

IV. Money, Education and Accountability

A widespread critique of NCLB is that its promise of improvement is meaningless given the insufficient resources allocated to the education of low-income children. In addition to continuing inequitable and inadequate school funding, many students suffer from the effects of poverty that schools alone cannot solve. As Susan Neuman, President Bush's former assistant secretary for elementary and secondary education, put it, "When we say all children can achieve and then not give them the additional resources [needed for meeting that goal] we are creating a fantasy" (Manzo, 2004).

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A. Funding NCLB and Funding Education

While President George W. Bush claims to be the "education president," touting NCLB as his credential, there is widespread agreement that NCLB's funds fall far short of what would be needed to make every child "proficient." The Fiscal Year 2003 federal Title I appropriation was \$11.3 billion. The Bush administration sought an increase to \$12.3 billion for FY 2004, far less than the \$18 billion Congress authorized when it created NCLB. In March 2004, the National Conference of State Legislatures calculated the gap between funds authorized and appropriated for NCLB at \$9.6 billion (Mandate Monitor, 2004). Bush claimed the \$1 billion increase he sought for FY 2004 was "more than enough money" to accomplish NCLB's goals.

However, according to William J. Mathis (2004), superintendent of schools in Brandon, Vermont, and a professor of education finance at the University of Vermont, "The law says that each child living in poverty is eligible to receive an extra 40 percent of the state's average per-pupil spending. The Congressional Research Service calculates this would amount to \$30.4 billion. Thus, the law is funded at only 41 percent of its own definition." An increase of \$30.4 billion would be welcome, but it is not likely to be enough to bring all children to the proficient level.

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Researchers have employed a variety of methods to estimate what it would take to get every child to pass mandated state tests. According to Mathis, a conservative estimate is that a 20 percent increase in spending nationwide, an increase of about \$84.5 billion, would be needed (Mathis, 2003). Elsewhere, Mathis (2004) points out that studies in 13 states that have considered the costs of bringing all children

up to proficient project “new money increases” of 20 to 40 percent, with a median increase of 30.2 percent. Nationally, that would require an increase of more than \$120 billion.

Many state policymakers charge that the modest federal budget increase will not cover the costs of fulfilling the law’s mandates. The most detailed study to date on the costs of NCLB, a report by the Ohio Department of Education, concluded it would cost the state an additional \$1.5 billion per year to administer NCLB and meet its achievement goals – twice what the state now gets from the federal government (Hoff, 2004). Mark Joyce, executive director of the New Hampshire School Administrators Association, estimated that his state’s schools will receive an average of \$77 per student in new federal money, but complying with the law’s mandates will cost \$575 per student (New Hampshire School Administrators Association, 2002).

A proposed lawsuit drafted by the National Education Association in July 2003 points out that the failure to allocate enough funds to pay for mandated testing, tutoring and transfers means the federal government is violating the terms of the NCLB law, which specifies in Sec. 9527, “Nothing in this Act shall be construed to authorize an officer or employee of the Federal Government to...mandate a State or any subdivision thereof to spend any funds or incur any costs not paid for under this Act.” To date, however, no state has filed suit on these grounds.

Some proponents of the NCLB test-and-punish philosophy espouse the idea that the nation should stop throwing money at the failed public education approaches of the past and hold everyone to the same high standards once and for all (Paige, 2003). Texas columnist Molly Ivins describes that viewpoint as: “Spend less money, and bring back the lash and McGuffey Readers” (Ivins, 2003).

Some of the same people who have argued the federal government doesn’t need to spend more on education are also fighting against spending increases at the state and local level. For example, Republican former House Majority Leader Dick Armey leads the group Citizens for a Sound Economy, which fights tax increases for education. The group helped kill a \$1.2 billion tax hike in Alabama, earmarked to improve public education, and it helped derail an Oregon tax increase that lawmakers intended to provide 13 percent more money for public schools (Straight A’s, 2003).

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Federal funds have never covered more than a small fraction of the nation's total elementary and secondary education spending. Currently, the federal share is 7 to 8 percent. Some NCLB proponents argued the law would force states to live up to their obligations to adequately fund public education. According to *Education Week's Quality Counts* (2004, 2003) most states exhibit sizeable funding differences among their districts, with poorer districts having lower-funded schools. However, during the first two years of NCLB, most states cut education funding due to their fiscal crises.

A report by the Vermont Society for the Study of Education concludes that the consensus among school funding experts is that students in poverty require twice the current per pupil expenditure to attain proficiency (Mathis, 2002). No state has come close to providing such support for children from low-income families.

Secretary of Education Rod Paige has correctly and repeatedly charged this country with perpetuating educational apartheid. However, Paige defends a law that not only fails to redress the funding apartheid that produces unequal outcomes, but may in fact exacerbate such inequities.

An *Oakland Tribune* article (Tucker, 2003) vividly described what educational apartheid looks like in California: "Students in poor communities enter dilapidated classrooms where uncredentialed teachers with inadequate materials await — and where parent involvement is limited or nonexistent. In better-off neighborhoods, sometimes just a few miles away, the schools nearly sparkle, sporting the latest facility upgrades, top-notch equipment and the most experienced teachers. With nighttime PTA meetings, weekend potluck fund-raisers and various festivities, these better schools lure upwardly mobile home buyers drawn to the first-rate education and other opportunities offered to their kids."

Funding disparities are being legally challenged in a number of states. New York's highest court recently ruled that the state has failed to provide adequate funding to New York City and other urban, poor districts. The court requested that a study be conducted to determine the cost of an adequate education in the state. In March 2004 (American Institutes for Research, 2004), researchers released a preliminary report calculating the state would need to

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spend an additional \$6.21 billion (an increase of 19.4 percent), including an additional \$3.62 billion in New York City alone.

In California, a major educational adequacy and equity case, *Williams*, is before the courts. New Hampshire is engaged in a long-running battle over how to fund a decision by the state's top court requiring additional funds for low-income districts to ensure that all students receive "an adequate education." In Massachusetts, a Superior Court judge has ruled that the state is not providing enough funding to adequately educate students in 19 low-income districts and recommended that the state's highest court hear a lawsuit filed by these districts against the state Department of Education (Maguire, 2004). A group of districts in Kentucky recently filed suit, charging that funding gaps between districts have widened since that court found the state's education system to be inadequate. And the Ohio Supreme Court reaffirmed its decision mandating changes in school funding — but once again did not mandate any specific aid level.

A Kansas trial court ruled in December 2003 that the state education finance system is unconstitutional due to its failure to "provide equity in funding for all Kansas children." Although a court had deemed the funding system constitutional in 1994, legislative changes in the intervening years led to funding disparities exceeding 300 percent. Hoover Institution fellow Dr. Eric Hanushek, a noted proponent of the idea that money doesn't matter in education, testified for the state. However, he was forced to acknowledge in his testimony that "money spent wisely, logically, and with accountability would be very useful indeed." He concluded by agreeing with the statement: "Only a fool would say money doesn't matter" (School Funding Updates, 2003).

And in a report whose title – *Can Separate Be Equal?* – is an implicit rebuttal to Rod Paige's use of the issue of apartheid, the Century Foundation argued, "Fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, NCLB is an effort, like most education reform, to make separate but equal work."

B. Schooling and Poverty

While states continue to allow great inequality in school funding, the social conditions that make education in low-income communities a more challenging task are also worsening. Unemployment is up, states are cutting access to medical care and, like the federal govern-

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ment, cutting housing support. A recent *New York Times* story reported that in some states, there has been a 50 percent increase in homeless students in the past year. Schools are increasingly faced with trying to compensate for these students' unmet basic needs (Dillon, 2003). Schools thus face major mandates to improve educational outcomes - or at least test scores - for low-income and minority-group children even as their funding declines and other social problems that affect learning intensify.

Failing to address the fundamental problems that undergird school inequality enables policymakers to blame teachers for the consequences of deep-seated social ills. It enables the federal government to pass legislation named "No Child Left Behind" without addressing housing, nutrition, health care or other basic needs that are unmet for millions of girls and boys.

Going at least as far back as the famous Coleman Report of 1966, research has consistently found a very high correlation between socioeconomic status and educational outcomes, including test scores. Analyzing the same data, Christopher Jencks and his colleagues (1972) concluded that schools were not good vehicles for addressing social inequality. Richard Rothstein has regularly argued that poverty is a more significant cause of low academic achievement than are weak schools, and that providing low-income students with things like dental care may do more for academic achievement than test preparation (Rothstein, 2001). George Schmidt, publisher of the Chicago monthly education paper *Substance*, reminds us that the language of "achievement gap" masks the real issues of poverty and racism that cause the gap (Schmidt, 2003).

Mathis (2003), writing in *Phi Delta Kappan*, offers evidence for this view, noting that the United States ranks 21st out of 24 industrialized nations in educational equality. He refutes the argument that schools alone can close the achievement gap: "Simply teaching children will have little effect if they return to bad neighborhoods, single-parent homes, foster care, inadequate health care and a general lack of support." Mathis referenced research by Whitney Allgood and Richard Rothstein demonstrating that overcoming the effects of poverty requires broad-scale interventions, including community clinics, before and after school programs, early childhood intervention and summer school programs.

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Valerie Lee and David Burkam (2002) found that the academic achievement gap is largely in place before children enter kindergarten and first grade. They identified a series of social factors that cause race and class differences in school performance.

Educational Testing Service researcher Paul Barton (2003) identified a series of school and non-school factors that substantially contribute to the test score gap. The out-of-school factors include lead paint, which is much more likely to be found in housing occupied by low-income families, and high student mobility, which is often caused by low-income parents having difficulty making rent payments.

A recent RAND Corporation report explained that approaches like NCLB, which address school factors alone, are unlikely to combat the root causes of the achievement gap: “NCLB assumes that educators can address the factors that have contributed to low levels of achievement effectively and that the way to make this happen is through a combination of high standards, powerful incentives, and technical assistance. If this is not the case — for example if poor achievement is due to high levels of student mobility — this model of accountability is not likely to be an effective strategy for improvement. Neither incentives nor the options for supplemental services or parental choice are likely to address the root cause of the problem” (Stecher et al, 2003).

Despite these well-supported arguments about socioeconomic influences on academic achievement, the U.S. has consistently sought to address social inequality through education. Thus, elementary and secondary schools have become the main arenas in which social differences of class and race are supposed to be addressed. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which passed under President Lyndon Johnson, was one such effort. Decades of evidence shows that while ESEA may have prevented gaps from increasing, achievement differences as measured by standardized tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress have not narrowed significantly.

Over the years, various individuals and organizations, most recently groups such as the conservative Heritage Foundation and the more centrist Education Trust, have argued that schools can do a far better job educating students from low-income backgrounds with the resources they have. The evidence to support their claims is contested, with some researchers responding that the numbers of “successful”

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schools claimed by these groups have been greatly inflated if not largely fabricated. For example, Steven Krashen (2002) found that Education Trust (Ali and Jerald, 2001) used very low standards for identifying California schools making exemplary progress, allowing schools with test score gains in only one subject in one grade to count as significant school-level improvement. In addition, the identified schools tended to have fewer students from poor households than the average California school (Krashen, 2002).

To acknowledge these facts is not to argue that schools cannot make a substantial difference in the lives of low-income students. There are some schools, such as those associated with educators such as Deborah Meier and Ann Cook (e.g., the New York Performance Standards Consortium schools), that over the years have produced substantially better outcomes for low-income children as indicated by graduation rates, college enrollment and undergraduate success (Institute for Education and Social Policy, 2001). Meier (2002) does not claim such schools can overcome the effects of poverty to ensure equality of outcomes, but says they have made a difference in measures more significant than test scores.

The question of the extent to which schools can overcome the consequences of poverty and racism has been hotly debated at least since Ron Edmonds (1979) argued that some schools serving low-income children had test scores similar to students in more affluent schools. While evidence does suggest school systems can do better than they often have, there are no large-scale examples in which schools have been able to conquer the effects of poverty.

Funding, of course, cannot be considered apart from what the money is spent on, as those who deny the importance of persistent funding inequities remind us. In essence, the federal law requires funds to be targeted toward activities that raise test scores. But as research by Audrey Amrein and David Berliner (2002) shows, there is no real evidence that boosting scores on one test means real learning has improved. Nor does a focus on tests lead to closing the racial score gap (Johnson *et al.*, 2001).

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Thus, the nation finds itself in an apparent bind: The federal government now requires states to improve results, but is providing very little money. States, which historically have allowed funding and educational inequalities to persist, have cut classroom aid. Even if schools can do a better job than ever before, there is no solid evidence that inequities can be overcome in the classroom alone, certainly not by a focus on test preparation. If states and the federal government do not jointly address social and educational inequities, districts and schools will inevitably fail to meet the new mandates.

What then? Will the U.S. grapple with the poverty that underlies low educational performance, recognize that it will take substantial funds to improve schools, and understand that test prep is not high quality schooling? Such considerations would entail vastly different national priorities. It is perhaps instructive that the Children's Defense Fund (2003), whose slogan "Leave No Child Behind" was appropriated (and put in passive tense) for the law, has crafted legislation to start to address these multiple issues — but the legislation has not moved in Washington.

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“SEC. 9527. PROHIBITIONS ON FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AND USE OF FEDERAL FUNDS. “(a) GENERAL PROHIBITION.— Nothing in this Act shall be construed to authorize an officer or employee of the Federal Government to mandate, direct, or control a State, local educational agency, or school’s curriculum, program of instruction, or allocation of State or local resources, or mandate a State or any subdivision thereof to spend any funds or incur any costs not paid for under this Act. 20 USC 7907. Cite title number, code abbreviation (U.S.C.) Section number 9527, year on volume spine.

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