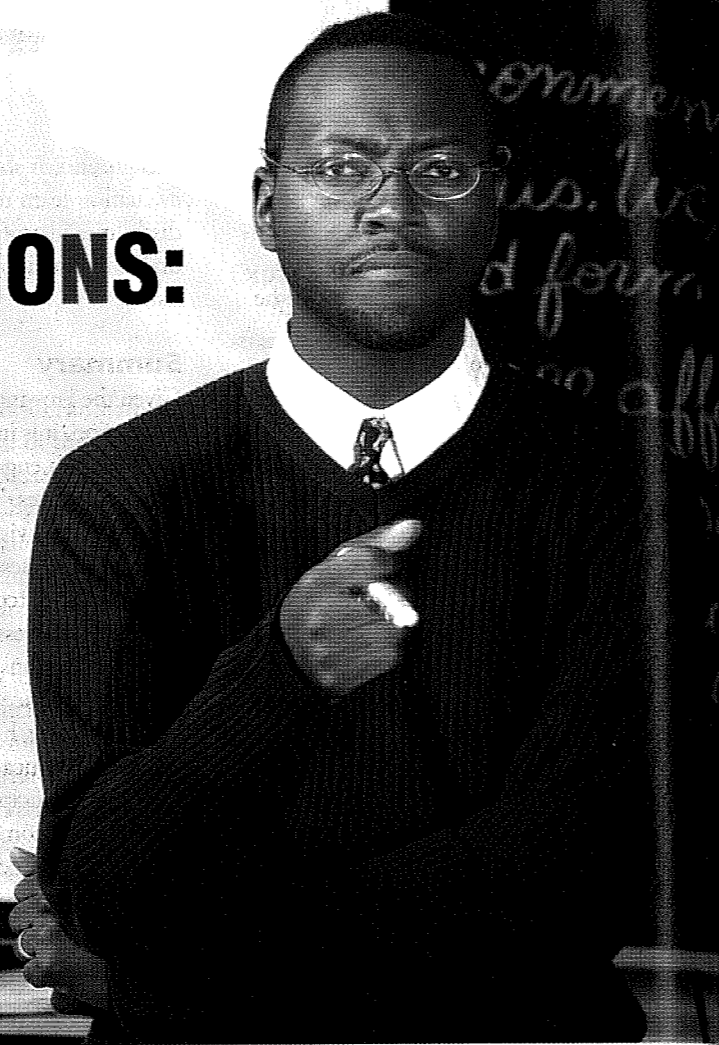


FLAWED ASSUMPTIONS: How No Child Left Behind Fails Principals

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UNDER THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT (NCLB), every school is subject to the controversial mandates for annual test score gains contained in the federal law. The law represents a profound change in the relationship between the federal government and state and local education agencies regarding who controls education and has direct implications for what happens educationally in schools and classrooms. Although NCLB affects these and other important areas of the educational system and imposes great pressure on school leaders, it is silent on the role of principals in fostering school improvement.

Yet many of NCLB's provisions have important implications for principals. The law is based on the assumption that external accountability and the imposition of sanctions will force schools to improve and motivate teachers to change their instructional practices, resulting in better school performance. By relying on the threat of sanctions and market mechanisms—choice and supplemental educational services—to force school improvement, the law tends to place the principals of low-achieving schools in the role of trying to produce very large gains every year for every subgroup of students.

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The heavy emphasis on testing and accountability has re-focused attention on underperforming subgroups but also has created incentives that drive curriculum and instruction in the classroom. The law requires that all schools receiving NCLB aid must have “highly qualified” teachers, a response to research showing that low-income students have the least prepared and experienced teachers and that the quality of teachers substantially affects student achievement. The underlying assumption is that school districts, and by extension principals, were not trying hard enough to attract good teachers to impoverished schools and that they could rapidly remedy this problem if required to by federal law.

Teachers Are Central

Although NCLB says nothing specific about principals, teachers are the central targets of the act. In many ways, the law is really a theory about what is wrong with teachers and schools and how to coerce improved performance. Conservative critics often blame the failure of high-poverty schools to achieve high rates of educational gain on the neglect of teachers and teacher unions. Many earlier studies of education reform concluded that useful and lasting reform is virtually impossible unless teachers embrace the ideas of the reform and receive extra support and resources to support change and that serious change requires serious time. NCLB, however, assumes that if teachers and their schools are labeled as failing and are required to make substantial improvements in student achievement without additional resources, then there will be very positive and rapid outcomes.

NCLB treats improvement in education as a regulatory problem rather than an education and professional problem that has many roots in the conditions of poverty and inequality that exist outside the schools. The law's solution is to force administrators to hire better teachers and get rid of the less-qualified ones.

But two very important elements of NCLB contradict each other: the provisions that all teachers in schools receiving

PREVIEW

No Child Left Behind stipulates that schools that receive aid must employ highly qualified teachers although qualified teachers aren't inclined to remain in schools that receive poor ratings.

Teacher survey responses show support for standards but skepticism regarding sanctions as motivation.

Schools that need improvement require strong, committed, long-term leaders, but the law does nothing to attract leaders to such schools.

aid must be highly qualified is in conflict with the implicit assumption in the law's sanctions that any school not making the prescribed level of annual progress on standardized tests must put its teachers under intense pressure to do better. It is true, of course, that one of the basic problems of concentrated-poverty schools is that they often cannot attract and retain strongly prepared and experienced teachers—the kind of teachers who are vital to achieving school progress. To try to attract better teachers to these schools and to improve the educational preparation of teachers aides are very positive goals. The act, however, does not provide the policies, support, or flexibility needed to meet these goals and instead assumes that good teachers will respond to being sanctioned and labeled as failing. But the reality is that teachers cannot be forced to stay in the schools that are targeted for change, and when the sanctions are severe and the goals are beyond what the teachers believe can be obtained, they are likely to leave rapidly.

One known problem is that teachers who begin teaching in high-poverty schools tend to leave both the schools and the profession in disproportionate numbers. In fact, high-poverty schools tend to have little stability in terms of their students, teachers, administrators, and even community residents. Teaching in these schools tends to be a harder and less-rewarding job because teachers confront



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many obstacles to learning that come from the conditions of their students' families and communities. The students from poorly educated homes typically have much less success on standardized academic achievement measures. NCLB threatens to dissolve schools and remove teachers in high-poverty schools, a potentially drastic career-wrecking sanction, unless their students achieve at a level that is vastly higher than in the past.

The law views the schools as having totally transformative power. Teachers do not believe that is true and see serious academic and nonacademic obstacles to improving student achievement. They believe that they can make a difference but that external factors are also important and that NCLB accountability is fundamentally unfair.

Findings From a Teacher Survey

In 2004, we conducted a survey to understand teachers' views of the assumptions underlying NCLB (Sunderman, Tracey, Kim, & Orfield, 2004). We surveyed a sample of teachers in two urban districts, the Fresno (CA) Unified School District and Richmond (VA) Public Schools, that are in different regions of the country and operate within very different state policies and reform contexts. These two school districts serve many low-income and minority students, with one serving mostly Latino students and the other mostly Black students. The survey was administered in May and June 2004 to teachers in schools that were identified for improvement under NCLB and in schools that were making adequate progress.

The survey asked teachers how they viewed the focus on external rewards and sanctions as motivators for school improvement and for teachers to change their instructional practices. It also asked them what they needed to improve their schools. The teachers were very responsive; 77.4% (1,445 out of 1,866) of the sampled teachers returned the survey. Their responses indicated that they had a thoughtful and nuanced view of reform that is quite consistent across districts and teachers. Teachers believed that there should be standards; that their schools had coherent education programs that were linked to standards; that their schools' goals were clear to the students; and that teachers were working hard to accomplish them, even before NCLB.

Teachers accepted the idea of accountability, were not opposed to appropriate sanctions, and believed that ineffective teachers should be removed from schools. But they did not believe that identifying schools that did not make adequate yearly progress would lead to school improvement. Teachers rejected the idea that the testing requirements would improve teachers' instruction or the curriculum. Instead, they believed these reforms narrowed the curriculum that teachers taught by focusing their instruction on tested subjects and neglecting nontested subjects. Teachers also indicated that schools were making changes and that many of these changes were underway prior to NCLB, something that was confirmed in our district interviews. In some cases, NCLB disrupted these long-term reform efforts.

On the very important issue of hiring and retaining more highly qualified and experienced teachers in high-poverty schools that are not meeting adequate yearly progress requirements, the survey provided some important information. Many of the teachers in those schools did not plan to be teaching in them five years into the future. In one of the two districts, three-fourths of the teachers in the sanctioned schools plan to be somewhere else. Teachers also believed that the NCLB sanctions would cause teachers to transfer out of schools that were not making adequate progress. Overall, the survey responses suggest that there is a very serious problem in getting teachers to make a long-term commitment to such schools and that designating schools as failing to make adequate yearly progress under NCLB will make things worse.

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Teachers recognized the possible positive impact that sanctions could have but tended to believe that rewards and positive recognition for improvements in outcomes were more powerful. They felt pressure to do whatever they could to raise test scores. Teachers would like to have more assistance, curricular and instructional materials better aligned with state standards, and more opportunity to work together with their colleagues on school reform.

NCLB has no policies designed to require highly qualified and experienced administrators in high-poverty schools and no incentives for them to take such jobs. In fact, it poses a serious risk that they will be rapidly labeled as leaders of failing schools and faced with sanctions for taking on these assignments. Teachers, however, recognized that good leaders are an essential part of reform. They saw a very high value in having good education administrators leading the education change efforts in the school, something largely neglected in the reform discussion.

Teachers were not opposed to accountability, but they did not believe that the NCLB accountability requirements or sanctions were designed in a way that would lead to school improvement. Teachers did not support the notion underlying NCLB—that external accountability and the imposition of sanctions will motivate teachers to improve and lead to school improvement—and they were dubious about the value of market competition for school improvement. The survey results suggest that teachers can be held to high standards, but that school reform is a collective, not an individual, undertaking that requires strong leadership and a sense of direction, goals that are attainable, incentives and resources for change, and a more sophisticated theory of how reforms work than the one offered by NCLB.

Implications for Principals

What are the implications of these findings for principals? For one, they show that teachers, like researchers, recognize the key role of leadership in fostering school reform. They suggest that principals and their organizations should advocate for better resources to help their schools. These resources need to focus on better curricular and instructional materials that are tied to state standards and on a long-term commitment to developing coherent instructional programs

that are not constantly changing. The resources should include the allocation of time and pay particular attention to finding additional time for teachers to collaborate.

Second, the survey findings suggest that principals should carefully consider how test-based accountability affects the educational process. Principals are in a position to evaluate the success of their current reform programs and encourage the continuation of those that are working while discouraging practices that disrupt good reform programs already underway. They can help to refocus accountability by using test results for diagnostic purposes and ensuring that testing activities do not take excessive time away from the basic activities of teaching and learning, distort the curriculum, or devalue other important learning goals.

Third, it is vitally important to increase the long-term attachment of quality teachers to Title I schools. Principals can address teachers' desire for more time for collaboration to improve learning by advocating for funds for such efforts. They can provide explicit recognition for teachers who make high levels of progress and balance the negative reinforcement of NCLB by focusing on the positive work that teachers do.

There is an urgent need for strong, committed, long-term leaders in schools that need improvement—leaders with vision and the ability to find and hold strong staff members. There is nothing in NCLB to attract administrators to such schools and much to push them away. Developing such leaders should become a key goal in reforming schools, and districts should be encouraged to develop and evaluate plans to reach this goal. The idea that schools need good administrators, which is left out of NCLB, is central for successful school reform. As we review the NCLB experience and prepare for revisions of the law and its policies, it is very important that principals play a role in explaining to communities, the media, and policymakers some of the contradictions and oversimplifications in the existing law and what would be needed to make real progress toward NCLB's worthy goals. **PL**

Reference

- Sunderman, G. L., Tracey, C. A., Kim, J., & Orfield, G. (2004). *Listening to teachers: Classroom realities and No Child Left Behind*. Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University.