of information that teachers can use to improve instruction. Meier (2002) believes it is crucial for teachers and administrators to be responsible for student assessment because they are the folks close to the action, 'interested parties' who can modify their exams and scores based on their best judgment and who are aware of what actually is happening in their classrooms and schools. (p. 3)

Much of the responsibility for U.S. public education falls to states and local school districts. Schools and students will be better off when these localities have the flexibility to create innovative solutions that meet their own unique situations. Consider Rhode Island, where annual assessments are only a small part of a student's graduation requirements. Under the Rhode Island Diploma System, students demonstrate proficiency through multiple sources of evidence gathered over time. State assessment results count for no more than 10 percent of this evidence, which includes portfolios, capstone projects, public exhibitions, departmental course assessments, and the state's Certificate of Initial Mastery. Imagine what such an approach could mean for NCLB. If testing were just one piece of an innovative, comprehensive assessment and accountability system, we would have not only a more accurate picture of each school's strengths and weaknesses but also more information to help those schools—and individual students—succeed.

In California, 30 school districts have turned their attention to mathematics assessment. Through the Silicon Valley Mathematics Assessment Collaborative, these districts created a performance assessment system that goes beyond multiple-choice questions to require students to demonstrate problem solving, explain their thinking, and justify their findings. A multiple-choice exam could not duplicate this rich picture of student performance. Moreover, because the assessments provide specific information about student learning needs, they guide professional development, inform instruction, and lead to changes in teaching strategies.

As we work to improve NCLB so that the letter of the law matches its intent, we need to pay particular attention to undoing the harm caused by the law's extreme focus on testing (see "The 2006 ASCD Legislative Agenda"). As it stands, NCLB is a two-tiered system in which schools either make AYP or are considered in need of improvement. Unfortunately, the schools in the latter category are lumped together even though they are in need of very different levels of improvement. Any system that hinges the evaluation of an entire school on one test score average from one group of students at one grade level cannot hope to accurately assess that school.
The U.S. Department of Education Web site acknowledges,

If a single annual test were the only device a teacher used to gauge student performance, it would indeed be inadequate. Effective teachers assess their students in various ways during the school year.

It's time NCLB took this idea into account. The transparency that NCLB has brought is a welcome change, but we can put this transparency to better use by gathering more data to paint a more accurate picture of both students and schools.

The 2006 ASCD Legislative Agenda

The current direction in U.S. education practice and policy focuses overwhelmingly on academic achievement, specifically as measured by standardized achievement tests. However, ASCD believes that a broader focus is required. Using the Association's positions as a foundation, ASCD has developed its 2006 legislative agenda to positively influence learning, teaching, and leadership. The legislative agenda has five priorities:

1. **Multiple measures of assessment.** When determining the performance of a student, a school, or an entire school district, multiple measures of assessment provide more accountability and clarity than performance on any single test can provide.

2. **Professional development for educators.** Teacher quality and school leadership are the top school-related factors for improving student achievement. ASCD promotes flexibility and innovation in both program design and use of resources to ensure the availability of high-quality professional development.

3. **Innovative high school reform.** High schools need to provide more meaningful education that better prepares students for their futures. ASCD is working with educators to develop legislation for reforming high schools and is seeking support from the federal government regarding increased flexibility, adequate resources, and policies that reward innovation.

4. **School readiness.** Providing resources and support for effective school readiness programs is crucial to student success and to schools' and educators' abilities to foster this success. High-quality early childhood education will result in substantial savings in future education spending, lower crime rates, lower welfare costs, and increased tax revenues.

5. **Effective school interventions.** No Child Left Behind prescribes specific school improvement options when a school is designated as "in need of improvement": mandatory public school choice and mandatory supplemental services. ASCD is working to enable local school districts to choose the option that best meets their individual needs.

Here's how you can help promote these priorities:

- Become an ASCD Educator Advocate. To sign up, go to [www.capwiz.com/ascd/mlm/signup](http://www.capwiz.com/ascd/mlm/signup)
• Contact the following Congress members who will have significant influence in shaping future education proposals:
  o **Howard P. “Buck” McKeon** (R-CA). Chair, House Committee on Education and the Workforce
  o **George Miller** (D-CA). Senior Democrat, House Committee on Education and the Workforce
  o **Michael B. Enzi** (R-WY). Chair, U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
  o **Edward M. Kennedy** (D-MA). Senior Democrat, U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions

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**References**


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