



Week of March 7-11, 2011

82 Percent of Schools Aren't On Track to "Win the Future"

by UCLA IDEA

The federal government is gearing up for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The current act, signed into law in 2002, requires that all students be "proficient" in reading and math by 2014. Each year, states must set benchmarks showing that they are making "adequate yearly progress" toward that ambitious goal. With only three years left, very few schools are making that progress.

When schools don't meet the benchmarks, they are labeled "in need of improvement" and required to implement reform plans, provide free tutoring, replace their staff, alert parents that they have the option of transferring to another school, convert to a charter, be taken over by the state, or a number of other measures. That's a lot of cost and commotion in these times when schools are cutting resources and supports. Furthermore, the logic of the reform is strained at best. Consider, for example, the option of transferring to another school when only two out of 10 schools meet the benchmarks or consider evidence that charters on average are no better than the "failing" public schools.

Fortunately, the Obama administration has recognized that NCLB has led school reform to a dead end. Irrational benchmarks, deeply flawed measurements of acceptable "progress," and impossible consequences do not add up to a winning strategy for improving schools. Yesterday, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan warned Congress that the act's guidelines could mean that up to 82 percent of schools are labeled as "failing" next year, even if they are making gains in student achievement. Duncan spoke before an education committee hearing urging support for the administration's reform of ESEA.

"We should get out of the business of labeling schools as failures and create a new law that is fair and flexible, and focused on the schools and students most at risk," Duncan said.

Many argue that the fundamental problem with NCLB is its focus on tests and sanctions, with little concern for changing the conditions that affect student outcomes. Gary Ratner, founder of the nonprofit Citizens for Effective Schools, said this focus "essentially jump(s) over the middle—the harder part—explaining what changes schools should make to substantially improve student learning, and then helping them do so."

One challenge that Duncan and the administration face is whether they can unglue education policy from the current culture of testing and sanctions in order to create policies that allow flexibility and encourage adequate funding—whether by the states or federal government. A recent report by USA Today looked at America's attachment to tests and the unhelpful—even unsavory—effects of that attachment.

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It reported on sharp fluctuations in schools' test scores from one year to the next and the suspicions they create. Investigations have shown that some schools distort the entire curriculum for the sole purpose of improving scores. Other schools apply sophisticated analyses to determine which few students are most likely to improve the school's progress status and then concentrate resources on only those students. Then there are schools that just plain cheat.

A narrow focus on test performance robs students of the well-rounded education they need to prepare for successful lives, even in schools with ample resources. High-stakes testing pressure, applied to schools that lack qualified teachers or other resources for learning, can create hopelessness or a "whatever it takes" attitude. Sanctions aren't enough. Schools need 1) high standards, 2) meaningful assessments, and 3) the conditions that allow the standards to be properly taught and learned. All three, working together, will build capacity and student achievement.

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