What Can We Learn from the Implementation of No Child Left Behind?

Abstract

While NCLB has generally succeeded in its intent, the flexibility it provides has led to a fragmented accountability system across states, resulting in different expectations for students and teachers and some unintended behaviors. District and school improvement activities have occurred, but progress to date suggests that the goal of 100 percent proficiency in reading and mathematics by 2014 is unattainable. Parents have not responded in great numbers either to school choice or to receiving supplemental educational services options.

It has been nine years since Congress passed—with bipartisan support—the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), a landmark in primary and secondary education. Aside from setting the ambitious goal that all students would be proficient in reading and mathematics by the year 2014, NCLB moved beyond the legislation it was built on by focusing on judging schools in terms of student outcomes, providing strong accountability with real “teeth” for enforcement, using parental choice (and the marketplace as a whole) as a driver of improvement, measuring performance of subgroups, requiring stronger teacher qualifications, and basing school improvement efforts on research-based practices.

Much has been said about NCLB, but as Congress considers reauthorizing it this year, what lessons can legislators draw from what has actually happened over the past nine years? This research brief summarizes RAND researchers’ independent analysis of the progress made as a result of this legislation and how state, district, and school administrators; teachers; and parents have responded to it. Their recommendations are based on two previous studies funded by the U.S. Department of Education—the National Longitudinal Study of No Child Left Behind (NLS–NCLB) and the Study of State Implementation of Accountability and Teacher Quality Under No Child Left Behind (SSI–NCLB), which both used data collected in 2004–2005 and in 2006–2007—and a third study, Implementing Standards-Based Accountability, funded by the National Science Foundation.

This research brief summarizes the key findings from those reports in four areas and presents RAND researchers’ recommendations for reauthorizing NCLB.

How Did States Implement NCLB Provisions?

Overall, NCLB has succeeded in its intent to establish a nationwide school and teacher accountability infrastructure that focuses on student outcomes and emphasizes improving the lowest-performing schools and students. However, the flexibility NCLB provided to states has resulted in the establishment of 52 different accountability systems—one for each state, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico—each with different academic standards, levels of student proficiency, and requirements for teachers.

How Did States Perform with NCLB in Place?

Progress to date in the share of students who are proficient in reading and mathematics suggests that the goal of having 100 percent of the nation’s students proficient in reading and mathematics by 2014 will not be met.

At the same time, NCLB’s narrow focus on these two academic areas and the states’ reliance on similarly narrow student tests have resulted
in unintended outcomes, such as the narrowing of schools’ curricula, encouraging teachers to focus on some students at the expense of others, and discouraging the development of higher thinking and problem-solving skills.

**How Did Funding Change, and How Did Districts Respond to Poor Performance?**

Education stakeholders received funding to improve student performance. There was a 51 percent increase (in constant dollars) in Title I appropriations between 1997–1998 and 2004–2005, but the overall share of Title I funds going to the highest-poverty districts remained essentially the same. There was an increase in the share of Title I funds retained for district-managed services (from 9 percent in 1997–1998 to 21 percent in 2004–2005), and there was a decline in the share allocated to individual schools (from 83 percent to 74 percent). Title I added more dollars per low-income student to elementary schools than to middle or high schools. For elementary schools, Title I added a significantly higher amount of personnel resources per low-income student in the lowest-poverty schools than in the highest-poverty schools—$825 versus $449, respectively.

As intended, school districts and schools identified for improvement have engaged in a flurry of improvement activities, including implementing the interventions and corrective actions mandated by the law. However, states typically have not implemented the most severe restructuring interventions for the chronically lowest-performing schools.

**How Did Parents Respond to the Services Provided?**

While the number of students taking advantage of the school choice and supplemental educational services options has increased over time, participation rates of eligible students for either option remain low. Part of the reason for low participation is administrative, and part is the preference of parents. Parents often chose not to participate because they were satisfied with their child’s school or performance or because of the inconvenience of the options offered to them.

As of 2006–2007, when the last data was collected for the NLS-NCLB study, knowledge about the law’s provisions and communications about the performance status of schools and parental choice options remain uneven. A majority of parents still do not know whether their child’s school is in need of improvement or not. Also, they are often notified about their choice options too late to make an informed decision about transferring their child to a school not identified for improvement.

**How Can NCLB Be Made More Effective?**

Should Congress reauthorize NCLB, RAND researchers recommend that it consider the following changes:

- Promote more uniform academic standards and teacher qualification requirements across states.
- Set more appropriate improvement targets using alternative accountability approaches that incorporate growth without the current targeting structure.
- Broaden test measures and hold schools accountable in some way for subjects other than reading and mathematics.
- Provide incentives for teachers to teach in low-performing schools, such as a higher salary or lower class loads for “highly qualified” teachers.
- Allow for a more flexible system of interventions that enables states and districts to identify and prioritize the schools most in need and to design consequences to address their particular needs.
- Broaden staff development beyond academic content and effective instruction to include approaches to problem solving, the development of interventions geared to the problems identified, and tools and practices for effective implementation of interventions.
- Recognize the limited benefits of school choice, at least at this time, and focus efforts for school improvement on all schools while continuing to offer school choice.
- Commit more resources to find better instructional methods and programs, especially for students with limited English proficiency and learning disabilities.
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