

Left Behind: The Educational Apocalypse

Apparently, our nation's school system is run by incompetent educators and administrators that are driving the education system into the ground. America's top math students are rated amongst the bottom 20% of some of the world's leading industrial countries' top students. These facts are startling – president Obama even pointed out that “it is an undeniable fact that countries who out-educate us today, are going to out-compete us tomorrow” (Obama 1). The government's solution to this problem is to demand that the way schools are run be changed and that educators and schools be held accountable. In 2001, the Bush Administration put the overly ambitious No Child Left Behind Act into action, which evaluates schools and teachers based on student standardized tests scores. However, just because politicians have attended school does not mean that they understand the school system and how to teach. Most politicians then, in 2001, and now have had no experience in a classroom. They do not have any expertise when it comes to high stakes testing and the effects of using a single measurement to assess teachers and an entire school. The goals and ambitions of NCLB are respectable, however the implementation of NCLB is further deteriorating the education system by stripping away teachers' autonomy and unfairly measuring school success, and its instant fixes for problems in education need to be replaced with enduring improvements in instruction and in the lawmakers themselves.

The NCLB Act has perfectly sound goals that we, Americans, should want for our students, teachers, and schools. We don't want inept, subpar teachers in the classroom. This generation of students will be governing society when our generation grows old. We surely want teachers in the classroom who can properly educate and challenge our students to reach their

potential. NCLB focuses on the issue of skill level and motivation of teachers and pressuring teachers to improve through testing (Smyth 1). NCLB is supposed to encourage teachers to continue their education in their content areas to become highly qualified and motivate them to be enthusiastic hard working teachers in the classroom. We ensure students a good education by kicking out all the teachers who do not meet these standards; we judge them on our students' test scores and hold teachers accountable for their actions.

However, how does the pressure from testing affect teachers' ability to teach and what they teach? NCLB lawmakers' assertion that the mandates will motivate teachers and increase subject knowledge does not fit the facts. What standardized testing does, according to education professor Dr. Smyth, is it forces teachers to teach to the test. This means that teachers revert to drilling students with practice tests, commonly known in the education world as drill and *kill*, and *only* teaching students what will be on the test. Smyth contends that this way of teaching has very negative effects on the profession that are actually an example of de-professionalism. In this case of de-professionalism, teachers feel like they are being reduced to technicians. There are decreases in teacher creativity, the variety of teaching strategies that is crucial for diverse learners, autonomy, and motivation (Smyth 134). Why would anyone want to be a teacher or enjoy teaching when so many of the attractive aspects have been trashed? Methods of instruction have become extremely constricted. What this means is that teachers are limited in the way that they can teach their classroom. The law is actually taking motivation away from teachers by measuring their effectiveness with test scores – the opposite effect of what NCLB had hoped for. *Time* magazine writer-reporter Kayla Webley agrees, adding that the “law turned schools into test factories” (43). The teaching profession is becoming a less and less appealing career. As a result,

most states will face a teacher shortage in the future. In California, nearly 23% of teachers are at retiring age and in just this past year the percentage of new teachers dropped 6.5 % (Lin 1).

There are more teachers retiring than coming into the profession. Nothing good can come from a teacher shortage. Students will be packed and smashed into small classrooms and the teacher to student ratio will increase, reducing the effectiveness of teachers. The aspects that were once so attractive to teachers – autonomy, creativity, diversity – need to be brought back into the classroom to draw in more new teachers that will be satisfied with their jobs.

The drill and kill method of teaching also restricts what type of information is taught in the classroom. Standardized testing narrows the curriculum, forcing schools to focus only on core subjects. This way of teaching is cheating students out of a holistic, well-rounded education and not teaching children how to be life-long learners. Thomas Dee and Brian Jacobs, both professors of education, conducted a study of the accountability systems in schools after NCLB's implementation. They found that "test-based accountability programs cause educators to reallocate instructional time toward testing subjects, specific content and skills covered on the exam, and to increase time devoted to narrow test prep activities that may have little broader value" (Dee, 177). Teachers who teach core subjects such as language arts and math have much more pressure on them consequently, while teachers of humanities and the arts are losing students and teaching time to other subjects. Some teachers, unfortunately, revel in the fact that their content is not on the state exams. Being a history education major, I spent a semester observing a geography classroom, which is not a subject tested on the state mandated tests. The teacher did not teach a single proper lesson, showed videos every class, and showed no desire to teach his students. Extreme concentration on tested subjects can have this negative effect on the

way teachers teach, if they do even “teach”. Also, within the core subjects, teachers tend to focus only on the information that will be on the state mandated tests. Many teachers are infuriated by the “law’s reliance on high stakes exams that lead schools to focus relentlessly on boasting scores rather than pursuing a broader vision of education” (Wallis 34). One complaint teachers have is that if students are interested in a certain item, they cannot afford to go into depth about it. Students exhibit curiosity and teachers have to shut them down in order to get through the tested materials. The law requires highly qualified teachers to be in the classroom. Teachers who have invested time and money in learning a certain subject would clearly have a passion for it. These restrictions from the act do not allow teachers to indulge in their passions and support those students who want more knowledge out of a class.

As for the aim to have more highly qualified teachers in classrooms, NCLB reaches this goal. Since the implementation of NCLB, the number of teachers with a master’s degree increased by roughly 14% (Dee, 164). However, this is meaningless in combination with NCLB’s state mandated standardized tests. Teachers with master’s degrees will experience the same effects from testing as teachers without a master’s degree. No matter how strong teachers are in their content area, unless the tools used to grade teacher effectiveness are changed, the same consequences of teaching to the test, a narrow curriculum, and demotivation will remain. There is no benefit to having someone highly qualified in their content area in the classroom when they are forced to stick to a narrow curriculum.

No one in America would say that they agree with schools allowing minority children to fall behind and ignoring their needs. One of NCLB’s goals is to expose the achievement gap, and according to Wallis and Steptoe, journalists at *Time Magazine* and CNN, the law does a great job

at revealing the gap and failing schools to the public. They also applaud the government for deeming failing schools unacceptable and demanding that schools do something about this issue (Wallis 33). Americans can now see that some schools are not properly educating minority and special education students. This is obviously unacceptable. White middle and upper class students aren't the only ones who deserve an adequate education. With NCLB, these students are now no longer being overshadowed. However, our clever lawmakers accidentally left some loopholes in the Act. Maleyko and Gawlik discuss how the standards for meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) are actually not "standard" across the United States. States have the authority to lower standards for AYP (measured by standardized test scores). The statistics and scores may look decent, but there is no real progress in instruction (601). If states can set their own standards, why not set them so low so that the majority of schools can make AYP? The overall quality of education standards "declined in 30 states from 2000 to 2006" (Wallis 38). Yes, schools are required to pay more attention to minority groups, but it does not matter when there are ways of beating the system and passing standards without actually improving. Schools are not helping students to become more proficient; there is just the illusion of proficiency. NCLB, technically by allowing states to choose their own standards, is allowing the unethical behavior of schools to exist. NCLB reached its goal of exposing the achievement gap, but failed to enforce any kind of rules that would help to close it.

When schools fail to meet AYP, students can get vouchers to transfer to a different school. Dr. Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute, whose research has been cited in Supreme Court opinions, insists that vouchers create healthy competition between schools. If schools have to compete for students, the more students a school has the more funding it receives, then they

will try harder to provide a better education for their students. Green's theory may be true, however: some schools are at a disadvantage when AYP comes into play. In 2005 at Bud Carson Middle School in Hawthorne, CA, "the school which is 92% Latino and black... reversed its failing record and hit 20 out of its 21 AYP goals, lifting scores for blacks, Hispanics and special-education students; closing achievement gaps; and raising attendance" (Wallis, 33). However, because it narrowly missed the reading score goal for the English-language learner subgroup the school remained on the "needs improvement" list. This happens to many schools around the country where they make huge progress, but do not make AYP, and therefore are forced to let their students transfer to other schools. NCLB basically sets these schools up for failure. Yes, vouchers can create competition between schools, but they are also taking all the high performing students away from low performing schools, which consequently keeps these schools perpetually underfunded and at ranked at the bottom of education. Money and resources are taken away that proved to help achievement in one school and send them to private and charter schools in the area.

Vouchers allowing students to transfer to charter and private schools are another large issue regarding NCLB's consequences for public schools. Some charter schools are run like a business where they are *for-profit* schools. They do not have to follow the same rules and regulations that state public schools do. In Louisiana, only 75% of teachers in charter schools need to be certified teachers. If certified teachers in public schools can't get the job done, what makes legislatures think uncertified teachers will? These schools are no better for America's students than public schools are, if not worse. On top of being exempt from public school "rules," private schools sometimes have religious affiliations. The government is paying for our

students to go to schools with *religious* affiliations. Citizens of the United States are paying taxes to send students to these types of schools. Vouchers are not solving the problems of a declining education system. If anything, they are worsening the chances for public schools to better the education they give their community.

Although author Maleyko praises NCLB for exposing the achievement gap, he also denounces it for its negative effect on communities. The trend with schools is to focus on students who are achieving between the lowest and highest achievers (34). The higher achievers are going to score high enough on the test anyways and the lower achievers will never improve enough to pass the test, therefore, teachers sometimes just “forget” they exist. Teachers need to focus on their most important, average students’ abilities to secure their jobs and allow them to continue carrying out their vital duty to “educate”. For those teachers who do try to work with the lower students, they are met with a sense of failure because even if “a child has tremendous growth, he’ll still bomb the [state] test because he isn’t on grade level” (Wallis 35). Any progress should be seen in a positive light; it should not produce a sense of failure to teachers because of these tests. On a larger scale, those who live in wealthier communities tend to have higher achieving children and those in poorer communities tend to have lower achieving children. These communities’ children are not being acknowledged at all because it is assumed that they will not be able to perform at their grade level, or already do, therefore they do not need to excel any further (Maleyko 34). For schools in poor communities, with low achieving students, NCLB makes it almost impossible for the school to make AYP. Then, students can transfer to other schools taking the funding with them that failing schools could have used to improve. Parents and communities who think that vouchers are beneficial because their students are sent to

“better” schools are misled. This trend of vouchers is only hurting education in the long run and perpetuating poor conditions. No one wants to live in a community where the schools are underfunded, failing, and full of low achieving students.

When students get out of high school or college they won't be asked to take a standardized test to apply for a job. Those with the highest scores and the best GPA in college aren't always the graduates that are hired. Yes, teachers need to be held accountable for their actions, and standardized tests could perhaps show whether or not teachers are doing their jobs. But, in the long run, no teacher is progressing professionally from these tests. So why keep NCLB around if its only hurting teachers, schools, and students?

Our current president Barack Obama addressed the No Child Left Behind Act in 2011, ten years after its implementation. Obama agrees with former president Bush's goals and feels that “higher standards are the right goal. Closing the achievement gap is the right goal...but experience has taught us that in its implementation [NCLB] had some serious flaws that are hurting our children instead of helping them” (Obama, 2). Even the president of the United States believes that NCLB is ineffective. He is right that NCLB has the right goals but has failed to help students through its enactment. We all believe in these goals, we would be fairly insensitive not to want all of our children to have the same chances at success. Nevertheless NCLB simply isn't cutting it. The objectives and ambitions of the Act are ideal, but the course of action being taken to reach these goals is further deteriorating the system. It cannot be stressed enough that this law has transformed schools into test factories. Turning teachers into remote controlled test drilling robots will not help students learn and it certainly will not help develop the profession.

Standardized testing should be used as a tool for teachers to see where their students stand in the academic world. It can be part of the learning experience, but should not be the sole method of academic measurement. The education system can never be reformed with this immense pressure on teachers and schools and an unfair measurement of their effectiveness. In West Virginia, the superintendent, Dr. Paine, switched the focus from standardized testing to project based learning to model Finland's education system. Test scores did drop initially, but after a few years the scores have steadily been rising (Frysh 1). Project based learning makes the teacher a guide to the learning process and allows the students to think critically, collaborate with others, and gain presentation skills – among other things. With this kind of learning teachers are not stuck with test drills and a narrow curriculum. They have control over the classrooms again and the students are learning skills that will stick with them for the rest of their lives. Students learn skills needed for college, for their professions, and life long learning, and teachers are given the autonomy and respect they need to produce this. This kind of teaching will produce long-term results needed to put this country back into the race to the top of education around the world. Finland's education system is at the top of international test rankings for elementary through high schools. If this system is working for them, why not give it a try in the United States? The laws in place now are obviously digging the US into a deeper and deeper hole, and we might not be able to pull ourselves out of this mess of standardized testing and accountability if change does not come soon.

The major, underlying problem here is not No Child Left Behind as the critics see it. The problem lies within those people behind the creation of this particular act and more recent education reform. Politicians and legislatures obviously have no idea what they are doing when it

comes to education. These people are elected officials. They rely on public opinion and what matters is what they change *now*, not ten or twenty years from today. They want immediate results to show for the changes they have made in education like firing bad teachers and giving students vouchers to go to “better” schools. These are short-term results and as it has been argued, they are not improving the education system in a long-term sense. To get long-term improvements in education, like in West Virginia, a change needs to be made to lawmakers, not the law.

Policy experts in Washington D.C. can know every statistic there is to know about education, and still not understand education and teaching. Why should we trust people who have never taught in a classroom to be able to reform the classroom? We all have teeth, don't we? Does that mean that we should be able to drill out a cavity or stick our hands in other peoples' mouths? Absolutely not! People who have taught inside a classroom and worked with students should be the ones making the laws regarding how to teach students and how to measure their success. The US Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, has never taught in a classroom, yet he is the head of the US Department of Education and deals with the nation's education policy. There is a problem here if someone who has never taught a child is guiding the nation's future in education. There needs to be requirements for school boards and superintendents at every level to have a background in education as a teacher. Or, they need to be thrown into the jungle we education majors call the classroom and attempt to teach. A better understanding and appreciation of education and teachers will lead to better policy and only then can real education reform begin. Teachers know what works and what doesn't work in the classroom. They know how to measure student success from tools other than a single standardized test. The education

system needs leaders who can see into the future and are not afraid to have some deficits at first, like Dr. Paine, in order to make real long-term improvements. . Schools, teachers, communities, and students will be left far behind, unless this change is made.

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