

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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Many Children Left Behind, and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation it challenges, joins the dialogue of educational debate – a debate that is embedded in the American ideal that public education is the foundation of social and economic development in this country. The collection of essays in this book details the counterproductive and destructive effects of NCLB. The premise of *Many Children Left Behind* is that NCLB cannot ever deliver on its promises of higher quality, more equitable, and more accountable public schools. Furthermore, the authors argue that the legislation actually harms those it seeks to serve through its punitive sanctions. The authors' voices unite in the impassioned belief in democratic public education and assert that to oppose NCLB is by no means an opposition to school reform. While the designers and supporters of the legislation and the authors of this book can agree on the ends – that all children are entitled to high quality public education – the authors dispute with NCLB the means by which this ideal ought to be attained.

Many Children Left Behind is a collection of essays of the voices of many important and critical educators in our nation's schools. The book is an important addition to the dialogue among educators, politicians, and American citizens about the purpose of education in this country. As a student-teacher in Philadelphia, a school district immersed in NCLB legislation, I found the critical perspectives of the authors sympathetic to the challenges I face myself everyday in the classroom with my pedagogy and teaching philosophy.

Beyond the practical limitations of NCLB, this book critiques the legislation in that it is theoretically limited in its acknowledgement of the sources of inequity in this country. The scope of the legislative efforts for school improvement does not reach beyond the scope of education to address structural forms of inequality, from housing to health care. Rather, NCLB places the blame and responsibility for achievement gaps solely on schools. As Linda Darling-Hammond argues in "From 'Separate but Equal' to 'No Child Left Behind': The Collision of New Standards and Old Inequities", the reform ignores the negative effect income disparity has on children's school experiences. In his essay, "NCLB's Selective Vision of Equality: Some Gaps Count More Than Others," Stan Karp provocatively states, "inequality is as American as processed apple pie" (p. 59) and echoes the call for acknowledgement of research that shows a strong correlation between student performance on standardized tests and family income (p. 59). If we are to think in terms of "accountability", then we must also apply this notion to the society that schools serve. Monty McNeil writes in "Leaving No Child Behind: Overhauling NCLB", "neither schools nor [school] accountability can solve the accumulated problems of class inequities and racial bias, but school systems can and should be accountable for doing well what they can control" (p. 105). If the authors are willing to accept that NCLB addresses the important issue of inequity in education in this country, they are equally

insistent about the need for legislators to examine the sources of these inequities in society and commit to social action therein as well.

The main applied aspect of NCLB is the shifted focus on teaching meaningful material through critical pedagogy to teaching to the test. The authors explore how teaching to the test is seen most often in economically poor schools which are often the first schools to be targeted by NCLB. Because these schools are targeted as in need of improvement, curricular instruction focuses heavily on teaching to the test in an attempt to improve test scores. In “A View From the Field: NCLB’s Effects on Classrooms and Schools,” George Wood argues that limiting school success by measures of standardized tests actually results in a decline of quality teaching and learning. Under such sanctions, there is little room for creative critical inquiry and many teachers find themselves defaulting to the banking model (Freire, 1982) approach of teaching, which conceptualizes students as passive empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge and teachers as knowledge distributors. Deborah Meier poignantly reminds us in “NCLB and Democracy” that pedagogy, like medicine, must be differentiated according to expressed needs. She writes, “even if it were possible to claim that one pedagogy was superior to another, in the field of education, as in the field of medicine, one solution does not fit all. Depending on other patient characteristics a good doctor would vary the treatment plan; so it is with a good teacher” (p. 67). Teaching to a standardized, one-size-fits-all test model clearly impedes such differentiation. In order to keep their jobs and to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), however, teachers feel pressured to teach to the test in order to ensure that their students are prepared. AYP is the benchmark that all schools must achieve under NCLB and is determined by student results on standardized tests. The reliance on tests is disproportionately felt by schools that serve the economically poor. Schools that do not achieve the necessary scores to make AYP are punished by sanctions ranging from the deprivation of federal funding, to the imposition of private companies taking over schools, to forced school closure.

Achieving AYP is a dark cloud that looms over schools identified as underachieving and it is the main reason that schools and teachers feel such pressure to teach to the test. In his essay on AYP, Stan Karp argues in his chapter “NCLB’s Selective Vision of Equality: Some Gaps Count More than Others” that diverse schools are the ones most affected by this vein of the legislation. Most alarming in Karp’s analysis is the understanding that the more diverse a school is, the higher its stakes are for testing. Karp argues that AYP disserves English language learners and students in special education in particular. For example, he argues that the former group of students is being pressured to take high-stakes content tests in a language in which they are not fully proficient and when they fail to deliver proficient results, schools suffer the consequences.

The authors paint a bleak picture, to be sure. *Many Children Left Behind* does end on somewhat of a hopeful note, however, with a proposal that articulates ideas for generative, equitable practices that would serve society in the way that NCLB was perhaps intended. Monty McNeill enumerates a list of ten principles for authentic accountability in “Leaving No Child Behind: Overhauling NCLB” and provides an example of an alternative model of reform. McNeill and fellow authors of the book argue

for a return to the legislative drawing board in order to come up with a more equitable and democratic model for reform and accountability.

The creation of NCLB reflects American citizens' impatience with the paltry efforts of many states and school districts' to address the needs of racial and economic- minority children. The authors of *Many Children Left Behind* argue in their essays that, in striking irony, the legislation disproportionately hurts the very people it purports to help. Because of the sanctions connected with this piece of legislation, schools that serve the historically underrepresented in this country suffer the most stringent consequences from the reform.

The collection stands as a powerful voice of opposition to legislation that is felt deeply by urban schools. As an educator in an urban environment, though, I also found myself asking "What next?" as I closed the book. I agree with many of the arguments that the authors make, but I wish there were something to supplement the critique. I appreciate reading about better ideas and better models, but as someone who actually deals with the day-to-day of NCLB, I would also appreciate a conversation that acknowledges empowerment, if not hope, within the system, flawed though it certainly is. There is a need for legislative change, but until that happens, what do educators do? What are educators currently doing? This conversation is an important piece of the overall dialogue, and I would look forward to a companion collection of essays that could speak to the great teaching that is occurring within these dire circumstances.

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References

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