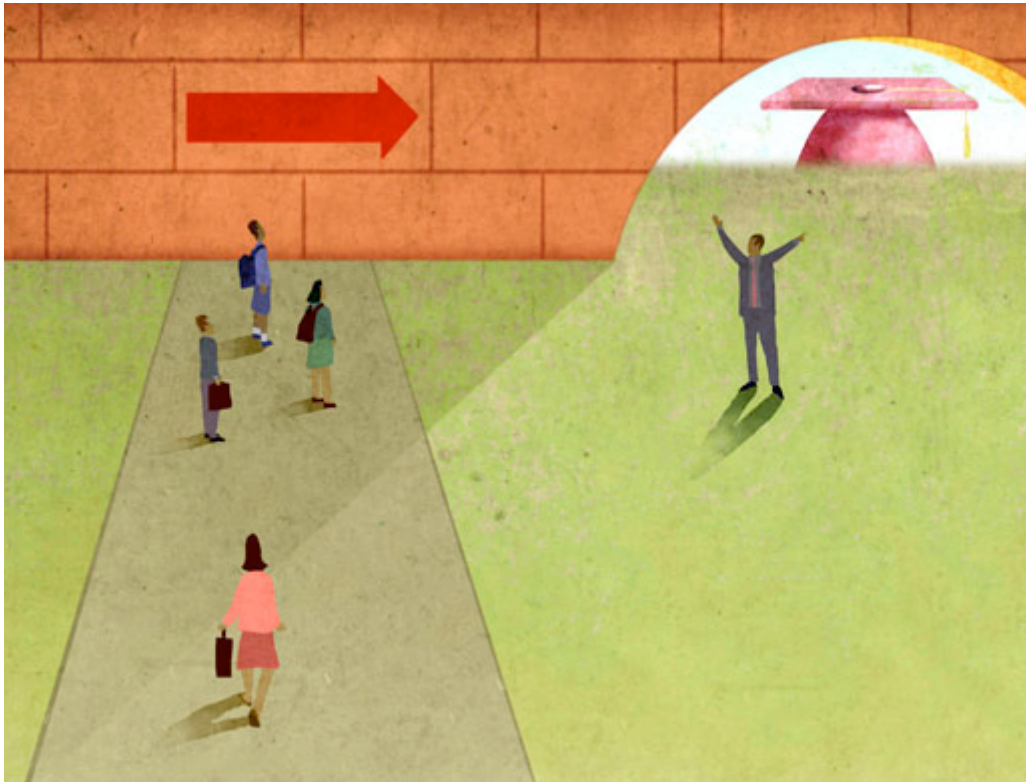



COMMENTARY

Time to Kill 'No Child Left Behind'



—Steve Dininno

By Diane Ravitch

The **latest release**  of scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress provides no evidence for the effectiveness of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. The scores announced on April 28 reflect long-term trends, measuring progress on the same skills since the early 1970s, as opposed to scores achieved on NAEP's regular, every-other-year tests.

In long-term trends, the achievement gap between white and minority students has hardly budged over the past decade. Although average scores are up for 9-year-olds and 13-year-olds in reading and mathematics between 2004 and 2008, the rate of improvement is actually smaller than it was in the previous period measured, from 1999 to 2004.

It is time to ask whether NCLB should be renewed. I argue that it should not. What will President Barack Obama and his administration do with the law?

During the presidential campaign, candidate Obama hinted at sweeping changes in the No Child Left Behind law. He promised that teachers would no longer be “forced to spend the academic year preparing students to fill in bubbles on standardized tests.” He recognized that subjects like history and the arts had been pushed aside, and that children were not getting a well-rounded education. He pledged to fix the accountability system “so that we are supporting schools that need improvement” instead of punishing them.


To date, the Obama administration has been silent about its plans for reforming No Child Left Behind. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan appears ready to propose a few nips and tucks in the program, but leave it fundamentally unaltered. But it is too late to tweak NCLB. Seven years after it was signed into law, it is clear that the program deserves to be buried.

"It is too late to tweak NCLB. Seven years after it was signed into law, it is clear that the program deserves to be buried."

In 2001, the “No Child” legislation was endorsed by large bipartisan majorities in Congress, who agreed that students were not keeping pace with their high-performing peers in other nations. The law requires public schools to test all students annually in grades 3-8 in reading and mathematics, and to disaggregate the test scores by race, socioeconomic status, disability, and English proficiency. The law mandates that all students must be “proficient” in both reading and math by the end of the 2013-14 school year. In a bow to federalism, Congress permitted the states to devise their own standards, their own tests, and their own definitions of proficiency.

Schools that do not make progress toward the goal of 100 percent proficiency for every group are subject to increasingly stringent sanctions. In their second year of failing to make what is called “adequate yearly progress” for any group, failing schools have their students given the choice of leaving to enroll in a better public school. In the third year of a school’s failure, students are entitled to free tutoring after school. In subsequent years, the failing school may be converted to private management, turned into a charter school, have its entire staff dismissed, or be handed over to the state.

Results from this multibillion-dollar undertaking have been disappointing. Gains in achievement have been meager, as we have seen not only on NAEP's long-term-trend report, but also on the NAEP tests that are administered every other year. In national assessments since the No Child Left Behind legislation was passed, 4th grade reading scores went up by 3 points, about the same as in the years preceding the law's enactment. In 8th grade reading, there have been no gains since 1998. In mathematics, the gains were larger before NCLB in both 4th grade and 8th grade.

In the **latest international assessment of mathematics and science** , released this past December, U.S. students again scored well behind students in Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, and Taipei. Our 4th grade and 8th grade students recorded small improvements in mathematics, but not in science, where those in both grades scored lower than in years predating No Child Left Behind.

The decline of 8th grade test scores in science from 2003 to 2007 demonstrates the consequences of ignoring everything but reading and mathematics. Because NCLB counts only those basic skills, it has necessarily reduced attention to such non-tested subjects as science, history, civics, the arts, and geography.

The law's remedies for failing students—school choice and tutoring—have also been a bust. Fewer than 5 percent of eligible students choose to leave their schools, and sometimes those who leave are the ones who are doing well, not the ones who are failing. In many districts, there is often only one school, so choice is meaningless. In some urban districts, there is no better school that is accessible. Many students don't want to leave their schools, even when a better one is nearby.

Similarly, fewer than 20 percent of eligible students sign up to be tutored, even when the extra help is free and convenient. Most apparently don't want another hour of schooling, which would mean giving up their after-school jobs and sports. Some studies show that tutored students are not learning any more than those who refused tutoring.

The law's sanctions don't work. Few schools have converted to charter status or private or state management. Most prefer "restructuring," in which the school gets a thorough shaking-up, in some cases with the entire staff dismissed. This has not made much difference either. Contrary to popular mythology, most failing schools continue to struggle, even after everyone has been fired and replaced.

The worst part of the law is its unrealistic demand that all students must be proficient by 2014. No other nation and no state has ever reached this unrealistic goal. Every educator knows that it is impossible. While the goal remains in place, the number of failing schools grows each year. In the past year, nearly 30,000 public schools—35 percent nationwide—were identified as failing. In Massachusetts, which has the highest-scoring students in the United States, nearly half the state’s public schools were rated “in need of improvement.” And an [article in Science magazine](#) this past September predicted that nearly 100 percent of all elementary schools in California would be considered failing schools under the law by 2014.

In trying to prove that they are moving closer to the impossible target required by NCLB, most states have adopted very low definitions of “proficiency.” Tennessee, for example, says that 90 percent of its 4th graders are proficient in reading, but the federal testing by NAEP says that only 27 percent are. Most states have endorsed low standards and inflated their scores to meet the law’s nonsensical requirements.

Congress should get rid of No Child Left Behind because it is a failed law. It is dumbing down our children by focusing solely on reading and mathematics. By ignoring everything but basic skills, it is not preparing students to compete with their peers in the high-performing nations of Asia and Europe, nor is it preparing them for citizenship in our complex society. It has usurped state and local control of education. Washington has neither the knowledge nor the capacity to micromanage the nation’s schools.

No amount of tinkering can repair this poorly designed law. The time has come for fresh thinking about the best way for Washington to help improve the nation’s schools.

Diane Ravitch, a historian of American education, is a research professor of education at New York University and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. She served as an assistant U.S. secretary of education from 1991 to 1993. She co-writes the [Bridging Differences](#) blog on [edweek.org](#).