

IMPLEMENTING NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND:

WHY SUPPLEMENTAL SERVICES MAKE MORE SENSE THAN SCHOOL CHOICE

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Overview of No Child Left Behind

In 2002, President Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act, which authorizes some of the most extensive reforms to America's public education system in recent history. No Child Left Behind's primary goal is to insure that all children in public schools reach a certain level of achievement in subject areas such as math and reading. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) focuses on providing equity in public education by closing the achievement gap between low-income and minority students and their peers.

NCLB represents the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), which aims to improve the academic achievement of disadvantaged students through "Title I" funds and programs. Title I schools are those public schools with a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students, or those receiving free or reduced lunch. These schools receive funding under ESEA (and now under NCLB) to provide programs that will "... ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments" (www.ed.gov. 2002). Currently, around 55% of public schools receive Title I funding, and are therefore required to meet the provisions of the NCLB law.

Under NCLB, there are a variety of measures to ensure schools achieve adequate yearly progress in meeting achievement standards for all students. These measures focus on providing accountability by testing students against achievement standards, reporting results, and implementing reforms if these standards are not met. If a school does not meet achievement standards for all students it will be designated as "needing improvement", and must undergo a series of steps to improve services. These steps involve either the provision of school choice and/or providing supplemental services. This paper will examine both these options in depth, and make a case for supporting supplemental services over school choice as the best way to directly aid students and teachers reach higher academic standards.

Provision for School Choice

Under NCLB, when a school fails to make adequate yearly progress in raising students' test scores for 2 years in a row, it must allow Title I students the option of transferring to

another public school in the same district that has not been designated as needing improvement (Center on Education Policy 2003). Choice is defined by the law as “the opportunity for students to choose between at least two better-performing schools” (2003). School districts are required to set aside 20% of their Title I funds to pay for transportation costs associated with school choice. In districts where Title I funds do not cover the cost of transporting all qualifying students, priority is given to the lowest-achieving students.

This school choice provision is designed to give parents whose children are in a “failing school” options for a better education. While this may appear to be an equitable and necessary response, there are many problems with this provision. Under closer examination, the choice provision makes better political rhetoric than it does a viable reform. No one argues allowing parents and students better options to choose from, but does choice actually improve student achievement, or help failing schools improve? The promotion of school choice strategies has been part of a larger market based reform movement that promotes competition and privatization as a way to boost low achieving schools’ performance. That school choice is part of the Bush Administration’s education reform plan does not surprise many, coming from a conservative administration that believes the free market system is the best tool to help remedy social issues such as poverty, and education inequities. The Bush Administration also tried to include vouchers for students to attend private schools under the choice provision but this part of the bill was defeated in congress (Friel 2004). Still, many critics are suspicious of the motives underlying the provision of school choice. Some believe that conservatives in the Bush Administration have purposely under funded NCLB and made standards impossibly high so that when better performing schools do not have room to accommodate transferring students, vouchers will have to be implemented, as the first step in the privatization of America’s public school system (2004).

Problems with Choice as an Improvement Measure

In my opinion, using school choice and competition as a method to promote school improvement is inappropriate because this approach ignorantly assumes that the reason schools are failing is that they are not trying hard enough. This proposed solution greatly oversimplifies the very complex challenges that schools serving disadvantaged students face. Competition will not solve the problems of high teacher turnover, overcrowded classrooms, under funded programs, high need children coming from abusive or neglectful home environments, and other effects of poverty. Additionally, simply sending a student to another school does not necessarily mean that this child’s achievement will improve. In fact, the disruption caused by joining a new school may actually cause this student’s academic performance to decline.

Furthermore, not only does school choice not necessarily improve underperforming schools, it may actually harm them by taking away resources. Each student that transfers from a “failing” takes with them on average \$7,000 worth of funding, making it even more difficult to reach the standards set by NCLB. In Duval County Florida, more than \$2.3 million in funding was redirected to other schools due to student transfers. In many of this county’s “failing” schools, this redirection meant schools had to cut teacher and teacher aide positions, which are crucial for improving students’ performance (Garza 2003). Furthermore, school choice programs redirect Title I money that could be used to educate students to transportation costs. Money is not the only resource these schools stand to lose, however. Many students who transfer tend to be those who are not the lowest performing, thus the schools lose some of their good students and the more involved parents that have the resources and interest in their child’s education to exercise their choice option.

Parents and educators on the receiving end of school transfers are also unhappy with the consequences of school choice. According to Tim O’Mara, who teaches in a New York City middle school, class sizes in his school’s sixth grade increased by 20% due to students transferring in from a failing school, making it harder for him to meet NCLB’s new achievement targets for all students (Mathews 2004). Under the law, school capacity is to be defined only as meeting health and safety code requirements, allowing for large increases in class size (Robelen 2002). A parent in South Chicago had a similar experience. After transfers from a nearby “failing school” poured into her kids’ elementary school, she commented, “you now have two schools failing instead of only one” (Mathews 2004).

After examining these kinds of concerns, it seems to make more sense to provide increased support for the “failing” school rather than taking resources away from it. Judging from statistics the school choice option is generally not supported by parents. A report examining 11 dynamic school districts in the first year of NCLB, it was found that although thousands of students were eligible to transfer schools, fewer than 3% exercised their choice option (Orfield 2004). While this may be due to lack of information available to parents, many parents don’t want their children to have to switch schools, as many have strong relationships and attachments to local neighborhood schools.

Other problems result from difficulty implementing the school choice provision, especially for low income urban districts and rural districts. In the above mentioned report, no district in the study was able to approve all transfer requests, due to overcrowded schools or a lack of better performing schools within a reasonable distance. The example of Baltimore is typical for urban school districts, where officials estimate that there are just under 200 slots available at better performing schools for over 30,000

students eligible for transfers (Robelen 2002). In rural areas there are many districts in which there is just one school, with the next nearest school 20 or 30 miles away.

Provision of Supplemental Services

After examining all the problems involved in implementing school choice under NCLB, it is important to examine other options that will actually help improve failing schools rather than directing resources away from them. One of the most promising reforms required for failing schools to implement is the provision of supplemental services. If a Title I school fails to make adequate yearly progress for three years in a row, the school is required to provide free supplemental education services to all qualifying students. These services may include tutoring and after-school enrichment programs, and are required to take place outside the regular school day. Funding for supplemental services comes from the same 20% of Title I funds that school choice programs are funded with.

These services can be provided by the public school district, private companies, community organizations, or faith-based organizations. The providers must be approved by the state, according to a list of criteria supplied by NCLB. These criteria include practical considerations, including documentation that the services provided are high quality, based on research, and designed to increase student academic achievement (Center on Education Policy 2003).

Advantages of Supplemental Services

Unlike school choice, the provision of supplemental services is a practical method aimed directly at positively impacting students and teachers. The provision of supplemental services attacks the achievement gap head on, by giving individual attention to students who are falling through the cracks. The impact of supplemental services is more easily assessed than transferring a student to a different school. For example, the Baltimore School District contracts Sylvan Education Solutions to provide individualized instruction based on each student's individual weaknesses in math and reading, which Sylvan evaluates when the program begins. At the end of the tutoring program, each student is re-evaluated to see if his/her skills have improved (Friel 2004). A principal at a Baltimore school was so impressed with Sylvan's curriculum that she and her staff went door to door to recruit more qualified students to join the program (2004).

According to studies reviewed in an article in *Educational Leadership*, "...struggling readers are instructionally needy. Classroom teachers will never have the time to provide the one-to-one support that so many of these students require. Research has shown that tutoring is an effective intervention that can provide this one-to-one support and raise student achievement" (Allington 2004). Research further found that "...no

studies suggest that classroom teachers can help 90-95% of students acquire grade-level reading proficiencies by learning more about phonology, using a scripted curriculum, teaching systematic phonics, or following some ‘proven’ program” (2004). Programs that most reliably accelerated the literacy development of struggling readers relied on costly, expert, and intensive tutoring ...” (2004). With the number of English language learners on the rise in American public schools, along with special education students, teachers are increasingly challenged by growing gaps between their students’ abilities. Under NCLB, teachers are expected to bring all students to a certain high level of achievement, even though there may be a range of five grade levels among students in their class. Under the supplemental services provision in NCLB, school districts would have to ensure that English language learners and special education students receive appropriate supplemental services and language or special education assistance in the provision of these services, allowing the kind of individualized instruction needed that regular classroom teachers cannot adequately provide.

Supplemental services not only benefit the students receiving them, but the rest of the students in the class and the teacher as well. A teacher in a Pennsylvania school explained, “we have kids in seventh grade who don’t know their multiplication tables ...but everything on the curriculum calendar is on grade level. There’s no time for reviewing; there’s no time for remedial work” (Friel 2004). Teachers in situations like these, where they have to stay on a schedule to cover the material on state tests for NCLB do not have time to bridge the gaps between their struggling students and those already at grade level, making it impossible to leave no child behind. The pressure would be taken off these teachers, allowing them more time to teach new curriculum and spend less time playing catch up if these struggling students received remedial instruction outside of class. Supplemental services aims to provide exactly this kind of assistance. The rest of the students in the class will also benefit if their struggling peers are given help outside of class to meet grade level standards. This is true because then their teacher could teach grade level material to everyone, rather than holding some students back while trying to play catch up with others.

Personal Insights on Teaching and Benefits of Supplemental Services

My own experience teaching in the St. Paul public schools provides a good example of how needed supplemental services are. I taught in a multiage classroom in which my students’ reading levels ranged from second to tenth grade. About half of my students were English language learners, and three students had Individualized Education Plans for special education. As a teacher with 30 students in my class, I was increasingly distressed by the gap in my students’ abilities; I didn’t have time to work individually with two students who were struggling to read picture books while others in my class could finish *The Lord of the Rings* in a week. Inevitably in this kind of situation, students who are struggling behind grade level become embarrassed, stop asking

questions in class, develop a negative and apathetic attitude toward school as a defense mechanism, and often later drop out of high school. However, if these students could receive one on one tutoring after school each day, and begin to feel like they were making some progress, they would come to class much more ready to learn. It is simply unrealistic to ask that teachers bring all their students up to grade level without this kind of individualized tutoring assistance. I think this example also illustrates the point that simply transferring these struggling students to another school does not help improve their academic achievement; rather it just passes their educational challenges on to another teacher in another school.

Future Prospects for Supplemental Services

Thus, my recommendations for the implementation of supplemental services is that they be given full funding, in part by replacing the school choice provision's portion of Title I funds. Due to the great potential these services have for impacting recipient students in and out of school, these students' classmates, and teachers, I recommend that supplemental services be offered immediately when a school is declared as "needing assistance" for not making adequate yearly progress, rather than waiting for 3 years. Furthermore, I recommend that school districts meet with community and faith based organizations to develop programs to provide supplemental services, as both the schools and community organizations stand to benefit from this partnership.

Funding

Currently, the main problem with the provision of supplemental services is that they are under funded and underused. According to a study on 11 dynamic school districts, demand for supplemental services was low in the first year of NCLB, with fewer than 16% of eligible students requesting and receiving supplemental services (Orfield 2004). According to Nina Shokraii Rees, the deputy undersecretary in charge of the U.S. Department of Education's office of innovation and improvement, the lack of demand is primarily a result of lack of sufficient parent notification (Gewertz 2004). A nonprofit group, Advocates for Children, found that poor outreach to parents was the main reason only 12% of children in New York City received tutoring last school year (2004). The good news is that this problem will likely subside as the supplemental services program at each school has been in place for longer, and parents become more familiar with the provisions of NCLB. Parent education and outreach are certainly not impossible problems to solve, and information campaigns and tactics are currently being developed by school districts to improve demand. Funding for supplemental services comes from the same pool of the 20% of Title I funds that are set aside for school choice programs. If supplemental services replaced school choice, as I think this essay makes a good case for, then much more money would be available for tutoring.

Community Involvement with Public Schools

Another hopeful prospect for the provision of supplemental services is that they have the potential to increase community involvement with schools. When a community is more involved with its schools, it becomes more invested in their success, and partnerships to achieve this success can be built. Qualifying faith-based organizations and community groups are among the providers that NCLB approves for providing supplemental services. Students who receive individual tutoring in these settings have the opportunity to build mentoring relationships with community members that are important for that student's personal as well as academic growth. In addition, spending time in these community organizations, such as YMCAs and churches after school provides a much more positive after school environment for these students than many of them would otherwise be in. Students will be exposed to people and activities these organizations have to offer and may develop extra curricular interests in them.

Conclusion

No Child Left Behind is an important and necessary law to ensure educational equity for economically disadvantaged students in America's public schools. However, the law needs to be reformed to ensure that its provisions are actually accomplishing in classrooms what they claim to in rhetoric. The school choice provision fails to actually increase student achievement, help teachers meet higher standards, or help failing schools improve. Supplemental services, on the other hand, have the potential to meet NCLB's goal of improving student achievement and educational quality by directly supporting teachers and students in practical ways that are desperately needed in many classrooms.

Annotated Bibliography

Allington, Richard. "Setting the Record Straight: Federal Officials are Holding Schools Impossible Standards Based on Misinterpretations of the Research." Educational Leadership, March 2004, vol.61 p.22-25.

This article examines research that shows individual tutoring produces on-level reading achievement with many struggling readers. Interestingly, this article cites research showing that classroom teachers cannot be expected to bring all struggling readers up to grade level without this kind of tutoring. The article makes the case that this kind of tutoring needs to be fully funded in order for schools to meet adequate yearly progress under NCLB.

Center on Education Policy. "From the Capital to the Classroom: State and Federal Efforts to Implement the NCLB Act." www.ctredpol.org/pubs/nclb Jan. 2003.

This report offers a comprehensive look at the implementation of NCLB, including analysis of strengths and weaknesses of NCLB provisions, challenges for implementation, and recommendations for future policy. The chapter on school choice and supplemental services offers comprehensive analysis of these provisions and their effectiveness on improving schools and student achievement.

Friel, B. "The Bush Record." National Journal March 20, 2004.

This article objectively examines President Bush's campaign promises regarding education and the NCLB Act and how well he has kept these promises during his first term in office. The article includes interviews with teachers and administrators on their criticisms and support for NCLB.

Garza, Cynthia. "Fewer Students, Money Left Behind." The Florida Times Union. Aug. 26, 2003.

This article examines the effects that school choice can have in terms of draining resources from schools that students choose to leave. Comments from teachers and administrators on this aspect of NCLB are included, and offer good insights into how the law actually affects those in the education field. Ultimately, this article reveals the negative effects of NCLB.

Gerwertz, Catherine. "Tutoring Aid Falling Short of Mandate." Education Week. Feb. 25, 2004.

This article gives an overview of the challenges involved in implementing the supplemental services provision of NCLB. Issues covered include insufficient funding, a lack of parent awareness regarding the availability of services, and a lack of service providers in rural areas.

"No Child Left Behind." www.ed.gov.

This website by the federal government gives a good overview of NCLB and all of its provisions. The site has different material for parents, teachers, and administrators and is generally designed to promote the law. Thus, the page gives good information on the positive aspects of NCLB.

Mathews, Jay. "Examining No Child Left Behind." Washington Post. March 9, 2004.

This article was written in response to the author's request that readers and educators share their stories regarding the strengths and weaknesses of NCLB. The author highlights some of the main issues that arose, including school choice implementation problems and an increased focus on standardized test prep, which were the most common responses.

McAuliffe, Bill. "Choice is Undermining Regular Schools and Communities." Star Tribune. April 11, 2004.

This article is one part in a series on the effects of school choice on Minneapolis Public Schools. This author presents the Minneapolis Public Schools as an interesting case study for school choice – presenting the challenges it poses for inner city schools as more minority families join whites in their decision to attend other schools. According to McAuliffe, the result is less resources and more problems for the inner city schools left behind. A general history of school choice is also presented.

"No Child Left Behind." www.nochildleft.com

This website is interesting to look at in contrast to the government sites for NCLB. This site is staunchly opposed to NCLB and offers a variety of articles, news items, books, cartoons and interviews on the problems and challenges with the law, including the view that it is one step on the way to privatizing America's public school system.

Orfield, Gary. "No Child Left Behind: A Federal, State, and District Level Look at the First Year." Harvard Graduate School of Education News. Feb. 9, 2004.

This study was conducted by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard and examines at three levels the challenges of implementing the provisions of NCLB. The report takes a largely negative view of the law, criticizing NCLB's accountability system regarding standards, the choice provision, and the supplemental services provision.

Robelen, Erik. "Few Choosing Public School Choice for this Fall." Education Week. Aug. 27, 2002.

This brief article reports that in the first phase of NCLB, few qualifying families chose to exercise their school choice option. It examines possible explanations for why this is the case.