

“No Child Left Behind” in Urban Education: Solving a Crisis or Creating One?

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Introduction: Clogged Arteries

Every Monday *The Philadelphia Inquirer* publishes a column called “Kids’ Talk”. Children of all ages are encouraged to send in short answers to questions such as “If you had two heads, what would they say to each other?” After reading this column for several years, I encouraged my son to send in an answer to the question: “What’s your great idea for a new video game?” This seemed a fitting question since both my sons (9 and 5 years old) love video games. Weeks later, the newspaper published a selection of the children’s letters.¹ Consider the following two answers, quoted verbatim:

“I’d invent a video game where there were men the size of skyscrapers, wizards, knights and cannons and lava, monsters, foods, tornados, earthquakes, meteor showers, and people who fly.” (my son, fourth grade)

“A game called Life, where you have to get a job to have an income and you can choose to have a spouse, children or pets. Your purchases, taxes and bills will be subtracted from your bank account. Your choices affect your life. Example: If you eat unhealthy foods, your arteries could get clogged so you would need surgery to unclog them. I think this would be good practice for when your are going out into the read world.” (male, fifth grade)

These two children are only a year apart in school yet their answers could not possibly be more different. Whereas my son is clearly still in a developmental phase where his imagination is running wild, the second child’s answer is as realistic and serious as it could possibly be – right down to the clogged arteries and surgery. While some might say this 5th grader’s answer shows maturity and responsibility, it is difficult to avoid the question of whether we are putting too much pressure on children in schools and at home if they are already worried about taxes and heart attacks at the tender age of ten.

While I don’t know this child personally, I believe that for many students a large part of this increased pressure to “practice,” and to a certain extent perform, at earlier and earlier ages is likely related to the greatly increased emphasis on high-stakes testing promulgated by the Bush administration’s cornerstone Education Act “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) – a bipartisan policy that is likely to continue for many years to come.

In this commentary I explore some of the most pointed criticisms of NCLB, and of high-stakes standardized testing more generally. I focus specifically on the impact of NCLB in urban schools – schools which are the constant focus of reform in a culture that

¹ See the September 27th, 2004 issue of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Section B, page 2.

presumably wishes to educate its citizens in the most democratic, equitable fashion possible.

The first section of this commentary broadly considers the inherent flaws and inequalities built into the NCLB testing philosophy in urban public schools, as well as its potential impact on children as young as preschool-aged. In the second section, I consider the content of several tests and the absurdity of many of the questions we expect students to answer – especially students of diverse cultures, linguistic and learning backgrounds who make up the majority of urban public school populations. Finally, in the third section, I look at what we, as a nation, are willing to pay for in comparison to other government spending, and consider whether and to what extent NCLB combats inequality in education (it doesn't). This section considers more closely the financial inequities inherent in our educational system and explores why NCLB is powerless to correct them and how, as the title of this commentary suggests, this legislation may even increase them. Again, this fact is often overlooked in favor of rhetoric which supports the notion that individual intelligence – boosted by a highly structured, scripted, and didactic teaching approach – are the primary factors in school success or failure. It is this exact belief that allows policies like NCLB to continue. As Karp (2004) strongly states, “the more people see how NCLB actually works, the more it becomes clear that NCLB is not a tool for solving a crisis in public education, but a tool for creating one” (p. 64).

No Child Left Untested

At their best...tests are only a way to measure reform; they do not by themselves produce better results. And objectives are a way to express aspirations, not to fulfill them. (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2004, p. 102)

Measurement surely implies that we can know with precision how much of something there is. For example, when we bake a cake we measure two cups of flour and there is very little room for interpretation or misinterpretation – two cups is two cups and flour is flour. (Mathison, 2001, p. 218)

Under NCLB, starting from preschool, children are under new levels of intense pressure to memorize, retain, and reiterate large amounts of information. The idea that preschool is primarily a time for children to learn through play, develop important social skills, exercise their imaginations, and essentially to learn to love learning, is quickly disappearing. In 1999, for example, the state of Connecticut drafted a 33-page curriculum guide for preschoolers. This document actually pales in comparison to the state of Michigan which publishes a 539-page preschool curriculum (Ohanian, 2002). As Dr. Howard Gardner, a professor of education at Harvard University and the author of the seminal book *Multiple Intelligences*, lamented in a recent telephone interview with me, the line between good preparation for school and the destruction of early childhood is a delicate one that is not understood by policymakers.

Nor, is it understood by entrepreneurs and toymakers; incredulously, there is now a hot new electronic gadget from Learning Resources designed for preschoolers called the “Time Tracker.” This device is supposed to help young (preschool) children prepare for

standardized tests. Shaped like a colorful peppermill with a digital panel display, the “toy” has flashing warning lights and a voice which booms “Begin!” and “Time’s up!”.

And the stakes get significantly higher once kids enter kindergarten, as Susan Ohanian (2002) argues persuasively in her book, *What Happened to Recess and Why are our Children Struggling in Kindergarten?*. More and more, and at earlier and earlier ages, children are encouraged to learn “the facts” (e.g., letters, numbers, etc.) in a totally didactic manner, with little room for personal imagination and exploration (Kelly, 2003). This is in part, as Kelly notes, because of the pressure teachers in higher graders are now under as they face new standards and high-stakes tests. These teachers argue that if students are going to succeed on such tests in third and fourth grade, they need to learn the “drill” as early as possible – even as early as kindergarten (Kelly, 2003). Likewise, Linda Christensen (2004) – a language arts coordinator for the public schools in Portland, Oregon – recounted the story of one her kindergarten colleagues who was asked to score students on a scale of 1 to 6 on everything from lining up at the classroom door, to tying their shoes, to counting as a way of preparing them for “the state’s six-trait analysis scoring guide” (p. 100).

Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, there are now significant consequences for children, teachers, and schools themselves if they do not do well on what are (primarily) multiple choice tests. Such tests become more important with each passing school year. Under NCLB, publicly funded schools are in danger of losing federal funds if they do not raise test scores continuously over a two-year period. They are also mandated to provide alternative school choices for failing students – schools that in most economically disadvantaged, urban neighborhoods simply do not exist (Darling-Hammond, 2004). As Karp (2004) has similarly noted, NCLB places an absurd mandate on schools that expects them to eradicate inequalities while the factors that create them remain in place.

Much of the criticism of the policy from both the left and right – as this has been a bipartisan endorsed policy – has been that NCLB is under-funded. Yet, especially in urban schools, there are much, much more troubling aspects of NCLB to be considered. These include the fact that students in different school districts are not taking the same test, and, with a dropout rate of close to 60% a year in some urban schools, the same students are not even taking the same test each year. As Howell (2004) rightly emphasizes, “how can you determine if you’re making progress when you’re not testing the same students year after year?” (p. 28). A similarly high teacher turnover rate in urban schools further confounds the problem.

All of this makes it difficult to compare scores across and within schools, and to pinpoint real improvement. But even within those schools correctly or incorrectly labeled “failing,” the options for students are limited. One urban superintendent from the Northeastern United States noted that in June 2003, of the 4,700 students who were entitled to transfer out of failing schools, only one child had taken advantage of this option. The question of why the other 4,699 students did not is not a mystery; in many poor urban districts there are few “non-failing” schools for students to choose from and those that are not failing are often not near students’ homes, making transportation

difficult. Moreover, the high cost of most private schools heavily outweighs any option of partially subsidized government vouchers from actually working. And it is very important to note that these “other schools” do not necessarily want to admit students from failing schools (Howell, 2004).

In Philadelphia, for example, 74% of its public schools are being sanctioned by NCLB. Yet the surrounding suburban districts “rejected Philadelphia’s requests for seats” (Casserly, 2004, p. 26). Those schools that do accept new students often find themselves overcrowded, such as some middle schools in New York City whose class size has swelled to more than 40 students – a number which undoubtedly will impede student achievement. Obviously, we don’t want to *increase* class size, we want to *decrease* it. If we are to expect urban schools to improve, we need to do more than offer the promise of false options; we need to provide schools with the extra resources they need to do so.

In other words, it is simply not enough to expect urban schools – most of which are in dire need of resources as simple as pens and pencils – to magically transform into schools that are competitive with those that receive significantly more funding. One must wonder what policymakers are thinking when they support legislation such as NCLB, which propose accountability without outlining a plan for real reform. As Karp (2004) states:

To expect schools to wipe out long-standing academic achievement gaps while denying them substantial new resources and leaving many of the social factors of inequality in place is not an “accountability” system. It’s a politically designed set-up. (p. 8)

When he speaks of a “politically designed set-up” Karp may well be referring to the trend towards the privatization of public schools. Profit-seeking companies, such as Edison Schools Inc., claim they can manage schools better and produce better “results” without substantially increasing funding or community resources. These companies have yet to prove their case, however, and have been criticized for viewing students in marketplace terms – as “commodities,” rather than individual persons with complex needs and interests.

A recent article by Susan Saulny (2005) in *The New York Times* describes the manner in which big businesses are jumping at the opportunity to provide tutoring to students in schools labeled “failing.” Yet, with tutors paid as much as \$1,997 per student, “companies eager to get a piece of the lucrative business have offered parents computers and gift certificates as inducements to sign up” (Section A, p. 1/18) Moreover, some parents who did not speak English said they were pressured to sign documents against their will that they did not understand. With the potential to be a \$2 billion dollar industry, these tutoring programs are “virtually without regulation or oversight” (p. A1).

Indeed, Ohanian (2002) addresses this issue repeatedly in her book, as she finds that businesses are increasingly referring to children in terms such as “human capital,” “outputs,” and “inventory control.” Ironically, Ohanian located a real test question that

was given to sixth graders in a well-known national high-stakes test which reads as follows:

Most decisions concerning public schools are made by the:

- (a) Students
- (b) Parents
- (c) Local businesses
- (d) School board

(Ohanian, 2002, p. 134-135)

Ohanian rightly notes that as it becomes increasingly more clear that school agendas are being set by big business rather than the local community, there should be another option:

(e) None of the above. In any case, the correct answer to the question above is certainly not (a) or (b). Students and parents have increasingly little input into either school curricula or the school budget. In urban schools, where money is of the utmost significance, NCLB creates what Barbara Miner (2004) describes as a “catch 22”:

NCLB does little to fix the problems. In fact, the NCLB puts so-called failing schools in a catch 22. Need more money to do a better job? Sorry, instead we’ll take money from you. (p. 10)

Because schools are in danger of losing precious resources under NCLB, even the best, most creative and caring teachers are forced to “teach to the test” – often to the extent of eliminating or marginalizing other important subjects such as art, creative writing, gym, recess, and even science and social studies. Ohanian, a public school teacher for over twenty years, has seen many children actually throw-up before taking these tests due to the intense pressure to do well. Indeed, in many schools, doing well on such tests has become the *only* qualification for graduating to the next grade (Christensen, 2004; Ohanian, 2002). Moreover, the heavy emphasis on testing encourages teachers to focus primarily on those children just below the benchmark – students whose scores can most easily be improved – rather than those students who are truly needy or those who are already considered to be “gifted.” (Ohanian, 2002). Linda Darling-Hammond (2004) has also aptly noted that the heavy emphasis on testing not only reduces focus on critical thinking skills, writing and production abilities, but also narrows the scope for students who learn in different ways and have different talents.

Which Direction is the Train Moving? Examining the Content of High-Stakes Tests

It is also very important not to lose sight of the *content* of such exams. With many of the questions it is not easy to see what the point is. In fact, they beg essential inquiry into the kinds of knowledge and skills we are teaching students and, more importantly, for what purposes. They certainly do not reflect a deeper understanding of what it means to be a productive citizen in a democratic society; instead, they focus on off-the-wall issues which even stump adults. The following questions are examples of real test questions that appear on standardized exams. This first question appeared on a test given to California 3rd graders:

1) Is a raindrop *hitting* one's head more like the hit in:

- dart *hitting* a target
- A storm *hitting* a region

(Ohanian, 2002, p. 127)

In response, Ohanian argues the following:

What is an eight-year-old to make of such a question? I haven't yet met any adults who can make any sense of it. I have asked 386 teachers, two priests, a rabbi, a poet, a physicist, a plumber, a postal clerk, and a French chef this question. Not only did nobody have a clue, nobody was willing to hazard a guess. (p. 127)

Now consider this perplexing question given to fourth graders in Massachusetts:

2) Monique is taking the train to Boston. Her train is stopped at a station. She is facing the direction the train will be moving. All she can see from her window is the train next to her. That train is also going to Boston and leaves first. As the other train leaves, it seems to Monique as if:

- (a) She is moving forward
- (b) She is moving backward
- (c) The other train is moving backward
- (d) The train station is moving

(Ohanian, 2002, p. 183)

Although the correct answer – which I believe is (b) – is not impossible to figure out, I suspect that most fourth graders would be more than a little perplexed by it. There are several problems with this question. Ohanian notes, for example, in order to answer this question one really needs to have been on a train looking at a similar situation. For many urban students – especially those who live in areas where transportation by train or subway is uncommon or unaffordable – such a question would be particularly obscure. Indeed, there exists a significant body of research that suggests that tests discriminate against non-mainstream students (Karp, 2004; Meier, 1995; Bigelow 1995) because they contain many questions which use examples that are primarily visible in white, middle-class culture. Meier (1995) poses the following compelling critique:

Doubtless many people would strongly object to a proposal that standardized tests be revised to include a sizable body of content specifically related to minority cultural experiences on the grounds that this would place middle class white students at a disadvantage. After all, why should they be expected to know anything about minority experience. (p. 181)

The fact that standardized tests do not, generally, reflect minority experiences is often overlooked, however, and needs to be explicitly addressed with students. Students are generally taught that such tests are completely “objective” in nature and thus often do not

question whether other answers may be equally appropriate. Christensen (2004), for example urges her students to ask such questions of the tests as: “Whose background knowledge is honored here? Whose culture is represented? Whose culture and knowledge is missing? How would that make a difference in test results?” (p. 102). Even though Christensen poses these questions, she remains very aware of the need to prepare children for high-stakes testing and recognizes that under the current educational system students will take such tests and their future options will, at least in part, depend upon their performance. Yet she strongly believes that students should engage in a critique of standardized tests. In this manner, students will likely do well on such tests at the same time that they begin to understand that knowledge is subjective and does not always fall neatly into a one-word answer.

It is important to add that even so called “open-ended” or essay questions, which are being added to many tests as a concession to the fact that students should be tested on their knowledge in other ways than simply filling in bubbles, reflect a very narrow form of learning and do not necessarily leave room for students’ individual imaginations, understanding, and expressions. This is best noted in the following example of a test question given to fifth graders in Delaware which presents a recipe for making Bacon-Tomato Sandwiches. They are told that the recipe indicates the need for a serrated knife and a table knife, and are asked to write an account explaining why two different knives are used.

After discovering this particular question, Ohanian (2002) decided to ask mothers what kind of knife they use to slice tomatoes for a bacon and tomato sandwich. Some the many responses were: “If you’re from East Texas you wouldn’t eat a tomato unless you peeled it first;” “I use a one-size-fits-many Chicago Cutlery butcher knife I have honed to perfection;” “I, of course, would never cut a bacon anything. It would also be repugnant for kosher Jews and Moslems too;” “Is it developmentally inappropriate to expect a fifth grader to know what a serrated knife is – and to let him loose with tomato-slicing? Not my kid!”; and my personal favorite, “I’ve never known a kid who would touch a bacon and tomato sandwich...Get real. Now kids pop all those instant pizzas into the microwave” (p. 199-200).

As it becomes obvious when Ohanian questions the parents, not only is the question itself silly and out-of-date, but for some students (e.g., kosher Jews) the question itself may be offensive, inappropriate and/or perplexing. Moreover, despite this being an “open-ended” question – a question which suggests that students can use their own voices and experiences in their answers – there is still a suggestion of a narrow scope of “right” answers. This is contrary to the belief that teachers should be helping students to be critical readers and to consider and respect a range of perspectives and subjectivities. As Hull and Shultz (2002) have noted, literacy is more than simply reading and writing, but being able to apply this knowledge in different contexts – contexts which are often frequently changing, and which are more increasingly complex.

A similar, but very different, example of this open-ended questioning process is described by Bill Bigelow (1995), a high school teacher and editor of the journal *Rethinking*

Schools. At the beginning of class Bigelow steals a student's purse (with the student's foreknowledge) and claims, in front of the class, that the purse and its contents are his. The students are, as Bigelow describes it, "mildly outraged" that he would pry into someone's purse with utter disregard for her privacy. Bigelow goes on, however, to pose the following question: "What if I *discovered* the purse, then would it be mine?" (p. 62). Students laugh a little but still maintain the purse belongs to the student, which leads Bigelow to the big build-up and focus of the lesson: "Why do we say that Columbus *discovered* America?" (p. 62).

This leads to a class-wide conversation about the meaning and use of the word "discovery;" what other phrases textbooks might use to describe what Columbus did; and ultimately a whole series of questions which "re-examine basic truths" (p. 65). Such questions include, among others: "How factually accurate was the account?; What was omitted (left out) that in your judgment would be important for a full understanding of Columbus?; How do the publishers use illustrations?; What do these communicate about Columbus and his "enterprise?"; In your opinion, *why* does the book portray the Columbus-Indian encounter the way it does?" (p. 62). Students work collectively in groups on their written critiques and look for common themes and important differences in their answers.

In comparison to the serrated knife question cited above, one can see why Bigelow's exercise is a far greater teaching tool and would thus provoke a far more compelling and useful essay question, or questions, for a test. Asking students to think and write critically about their own histories emphasizes the importance of students' multiple perspectives and underscores issues of social justice. Such issues should be addressed in all schools, but are vitally important in urban schools where many students receive inequitable resources and are the subject of ongoing discrimination based on primarily race, ethnicity, and class. Thus, the question about the use of two different knives to make a sandwich is problematic not only because it may be obscure to many students, but because it is void of any meaningful knowledge. As Meier (1995) notes, the questions on standardized tests do not address the skills and abilities needed to function in a complex, pluralistic society. These skills include the ability to work collectively in different social and cultural contexts, to respect the opinions of others, and to maintain a commitment to social justice. In short, while it is very gratifying when students in a particular school do well on such tests, we need to constantly ask ourselves – given the lunacy of some of the questions – what exactly do these test scores signify? Are there other kinds of questions and answers that would be more meaningful? Indeed, why are we not considering a wide range of other assessment processes in accompaniment with such tests that can more clearly indicate students' learning and understanding of a variety of different topics and subjects?

Acknowledging that there are, in fact, many kinds of questions to which there is often only one right answer (e.g., certain spelling and grammar questions and mathematical computations, etc.), there is also a growing body of alternative assessments which urban public policymakers should begin to consider. Again, this does not mean that tests should not be rigorous or don't need reflect standards of learning that enable students to fully

function in American society upon graduation. It does, however, mean that one single test should not be used as the entire measure of a student's knowledge and ability. As Meier (2004) rightly suggests, "we wouldn't trust a doctor who made life-or-death decisions about our treatment by looking at only one test result or who was not allowed to exercise judgment about what to prescribe for this or that particular situation" (p. 77). Lisa Delpit (1995), a well-known expert on African American children's educational success, has further noted that a large part of the problem is the tendency to dichotomize, as if teachers must choose between a skills vs. process approach. Delpit asks, "why not insist on 'skills' in the context of critical and creative thinking?" (p. 137). It is indeed worth underscoring these two points: 1) that there are many different forms of student assessment and students' progress should not rest solely on any one of them, and 2) that it is possible to successfully teach students the basics of reading, writing and math in a non-didactic manner.

What Difference Does Money Make?: Testing Inequality

"If money doesn't make any difference," asked the Superintendent of one poor district, "how come the rich spend so much on their schools?" (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003, p. 56)

In the final section of this paper, I address more directly the issue of urban school reform itself, as it is surrounded by politics and rhetoric – particularly where funding is concerned. As the above quote suggests, many people and policymakers attempt to argue that money is not at issue, even as they continue to pour more money and material resources into their schools. Instead, they focus on aspects of reform that fall more readily into categories of "blaming" (e.g., students do not apply themselves, teachers are not skilled enough, parents don't care enough, etc.). But let there be no doubt: money is a huge issue in urban school reform.

The following several questions – published in a recent "test" in the Fall 2004 issue of *Rethinking Schools* – help to put NCLB in a larger context. The author, Stan Karp (2004) – a public school teacher for over twenty years – suggests that we consider a test with a *completely different set of questions*. These questions do not appear on national standardized exams, but arguably should.

- 1) Under NCLB the following measure of inequality must be eliminated by 2014:
 - (a) Inequality in school funding
 - (b) Inequality in child poverty rates
 - (c) Inequality in access to health care
 - (d) Inequality in family income
 - (e) Inequality in standardized test scores

- 2) The approximately \$130 billion spent so far on the war in Iraq is:
 - (a) About 4 times what the federal government annually spends on K-12 programs for all 50 states.
 - (b) Enough to hire 2.4 million elementary school teachers
 - (c) Enough to provide Head Start slots for an additional 18 million

- children
- (d) Enough to provide full four-year college scholarships for more than 3 million students
 - (e) Each of the above
- 3) According to the Children's Defense Fund:
- (a) States spend on average almost three times as much per prisoner as per public school pupil
 - (b) 9.3 million children lack health insurance
 - (c) Three million children live in households suffering from hunger or "food insecurity without hunger"
 - (d) All of the above
- 4) Which of the following does NCLB specifically provide funds for?
- (a) Smaller class sizes
 - (b) Multicultural education
 - (c) Full-day kindergarten
 - (d) Test research

There is no real need to provide the answers here – which are, incidentally, (e), (e), (d), (d) – but there is a pressing need to think about the importance of such questions as we consider the current state of public education. *States spend on average almost three times as much per prisoner as per public school pupil.* Thus far, we have spent on the Iraq war about 4 times what the federal government annually spends on K-12 programs for all 50 states. Instead of focusing on basic, common sense issues such as *creating smaller class sizes, inequality in school funding, or declining access to health care*, NCLB focuses on one and only one thing: standardized test scores. If we were willing to pay for it, there are, of course, other ways to help children do well on such tests. Ohanian (2002) has pointed out that one simple way to raise urban test scores is to make sure each child has had a healthy breakfast – not a given for many children attending urban schools. This would cost the government a mere \$1.00 a day per student yet, as Ohanian rightly points out, you do not see campaigns such as “Eat for Success” (p. 111-112).

In other writings, I have underscored the need to move away from reform slogans that stress what we *don't want* (e.g., “No Child Left Behind”) and towards a clearer understanding of what we *do want* (e.g., “Every Child Engaged and Empowered”). I write this because the rhetoric of NCLB suggests that its goal is to educate every child with the skills they need to succeed in life, and, more subtly, that every child is worth the time and attention needed to accomplish this goal. As the questions in Stan Karp's alternate test sampled above suggest, this is simply rhetoric. As a nation, we claim to care very much about education but when push comes to shove, it is one of our lowest priorities.

Children who attend suburban schools where property taxes make for a high per-pupil spending (often almost *twice or even three times* that of urban public schools), and children attending private schools (where spending can be as much as *ten times* that of

urban schools), will most certainly *not* be left behind. A relatively recent survey conducted by the Frameworks Institute (Grady & Auburn, 2000) concluded that the majority of people interviewed had “a strong desire to see the classroom as an ideal, controlled environment where children are protected from social problems, not exposed to them” (p. 6). While in theory this sounds like a laudable goal, *in practice* it is hardly the case. As long as our government continues to allow for inequities in school funding, growing child poverty rates, and decreasing access to health care while simultaneously spending about four times more the amount of money in Iraq than it spends annually on K-12 programs in all 50 states, urban schools will continue to be broadly affected by social problems and politics. We simply can not isolate what is happening in the classroom from what is happening in the country more generally. This is because tough choices must continually be made as to where limited resources will go. They are not, clearly, going to urban schools and children in need. We thus need to let students and their parents and communities know school is not, in fact, an “ideal controlled environment.” It *is*, however, an institution where future leaders are cultivated, and thus, a place where social problems and inequities should be both acknowledged and discussed. As Darling-Hammond (2004) notes, one of the most significant problems with the NCLB Act is that it mistakes measuring schools for fixing them (p. 9). What we really need is an education act aimed at empowering schools to seek solutions, not one based on blaming, shaming and ultimately punishing them financially. The irony that taking away money from schools that are already struggling financially as a way of “improving them” should not be lost on anyone.

Finally, we need to address educational inequities and we need to empower communities, students, and teachers to take an active role in developing and implementing an educational vision that goes beyond multiple choice exams – one that reaches out towards individual imaginations, leadership, and teaching for social justice. As the consequences of being labeled a “failing” school becomes more and more real for many urban schools and school districts, many states are indeed beginning to challenge the NCLB legislation. It is unclear where such challenges will lead, however they are raising public awareness of the fact that urban schools need more than increased testing. Urban schools need increased resources and support at the local level on up to the highest levels of government and policymaking. Years of quantitative and qualitative research on school reform has resulted in significant knowledge as to what kinds of reforms are working for urban students. These include: smaller classes; a curriculum and pedagogy that is culturally relevant and engaging; teachers that engage in ongoing professional development to better understand their own biases; a system of assigning teachers to schools that is not based solely on seniority thus leaving the newest teachers in the toughest schools, among many others. These kinds of changes, while not easy, are achievable. Yet with NCLB as the ultimate test, I think it’s fair to say that we are already failing – miserably.

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