

Meier, D., & Wood, G. (Eds.). (2004). *Many Children Left Behind: How the No Child Left Behind Act is Damaging our Children and our Schools*. Boston: Beacon Press.

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“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. 65).

In its current form, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) will, undoubtedly, leave many children in its wake. Consequently, it is important for those directly involved with the public educational system to raise everyone’s awareness about what such a piece of legislation entails. As it stands, NCLB’s current form presents a myriad of potentially-devastating quandaries for public school districts across the United States. *Many Children Left Behind*’s six essays detail the problems presented by NCLB in practice thus far and propose modification to the current legislation that would create a more distinct possibility of actually leaving no child behind.

In their separate chapters, Linda Darling-Hammond and George Wood circumscribe the disparity that exists between the aims and realities of NCLB. In effect, they situate the legislation as a problematic, even antithetical, means to its ends. Darling-Hammond’s chapter, “‘Separate but Equal’ to ‘No Child Left Behind’: The Collision of New Standards and Old Inequalities”, pinpoints how NCLB is misdirected and serves to exacerbate instead of narrow the vast differences in per-pupil spending across public school districts throughout the United States. Though the benchmark tests (used to measure student progress) from NCLB are suppose to serve as a means through which a school is received and treated by the government in regards to funding, the reality is that these tests would better serve schools if they were used to gauge areas in which a school needs the most improvement. Instead, these tests determine whether or not schools make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). According to NCLB, each school must meet yearly projected test scores. Schools that fail to make AYP are allotted three months to generate a corrective plan of action. If these schools continue to fall short of AYP, they face reconstitution, loss of funds, or closure. These measures hardly constitute "fixing" a school. In fact, pressures on “failing” schools are compounded by the fact that the standards that their students must meet are raised each year. By 2014, every student in every school in the United States is projected to score at the “proficient” level on state tests. Schools with diverse populations are expected to make the most significant gains but, as Darling-Hammond posits, the lack of funding for NCLB and its sanctions for “failing” schools prove counterproductive to such a cause:

NCLB’s requirements for parent notification of school “needs improvement” or “failing” labels and threats of staff dismissal have already been reported as disincentives for qualified staff to stay in high-need schools when they have options to teach in better resourced and better regarded schools with more affluent students. (p. 14)

Though Darling-Hammond admits that NCLB's aims at shaming and punishing schools might prove successful in some cases, she also offers examples of accountability provisions imposed in various states that have shown that such anticipated results are often not the case. In his chapter, "A View From the Field: NCLB's Effects on Classrooms and Schools", Wood reiterates Darling-Hammond's focus on the misdirection of the NCLB Act:

As a high school principal who also works with schools nationwide, married to a kindergarten teacher, I have experienced firsthand what NCLB leaves behind – and it is the notion that schools have any role aside from preparing our children to take tests. (p. 34)

The question of whether standardized tests are accurate indicators of the quality of education within a school has been under discussion for a long while. However, the advent of NCLB gives unprecedented power to such assumed measurements of quality education. Consequently, schools begin to teach to the test even though standardized tests have never proven to accurately gauge intelligence or the quality of education within a particular school. Wood elaborates by stating that, "there is abundant reason to believe that the skills needed to do well on these tests at best reflect a shallow kind of learning and at worst indicate only a better ability to take tests" (p. 35). Citing various examples of schools subjected to standardized testing, Wood asserts that such accountability measures as those in NCLB only serve to promote student dropout rates and schools pushing out low-performing students. Both Wood and Darling-Hammond suggest that past evidence serves as an admonition to the ineffectiveness of such high-stakes reform efforts and, if not properly addressed, will ultimately result in a multitude of children – most of them the poorest and the neediest – being left behind.

The second section of this book includes chapters by Stan Karp, Deborah Meier, and Alfie Kohn. In their respective essays, they explore the political agendas behind NCLB legislation and the contradictions inherent in the NCLB Act. They also explore NCLB legislation in light of the history of democratic education in this country. According to Karp, a closer examination of AYP reveals its political underpinnings:

But the AYP system is an arbitrary and inappropriate assessment scheme that does not provide an accurate picture of how schools are serving their students, and the sanctions it imposes for low test scores have no record of success as school improvement strategies. These are not educational strategies at all, but political strategies designed to bring a kind of "market reform" to public education. (p. 55)

In his chapter "NCLB's Selective Vision of Equality: Some Gaps Count More Than Others", Karp argues that AYP provides a means through which the privatization of public schools systems may occur. Operating under the facade as being an indicator of the quality of education within specific schools, AYP is way to point a finger at and persuade the public of the ineffectiveness of public schools, thereby creating doubts in the minds of parents as to whether or not they should send their children to such places. Karp believes that if such legislation were

truly intended to abolish the achievement gap, its focus would be on properly funding all school districts. Instead, NCLB itself remains under-funded, the per-pupil spending disparity between school districts continues, and standardized tests merely reiterate these facts. In her chapter “NCLB and Democracy”, Meier proceeds to show how the NCLB Act boldly goes where no piece of legislation has gone before by exempting power from local and state governments, directing decision-making to the sole discretion of the federal government, and redefining the original articulation of democratic education. Meier states:

The very definition of what constitutes an educated person is now dictated by federal legislation. A well-educated person is one who scores high on standardized math and reading tests. And ergo a good school is one that either has very high test scores or is moving toward them at a prescribed rate of improvement. Period. (p. 67)

In essence, the rights of individuals to have a voice in the schools within their community school systems is completely negated. Instead of trusting local and state governments to ensure the quality of education within their schools, there is an imposition and overpowering of standards-driven mandates passed down from the federal government. According to Meier, there is more autonomy than democracy here. The power to make decisions with regards to the future of education in the United States has been centralized. Kohn’s chapter, “NCLB and the Effort to Privatize Public Education”, further explores the growing disconnect between the face of contemporary education today and the historical roots of democratic education. He states that in schools today, “there is fresh evidence of how teaching is being narrowed and dumbed down, standardized and scripted – with poor and minority students getting the worst of the deal as usual” (p. 92). Kohn promulgates that in order to truly have an effective democratic education and reverse the negative effects of NCLB, community members must rise up and take an active role in their school systems. More authority and trust must be given to citizens, parents, teachers, and administrators on local boards of education, as they have first-hand experience of their community needs.

Perhaps the most prescriptive essay, in the third section of this book is Monty Neill’s “Leaving No Child Behind: Overhauling NCLB”. It serves as an effective addressing of critical NCLB issues depicted in the previous essays. In particular, Neill’s essay resonates with Kohn’s and Meier’s essays on the importance of localizing decision-making in education. He states:

Teachers and administrators must be allowed to be professionals, to assume responsibility and thus exercise power to regulate their work as teachers. Parents must be involved in making the key decisions about their children’s schooling (and not just choosing the school). Students must be actively engaged in learning to be part of a democratic citizenry and not treated merely as passive recipients of knowledge. (p. 106)

The denial of the opportunity to make decisions that affect the future of one’s community leads to further mistrust and disconnect between local, state, and federal governments. Furthermore, when educators teach to the test, students no longer take an active role in their education.

Instead, students become passive and pedagogy becomes rote and synthetic. Within the community, the ability of nuclear families to make decisions regarding the academic future of their offspring is weakened by the mandates and standardized assessments imposed by the federal government. To counteract this, Neill suggests that “schools and districts must ensure that all teachers are skilled users of formative assessments. Standardized exams should supplement, not supplant or overpower, classroom assessment” (p. 108). Educators must awaken families to the fact that they can still derive power in their collective voice as taxpayers and stake-holders in public school systems. Neill appeals to the power of the individual – particularly teachers – to institute constructive changes to the NCLB Act. He argues that, “teachers can help mobilize the public to support change. Educators especially need to reach out to parents, who are likely to turn to teachers for information” (p. 117). More than ever, this serves as a critical denotation of the attention that must be paid to the current state of education in the United States.

Many Children Left Behind is an urgent call to educators and civil rights groups to raise the general public’s awareness of how their hard-earned tax dollars are supporting a piece of legislation that is potentially detrimental to their public school systems, particularly those schools with diverse populations and students who are considered “at-risk”. It is essential that dialogue about concerns over NCLB begin and develop in every community. Such a process begins when teachers and community members organize, hold forums, develop plans of action, and remind tax payers of the undeniable power of their voice when it is raised.

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