

Reality-Testing NCLB

Proponents of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law have charged critics with creating "myths" about the law and have issued their own "facts." It's time to look at the evidence for a reality check on NCLB's claims of success.[1]

THE CLAIM: Proponents say higher test scores prove NCLB is working.

THE REALITY: Rising test scores are primarily the result of repetitive drilling for the narrow content the exams cover, not real educational improvements. Groups that have long struggled, like special education and English language learners and many low-income minority students, continue to do so – in fact, they may be falling further behind.

- Some state test scores have risen, but reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have not. (NAEP math scores began rising prior to NCLB's passage.) Most test experts agree that score gains on one test mean little if there are not parallel improvements on tests that are not taught to, such as NAEP. [2] Instruction in reading and math increasingly resembles test preparation, which is why scores often rise on state tests, but not on NAEP.
- Texas is the NCLB model state. Due to a decade of intensive teaching to the TAAS test, scores rose dramatically and the racial score gap narrowed. But the gains were not confirmed and the racial gap did not close on NAEP or on the state's college admissions exam. In fact, Texas colleges reported in-state high school graduates needed more, not less, remediation after high-stakes testing was introduced.
- Study after study has found that a focus on reading and math tests causes schools to downplay science, history, art, physical education and even recess in order to boost scores.

THE CLAIM: Education Trust and other NCLB proponents say, “[E]arly evidence from states at the forefront of implementing rigorous accountability and instructional support systems demonstrates beyond any reasonable doubt that public schools are capable of meeting the expectations in the law.” [3] Supporters also point to an increase in the number of schools that made "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) under NCLB as evidence of success.

THE REALITY: Based on recent NAEP trends, testing expert Robert Linn says that it would take 166 years for all 12th graders to attain proficiency in both reading and math. Across the nation, researchers and state officials predict 70 to 100 percent of all schools will, sooner or later, fail to make AYP.

- The major reason why more schools made AYP this year was a series of one-time changes in the way AYP is calculated. These “improvements” do not necessarily represent real learning gains.
- Due to requirements that all demographic groups make AYP, schools with integrated student bodies are far more likely to fail and be punished than schools that lack diversity.
- Even NCLB proponents such as Education Trust acknowledge that gains on state tests in the first few years are not fast enough to meet the law's requirements. Most states' NCLB compliance plans require much greater annual score increases in the coming years.

THE CLAIM: President Bush says that tests are needed to diagnose children's difficulties so problems can be caught early and addressed by teachers: "My attitude is, is that in order to know, in order to diagnose a problem, you have to measure it in the first place. You cannot solve a problem until you measure in the first place." [4]

THE REALITY: Catching learning difficulties early is essential. However, one-shot state exams are not good diagnostic tools.

- To find out whether a child is having trouble in a particular area, such as multiplying fractions, a few questions on a state test do not provide enough information.
- Children struggle academically for a variety of reasons. State tests do not provide any useful information on *why* an individual child may be having trouble, so the tests cannot help teachers figure out what to do differently to help that child.

THE CLAIM: NCLB proponents say the law holds schools accountable to parents and empowers them with useful data about their schools' performance.

THE REALITY: NCLB actually reduces local control and increases the control of distant bureaucrats. Because it reduces the gauge of school improvement to standardized test scores in reading and math, NCLB can't answer the main questions on most parents' minds: How is my child doing overall, and does my child's school offer what he needs to be well educated, happy and successful?

- Many parents receive contradictory information about the quality of their child's school, e.g., state tests concluding the schools are improving and federal data saying they're getting worse. Many parents are left confused about what the data really means.

THE CLAIM: President Bush says the law empowers parents by letting them transfer their children out of ineffective schools or obtain tutoring.

THE REALITY: The law has done little more than label schools "in need of improvement," leaving many parents with no real options.

- In large cities such as New York, Chicago and Washington, D.C., and in smaller districts, very few seats for transfers are available in schools making AYP.
- Most "tutoring" is little more than test preparation, not real learning; unlike teachers, tutors do not have to be "highly qualified"; and money for tutoring is taken out of schools' NCLB Title I funds, reducing support for most students.

THE CLAIM: U.S. Education Secretary Rod Paige said that NCLB only asks "that a third-grade child read at a third-grade level," and defines "proficiency" as basic grade-level capability.

THE REALITY: The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) proficiency standards, on which NCLB is based, are set so high that it will be impossible for most schools to reach them.

- Multiple independent studies of how NAEP set proficiency levels found that the procedures were flawed, resulting in absurdly high cut-off points. In other words, "proficient" on NAEP means a score well above what is typically considered "grade level."
- A federal Government Accountability Office study found that states vary wildly in how they define proficiency. "Proficient" is far easier to reach in some states than in others. The differing percentage of students scoring proficient therefore does not reflect the relative academic health of their schools and students.

THE CLAIM: NCLB provides the tools schools and districts need to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

THE REALITY: Once a school or district is labeled “in need of improvement” because it has not met test score targets for two years, a series of progressively more severe sanctions are set in motion, ending with "restructuring," which may mean that a school’s staff is replaced or the school is put under private management.

- The law focuses on punishment and blame, rather than on increasing the capacity of state education agencies and school districts to fully address the needs of struggling schools and their students.
- There is no evidence from previous experience that the types of interventions listed by NCLB – firing teachers, privatizing school management, having the state run the school, forcing a school to be a charter school – have consistently improved schools. For example, a report from the pro-NCLB, pro-privatization Fordham Foundation found that replacing staff simply did not work.

THE CLAIM: U.S. Education Secretary Rod Paige says the law is adequately funded and federal expenditures have risen rapidly.

THE REALITY: Funding remains woefully inadequate for the goal of leaving no child behind.

- The National Conference of State Legislatures calculated the gap between funds authorized and appropriated by Congress for NCLB at nearly \$20 billion for just the two years 2004 and 2005.
- If the nation is serious about leaving no child behind, then it must not only provide adequate school funding – which some experts say would mean an additional \$84.5 billion per year for low-income schools – but also address issues of nutrition, health care, housing and community stability that so often make it hard for children to learn in school.

Notes:

1. These statements are documented in FairTest's report on NCLB, *Failing Our Children*, [http://www.fairtest.org/Failing_Our_Children_Report.html] unless otherwise noted.

2. NAEP math results are available online at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/mathematics/>. Reading results are at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/reading/>.

3. Education Trust’s “The ABCS of AYP” is available online at <http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/37B8652D-84F4-4FA1-AA8D-319EAD5A6D89/0/ABCAYP.PDF>.

4. See <http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/edu/s090803.htm>.