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Evaluating 'No Child Left Behind'

by LINDA DARLING-HAMMOND

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As Congress begins to consider reauthorization of the Bush Administration's 2002 No Child Left Behind Act, *The Nation* asked Linda Darling-Hammond, a leading education expert, to examine the law, its consequences and prospects for improving the legislation. Those responding in this forum include sociologist and author [Pedro Noguera](#), longtime educator and National Urban League vice president [Velma L. Cobb](#) and senior NYU scholar and veteran school principal [Deborah Meier](#). --The Editors

Linda Darling-Hammond

When Congress passed George W. Bush's signature education initiative, No Child Left Behind, it was widely hailed as a bipartisan breakthrough--a victory for American children, particularly those traditionally underserved by public schools. Now, five years later, the debate over the law's reauthorization has a decidedly different tone. As the House and Senate consider whether the law should be preserved--and if so, how it should be changed--high-profile Republicans are expressing their disenchantment with NCLB, while many newly elected Democrats are seeking a major overhaul as well.

What happened? Most discussions focus on the details of the more than 1,000-page law, which has provoked widespread criticism for the myriad issues it has raised. All of its flaws deserve scrutiny in the reauthorization debate, but it's also worth taking a step back to ask what the nation actually needs educationally. Lagging far behind our international peers in educational outcomes--and with one of the most unequal educational systems in the industrialized world--we need, I believe, something much more than and much different from what NCLB offers. We badly need a national policy that enables schools to meet the intellectual demands of the twenty-first century. More fundamentally, we need to pay off the educational debt to disadvantaged students that has accrued over centuries of unequal access to quality education.

NCLB's Promise--and Problems

In 2002 civil rights advocates praised NCLB for its emphasis on improving education for students of color, those living in poverty, new English learners and students with disabilities. NCLB aims to raise achievement and close the achievement gap by setting annual test-score targets for subgroups of students, based on a goal of "100 percent proficiency" by 2014. These targets are tied to school

sanctions that can lead to school reconstitutions or closures, as well as requirements for student transfers. In addition, NCLB requires schools to hire "highly qualified teachers" and states to develop plans to provide such teachers.

NCLB contains some major breakthroughs. First, by flagging differences in student performance by race and class, it shines a spotlight on longstanding inequalities and could trigger attention to the needs of students neglected in many schools. Second, by insisting that all students are entitled to qualified teachers, the law has stimulated recruitment efforts in states where low-income and "minority" students have experienced a revolving door of inexperienced, untrained teachers. While recent studies have found that teacher quality is a critical influence on student achievement, teachers are the most inequitably distributed school resource. This first-time-ever recognition of students' right to qualified teachers is historically significant.

This noble agenda, however, has been nearly lost in the law's problematic details. Dubbed No Child Left Untested, No School Board Left Standing and No Child's Behind Left, among other nicknames, the law has been protested by more than twenty states and dozens of school districts that have voted to resist specific provisions. One state and a national teachers association have brought lawsuits against the federal government based on the unfunded costs and dysfunctional side effects of the law. Critics claim that the law's focus on complicated tallies of multiple-choice-test scores has dumbed down the curriculum, fostered a "drill and kill" approach to teaching, mistakenly labeled successful schools as failing, driven teachers and middle-class students out of public schools and harmed special education students and English-language learners through inappropriate assessments and efforts to push out low-scoring students in order to boost scores. Indeed, recent analyses have found that rapid gains in education outcomes stimulated by reforms in the 1990s have stalled under NCLB, with math increases slowing and reading on the decline.

At base, the law has misdefined the problem. It assumes that what schools need is more carrots and sticks rather than fundamental changes.

A Focus on Testing Rather Than Investing. Most centrally, the law does not address the profound educational inequalities that plague our nation. With high-spending schools outspending low-spending schools at least three to one in most states, multiplied further by inequalities across states, the United States has the most inequitable education system in the industrialized world. School funding lawsuits brought in more than twenty-five states describe apartheid schools serving low-income students of color with crumbling facilities, overcrowded classrooms, out-of-date textbooks, no science labs, no art or music courses and a revolving door of untrained teachers, while their suburban counterparts, spending twice as much for students with fewer needs, offer expansive libraries, up-to-date labs and technology, small classes, well-qualified teachers and expert specialists, in luxurious facilities.

The funding allocated by NCLB--less than 10 percent of most schools' budgets--does not meet the needs of the under-resourced schools, where many students currently struggle to learn. Nor does the law require that states demonstrate progress toward equitable and adequate funding or greater opportunities to learn. Although NCLB requires "highly qualified teachers," the lack of a federal teacher supply policy makes this a hollow promise in many communities.

At a time when the percentage of Americans living in severe poverty has reached a thirty-two-year high, NCLB seeks to improve the schools poor students attend through threats and sanctions rather than the serious investments in education and welfare such an effort truly requires. As Gloria Ladson-Billings, former president of the American Educational Research Association, has noted, the problem we face is less an "achievement gap" than an educational debt that has accumulated over centuries of denied access to education and employment, reinforced by deepening poverty and resource inequalities in schools.

Until American society confronts the accumulated educational debt owed to these students and takes responsibility for the inferior resources they receive, Ladson-Billings argues, children of color and of poverty will continue to be left behind.

Disincentives for Improving Learning. Even if NCLB funding were to increase, its framework does not allow for important structural changes--for example, a system of teacher preparation and professional development that would routinely produce high-quality teaching; curriculums and assessments that encourage critical thinking and performance skills; high-quality preschool education, libraries and learning materials; and healthcare for poor children. Instead, the law wastes scarce resources on a complicated test score game that appears to be narrowing the curriculum, uprooting successful programs and pushing low-achieving students out of many schools.

To go back to first principles, we must ask what US schools should be doing in a world where education is increasingly essential and the nature of knowledge is rapidly changing. What would we need to do to graduate all of our students with the ability to apply knowledge to complex problems, communicate and collaborate effectively and find and manage information?

We might want to be doing some of the things that higher-achieving countries have been doing over the past twenty years as they have left us further and further behind educationally. As an indicator of the growing distance, the United States ranks twenty-eighth of forty countries in mathematics, right above Latvia, and graduates only about 75 percent of students, instead of the more than 95 percent now common elsewhere. Most high-achieving countries not only provide high-quality universal preschool and healthcare for children; they also fund their schools centrally and equally, with additional funds going to the neediest schools. Furthermore, they support a better-prepared teaching force--funding competitive salaries and high-quality teacher education, mentoring and ongoing professional development for all teachers. NCLB's answer to the problem of preparing teachers for the increasingly challenging job they face has been to call for alternative routes that often reduce training for the teachers of the poor.

Finally, high-achieving nations focus their curriculums on critical thinking and problem solving, using exams that require students to conduct research and scientific investigations, solve complex real-world problems and defend their ideas orally and in writing. These assessments are not used to rank or punish schools, or to deny promotion or diplomas to students. (In fact, several countries have explicit proscriptions against such practices.) They are used to evaluate curriculum and guide investments in learning--in short, to help schools improve. Finally, by asking students to show what they know through real-world applications of knowledge, these other nations' assessment systems encourage serious intellectual activities that are being driven out of many US schools by the tests promoted by NCLB.

Narrowing the Curriculum. No Child Left Behind has actually made it harder for states to improve the quality of teaching. At the core of these problems is an accountability system borrowed from Texas and administered by an Education Department with a narrow view of what constitutes learning. This system requires testing every student in math, reading and, soon, science and issuing sanctions to schools that do not show sufficient progress for each subpopulation of students toward an abstract goal of "100 percent proficiency" on state tests--with benchmarks that vary from state to state.

Ironically, states that set high standards risk having the most schools labeled "failing" under NCLB. Thus Minnesota, where eighth graders are first in the nation in mathematics and on a par with the top countries in the world, had 80 percent of schools on track to be labeled failing according to the federal rules. In addition, states that earlier created forward-looking performance assessment systems like those used abroad have begun to abandon them for antiquated, machine-scored tests that more easily satisfy the law. As emphasis on drilling for multiple-choice tests has increased, the amount of research, project

work and scientific inquiry has declined, and twelfth grade reading scores have dropped nationwide.

The Education Department has discouraged states from using more instructionally useful forms of assessment that involve teachers in scoring tasks requiring extensive writing and analysis. Connecticut, Maine, Rhode Island, Nebraska and Vermont, among others, had to wrestle with the department to maintain their sophisticated performance-based assessment systems, which resemble those used in high-scoring nations around the world. Connecticut, which assesses students with open-ended tasks like designing, conducting and analyzing a science experiment (and not coincidentally ranks first in the nation in academic performance), sued the federal government for the funds needed to maintain its assessments on an "every child, every year" basis. The Education Secretary suggested the state drop these tasks for multiple-choice tests. Thus the administration of the law is driving the US curriculum in the opposite direction from what a twenty-first-century economy requires.

Distracting Schools From Productive Reforms. Other dysfunctional consequences derive from the law's complicated accountability scheme, which analysts project will label between 85 and 99 percent of the nation's public schools "failing" within the next few years, even when they are high-performing, improving in achievement and closing the gap. This will happen as states raise their proficiency levels to a national benchmark set far above grade level, and as schools must hit targets for test scores and participation rates for each racial/ethnic, language, income and disability group on several tests--often more than thirty in all. Missing any one of these--for example, having 94 percent of low-income students take the test instead of 95 percent--causes the school to fail to "make AYP" (adequate yearly progress).

Worse still, there is a Catch-22 for those serving English-language learners and special-needs students. In *Alice in Wonderland* fashion, the law assigns these students to special subgroups because they do not meet the proficiency standard, and they are removed from the subgroup as they catch up, so it is impossible for the subgroups ever to be 100 percent proficient. Schools serving a significant share of these learners will inevitably be labeled failing, even if all their students consistently make strong learning gains. Those who warned that the law was a conservative scheme to undermine public schools and establish vouchers were reinforced in their view when the Bush Administration's recent reauthorization plan recommended that students in schools that do not achieve their annual test benchmarks be offered vouchers at public expense.

As a result of these tortuous rules, more than 40 percent of the nation's public schools have been placed on intervention status at some point in the past four years, including some of the highest-achieving schools in the nation and many that are narrowing the achievement gap. These schools have sometimes been forced to dismantle successful programs in favor of dubious interventions pushed by the Education Department--including specific reading programs under the Reading First plan, which, the inspector general found, was managed in such a way as to line the pockets of favored publishers while forcing districts to abandon other, more successful reading programs. Although some of these schools are truly failing and require major help to improve, it is impossible to separate them from schools caught in the statistical mousetrap.

Punishing the Neediest Schools and Students. At least some of the schools identified as "needing improvement" are surely dismal places where little learning occurs, or are complacent schools that have not attended to the needs of their less advantaged students. It is fair to suggest that students in such schools deserve other choices if the schools cannot change. However, there is growing evidence that the law's strategy for improving schools may, paradoxically, reduce access to education for the most vulnerable students.

NCLB's practice of labeling schools as failures makes it even harder for them to attract and keep

qualified teachers. As one Florida principal asked, "Is anybody going to want to dedicate their life to a school that has already been labeled a failure?" What's more, schools that have been identified as not meeting AYP standards must use their federal funds to support choice and "supplemental services," such as privately provided after-school tutoring, leaving them with even fewer resources for their core educational programs. Unfortunately, many of the private supplemental service providers have proved ineffective and unaccountable, and transfers to better schools have been impossible in communities where such schools are unavailable or uninterested in serving students with low achievement, poor attendance and other problems that might bring their own average test scores down. Thus, rather than expanding educational opportunities for low-income students and students of color, the law in many communities further reduces the quality of education available in the schools they must attend.

Perhaps the most adverse unintended consequence of NCLB is that it creates incentives for schools to rid themselves of students who are not doing well, producing higher scores at the expense of vulnerable students' education. Studies have found that sanctioning schools based on average student scores leads schools to retain students in grade so that grade-level scores will look better (although these students ultimately do less well and drop out at higher rates), exclude low-scoring students from admissions and encourage such students to transfer or drop out.

Recent studies in Massachusetts, New York and Texas show how schools have raised test scores while "losing" large numbers of low-scoring students. In a large Texas city, for example, scores soared while tens of thousands of students--mostly African-American and Latino--disappeared from school. Educators reported that exclusionary policies were used to hold back, suspend, expel or counsel out students in order to boost test scores. Overall, fewer than 40 percent of African-American and Latino students graduated. Paradoxically, NCLB's requirement for disaggregating data by race creates incentives for eliminating those at the bottom of each subgroup, especially where schools have little capacity to improve the quality of services such students receive. As a consequence of high-stakes testing, graduation rates for African-American and Latino students have declined in a number of states. In the NCLB paradigm, there is no solution to this problem, as two-way accountability does not exist: The child and the school are accountable to the state for test performance, but the state is not held accountable to the child or his school for providing adequate educational resources.

How to (Really) Leave No Child Behind

There are hundreds of proposals for tweaking NCLB, but a substantial paradigm shift is required if our education system is to support powerful learning for all students. The Forum on Educational Accountability, a group of more than 100 education and civil rights organizations--including the National Urban League, the NAACP and the League of United Latin American Citizens, as well as the associations representing teachers, administrators and school boards--has argued that "the law's emphasis needs to shift from applying sanctions for failing to raise test scores to holding states and localities accountable for making the systemic changes that improve student achievement."

How might this be done? A new paradigm for national education policy should be guided by dual commitments to support meaningful learning on the part of students, teachers and schools; and to pay off the educational debt, making it possible for all students to benefit from more productive schools.

A new Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) should start by helping states develop world-class standards, curriculums and assessments and to use them for improving teaching. Returning to the more productive approach of President Clinton's Goals 2000 initiative, the federal government should assist states in developing systems for evaluating student progress that are performance based--including assessments like essays, research papers and science experiments that are embedded in the curriculum

and scored by teachers using common criteria--leveraging intellectually ambitious learning and providing information that continuously improves teaching.

School progress should also be measured in a more comprehensive manner--including such factors as student progress and continuation, graduation and classroom performance on tasks beyond multiple-choice tests--and gains should be assessed by how individual students improve over time. To eliminate the statistical gantlet that penalizes schools serving the most diverse populations, the AYP system should be replaced with a continuous improvement model. While continuing to report test scores by race and class, schools should be judged on whether students make progress on multiple measures of achievement, including those that assess higher-order thinking and understanding, and insure appropriate assessment for special-education students and English-language learners. And "opportunity to learn" standards specifying the provision of adequate materials, facilities and teachers should accompany assessments of student learning, creating benchmarks for the pursuit of equity.

The new ESEA must finally address the deep and tenacious educational debt that holds our nation's future in hock and insure that every child has access to adequate school resources, facilities and quality teachers. Federal education funding to states should be tied to each state's movement toward equitable access to education resources. Furthermore, the obvious truth--that schools alone are not responsible for student achievement--should propel attention to programs that will provide adequate healthcare and nutrition, safe and secure housing, and healthy communities for children.

Major investments must be made in the ability of schools to hire and support well-prepared teachers and leaders. While NCLB sets an expectation for hiring qualified teachers, it does not include supports to make this possible. Federal leadership in developing an adequate supply of well-qualified teachers is needed. Just as it has helped provide an adequate supply of physicians for more than forty years, it can provide training for those who prepare in specialties for which there is a shortage and agree to locate in underserved areas.

A Marshall Plan for Teaching could insure that all students are taught by well-qualified teachers within the next five years through a federal policy that (1) recruits new teachers using service scholarships that underwrite their preparation for high-need fields and locations and adds incentives for expert veteran teachers to teach in high-need schools; (2) strengthens teachers' preparation through support for professional development schools, like teaching hospitals, which offer top-quality urban teacher residencies to candidates who will stay in high-need districts; and (3) improves teacher retention and effectiveness by insuring that novices have mentoring support during their early years, when 30 percent of them drop out.

For an annual cost of \$3 billion, or less than one week in Iraq, the nation could underwrite the high-quality preparation of 40,000 teachers annually--enough to fill all the vacancies taken by unprepared teachers each year; seed 100 top-quality urban-teacher-education programs and improve the capacity of all programs to prepare teachers who can teach diverse learners well; insure mentors for every new teacher hired each year; and provide incentives to bring expert teachers into high-need schools by improving salaries and working conditions.

Students will not learn at higher levels without the benefit of good teaching, a strong curriculum and adequate resources. Merely adopting tests and punishments will not create genuine accountability. In fact, adopting punitive sanctions without investments increases the likelihood that the most vulnerable students will be more severely victimized by a system not organized to support their learning. A policy agenda that leverages equitable resources and invests strategically in high-quality teaching would support real accountability--that is, accountability to children and parents for providing the conditions under which students can be expected to acquire the skills they need to succeed.

The forum continues with responses from sociologist and author [Pedro Noguera](#), longtime educator and National Urban League vice president [Velma L. Cobb](#) and senior NYU scholar and veteran school principal [Deborah Meier](#).