No More Invisible Kids

Kati Haycock

By shining a spotlight on the achievement of previously ignored student groups, NCLB has given educators the leverage they need to reform public schools. What are the next steps?

One of the best things about my job is how much time I get to spend with educators across the United States who are working hard to improve student achievement. I learn a lot from these principals and teachers about what really works for poor and minority students, and about what doesn’t. These educators always leave me inspired by their accomplishments and hopeful about the future.

Not surprisingly, almost everywhere I go, I get an earful about No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The comments are not all positive, of course. But despite all the rancor and anxiety that seem to dominate the headlines, I’m struck by how often educators tell me that the law is having an enormously positive effect.

The biggest benefit of all? There are no more invisible kids. NCLB has shone a spotlight on the academic performance of poor and minority students, English language learners, and students with disabilities—students whose lagging achievement had previously been hidden. As a result, schools are now focusing more attention on these students’ education.

The law also provides real leverage for educators who are trying to bring about change. Many teachers and administrators have told me that NCLB strengthens the hands of those who are working to boost overall achievement and close achievement gaps. Before passage of this law, these reformers mostly had to rely on exhortation. Now, they’ve got the federal government behind them.

Although NCLB isn’t perfect, the Bush administration and Congress did something important in passing it. They called on educators to embrace a new challenge—not just access for all, but achievement for all. Thousands of educators have answered, bringing more energy, attention, and resources to improving the education of poor and minority students than at any other time in the last two decades.

Spotlight on Success

At Centennial Place Elementary School in Atlanta, Georgia, data collected under NCLB give educators concrete information on individual student achievement. Administrators and teachers are using this information to identify lower-achieving students and address their individual needs.

Although nearly two-thirds of Centennial's students come from low-income families and 90 percent are African American, hard work and a clear focus made the school one of the top performers in the state. But in 2004, new data collected under NCLB brought to light something
that the school had overlooked: The achievement of students with disabilities lagged behind that of other students. Cynthia Kuhlman, Centennial's principal, said,

We took it to heart. We had gone through a period when we didn't acknowledge that our special education students weren't doing well. No Child Left Behind helped us focus.

As a result, the school turned new attention to students with disabilities, adding more depth to the curriculum and ensuring that students in special education had access to the same enrichment programs that other students did.

One year later, 87 percent of students with disabilities met or exceeded standards in math, and 85 percent met or exceeded standards in reading—up from 41 percent in math and 53 percent in reading.

A second example of NCLB's benefits comes from Virginia, where data analysis has revealed that achievement disparities are not the sole province of inner-city schools. Breaking achievement data down by students' race and ethnicity helped sound an alarm in Fairfax County, one of the wealthiest school systems in the United States. African American students in Fairfax (many of whose parents spent a lot of money to secure housing within the school district boundaries) scored significantly lower than African American students in other parts of the state—including Richmond, a predominantly African American school district with far more poverty and far fewer resources than Fairfax has.

In recent interviews with the Washington Post, educators in Richmond attributed much of their improvement to the significant changes made in response to NCLB (Glod, 2006). Schools closely track individual student data to monitor student performance and offer extra tutoring to struggling students to ensure that they reach proficiency targets.

At Richmond's Woodville Elementary School, where 75 percent of students come from low-income families, the improvement has been dramatic: 95 percent of 5th graders met state standards in math last year, compared with 33 percent in 2002. Woodville has seen large gains in other grade levels and in other subjects, too, because the school leaves little to chance. Students take weekly tests to ensure they are grasping the material. If the tests reveal problems, students receive tutoring. When “four Woodville 5th-graders failed a reading test in preparation for the statewide Standards of Learning,” the reporter noted, “the next afternoon an assistant principal was planning extra help for them.”

Today, educators from Fairfax—and from all across the state—are traveling to Richmond to learn more.

**Trends in Student Achievement**

The important question is, Are students learning more as a result of this greater focus on achievement for all?

The Education Trust works hard to track achievement patterns both in the United States as a whole and in the individual states. We collect and analyze results from state assessments and the various exams that make up the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Although numbers vary from state to state and are complicated by frequent changes in tests, the overall patterns are fairly consistent.

In general, we're seeing improved achievement and narrowing gaps on state tests in the elementary grades, where most of the energy and resources provided through NCLB's Title I are focused. Our analysis of state assessment results from 2003 to 2005 (Hall & Kennedy, 2006) looked at states that had at least three years of consistent elementary assessments for which they had reported results for the different subgroups. We found that in reading, 27 of 31 showed improvement, 22 of 29 states narrowed gaps between African American and white students, and
24 of 29 states narrowed gaps between Latino and white students. In math, 29 of 32 states showed improvement, 26 of 30 states showed gap closing between African American and white students, and 22 of 30 showed gap closing between Latino and white students.

In the middle grades, the picture on state assessments is mixed. In reading, only 20 of 31 states showed overall improvement, 22 of 29 states showed gap closing for African American students, and 17 of 29 showed gap closing for Latino students. In math, 29 of 31 states showed improvement, but only 18 of 29 showed gap closing for African American students, and 17 of 29 showed gap closing for Latino students.

In high schools, which get little attention (and even less funding) from NCLB, we see far less progress: 17 of 24 states showed improvement in reading, but only 13 of 20 states showed gap closing for African American students, and 11 of 20 states showed the same for Latinos. In math, 20 of 23 states showed overall improvement, but only 12 of 20 showed African American–white gap closing, and only 10 of 20 states showed Latino-white gap closing.

Patterns for NAEP scores are consistent with those for state assessments. On NAEP's long-term trend assessment, the most stable of all the tests, reading and math scores at the elementary level show strong improvements between 1999 and 2004. More important, we're seeing record performance for all groups of students and the smallest gaps separating African American and Latino students from white students in U.S. history (Perle, Moran, & Lutkus, 2005).

In the middle grades, performance is up and gaps are narrowing in math, but reading is mostly flat. At the high school level, Education Trust's analysis of NAEP data shows no real change. These results on the long-term NAEP trend exam are mostly consistent with results on the main NAEP, but there's a worrisome suggestion in the most recent main NAEP results that the pace of improvement could be slowing.

Translating Accountability into Long-Term Gains

How can we translate the increased focus on the achievement of our most vulnerable students into increased student learning at all levels and in all schools?

First, we need to get serious about high schools, where achievement has been stagnant or declining and gaps between groups are still widening. Right now, few federal education funds flow to high schools. We need to focus more attention, allocate more resources, and implement more effective strategies for improving secondary education and increasing graduation rates. As part of this effort, we should incorporate high school graduation rate targets into NCLB accountability provisions.

Second, we need to rapidly expand the expertise and the resources focused on turning around persistently low-performing schools. NCLB's goal is not to stigmatize schools that don't make adequate yearly progress, but to focus attention and help on the schools and students who need it most. States and districts need systems to diagnose and intervene when schools are struggling. Providing additional federal resources for school improvement would be a good start.

Third, the law would do a better job of targeting the schools that need the most help if accountability determinations included a measure of student growth over time. Giving schools credit for growth in students' learning can help distinguish between schools whose students are on a trajectory to becoming proficient soon and schools whose students are on a trajectory to nowhere. Recognizing growth also can help ensure that schools don't focus in-ordinate attention on students who are just below proficient, but rather seek to build the knowledge and skills of students at all points on the achievement spectrum.

Fourth, we need to ensure that students are taught to real-world standards. The vast disparities between student performance on many state assessments and the more rigorous NAEP are worrisome. At a time when the achievement of U.S. students trails that of their peers in many other industrialized nations, Congress should encourage states to ramp-up expectations by...
providing financial incentives for states to align their standards and assessments more closely to the challenges young people will face in college and the global workplace.

Fifth, we should acknowledge that raising standards isn't enough; this time around, we need to secure stronger supports to help our teachers meet the standards. Despite what reformers once thought, standards themselves do not provide sufficient guidance to teachers about what to teach and to what level. Teachers need coherent, well-designed lessons, units, and assignments that they can use day to day. Fortunately, states and districts are doing more along these lines, and they are also developing more teacher-friendly benchmark assessments to help teachers gauge their students' progress toward state standards. The federal government, however, should play a larger role in supporting these practices.

Finally, we have to revisit NCLB's teacher quality and distribution provisions. Quite simply, we will not close gaps in achievement until we close gaps in teacher quality. Despite all the evidence that teachers matter most in student achievement, the most damaging practice in all of U.S. education persists: giving poor and minority students the least access to high-quality teaching. Recent research from the Illinois Education Research Council makes clear the devastating toll this situation takes on young people. Students who completed calculus in schools with the lowest teacher quality learned less math than students who only went through Algebra II in schools with average teacher quality (Haycock & Peske, 2006).

Improving teacher quality and ensuring equal access to effective teachers must remain a bipartisan priority when Congress reauthorizes NCLB. First, we have to focus on recognizing and rewarding teacher excellence in raising student achievement. Then, we need to devise powerful incentives to attract the most successful teachers to our lowest-performing schools with additional support and pay.

Fulfilling the Promise

Thanks in large measure to the spotlight that NCLB has focused on the performance of all students, the United States is gaining some traction in overcoming the deep inequities that have plagued public education for far too long. We no longer accept dead-end trajectories for students who are poor, or disabled, or African American, or Latino.

To fulfill the real promise of U.S. public education, we must do much more. Achieving this goal will require a real commitment to giving poor and minority students their fair share of teaching talent, more help to states and districts struggling to turn around low-performing schools, standards and assessments linked to the demands of the 21st-century economy, and clear guidance to teachers on how to align instruction with these higher standards. Raising achievement for all students and closing achievement gaps once and for all will require more attention from Congress, policymakers, and educators. We cannot rest on our accomplishments to date.

References


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