

## **Leaving NCLB Renewal Behind**

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Education Secretary Margaret Spellings has pronounced the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) a success, with her department's Web Site currently proclaiming, "NCLB Is Working." That would be great news if it were accurate – but unfortunately it's not.

The best evidence available suggests that NCLB may actually be reducing student gains in reading and making no difference in math achievement. Moreover, no study has shown benefits yet for such central NCLB features as its school choice provision, its supplemental education services, or its sanctions for schools that persistently fall short of goals.

All of this argues against Congress reauthorizing NCLB this year, as the Administration, congressional education chairmen and others appear eager to do. This is by no means to suggest that NCLB should be abandoned. It is only to say that common sense dictates we await evidence that the law actually helps students before proceeding further – and certainly before expanding NCLB-type measures to high schools or colleges.

Right now there is no such evidence, contrary to Secretary Spellings' contentions. A basic look at why she is wrong and what the best evidence tells us is essential if we are to grasp what a mistake it may be to renew the law this year.

Secretary Spellings' premature proclamation of success is based on one of three versions of the test known popularly as "the nation's report card" and technically as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP. The version she cited was the Long-Term NAEP, a test last administered in 2004. She particularly pointed to a considerable rise in 9-year-olds' reading skills since the previous Long-Term assessment was given in 1999, and compared this with the lesser gains of prior years. Perhaps forgetting the cause-and-effect perils taught in statistics courses – you know: most people die in bed; ergo, stay away from beds – she attributed the improvement to NCLB.

There are clearly problems with that conclusion. The 2004 test was administered just two years after the No Child Left Behind Act had even been signed into law and a year before it was fully implemented, in 2005. It therefore couldn't have played any part in several years of the 9-year-olds' reading gains that Secretary Spellings cited (at least 1999 through 2002), and it's hard to see how it could have been the central influence on their reading skills in 2003 and 2004, since the program was then just starting up. (Initial awards by the Reading First program, NCLB's chief reading initiative, weren't announced until the fall of 2003.)

So what does the evidence really tell us? Fortunately, the two other versions of the "nation's report card" can help us here, especially since they are arguably more appropriate for judging NCLB. The Long-Term version was created in the 1970s and isn't considered well aligned with current curricula. The others – the Main NAEP and the

State NAEP – were designed in the late 1980s and 1990s and are viewed as having more challenging material. Because of this, in fact, NCLB requires administration of the Main NAEP every two years.

The Main NAEP was administered several times in the 1990s and more recently in 2002, 2003 and 2005. By using results from a period that excluded NCLB (1994-2002) and another that included it (2002-2005), we can better measure the program’s effects. Evidence that NCLB is working would require that there be a faster rate of improvement in the 2002-2005 period than in 1994-2002. If NCLB were making no difference, the rates of gain would be roughly the same, and if gains favored the pre-NCLB period, it would indicate that NCLB may be harmful.

The reading scores for the 4<sup>th</sup> graders tested in the two periods can be seen in Table A. With 10-11 points roughly equivalent to one grade level, you will note that in the pre-NCLB period, gains of more than a grade were registered by African Americans (14 points) and Hispanic Americans (13 points). Yet African Americans advanced only 1 point in the post-NCLB period, while Hispanic Americans picked up just 2 points.

**TABLE A**  
**Main NAEP**

*Reading Scale Scores – Grade 4*

UNIVERSE	YEARS			GAINS	
	1994	2002	2005	1994-2002	2002-2005
<b>Nation as a Whole</b>	214	219	219	+5	0
<b>Whites</b>	224	229	229	+5	0
<b>African Americans</b>	185	199	200	+14	+1
<b>Hispanic Americans</b>	188	201	203	+13	+2

If we look at the average annual rates of gain for the 4<sup>th</sup> graders (a period’s gain divided by the number of years in the period), we can see that the differences in rates of improvement during the two time periods are substantial. For African Americans, the slope diminished from 1.75 points a year before NCLB to 0.33 point a year after NCLB, while for Hispanic Americans the rate shrunk from 1.6 points to 0.66 point a year.

Reading data for 8<sup>th</sup> graders, the other group tested, present a similar picture (see Table B). The differences in rates of improvement are substantial for African Americans, who picked up a bit more than 1 point a year over the 1994-2002 period but lost about two-thirds of a point a year after 2002. Hispanic Americans gained about 0.5 point a year over 1994-2002 but lost a third of a point a year after 2002. Reading scores for whites and for all students also showed reduced gains after 2002 for both 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades.

The common trends in the data for 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders are striking, suggesting that NCLB actually has *reduced* reading achievement gains of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade children.

**TABLE B**

**Main NAEP**

*Reading Scale Scores – Grade 8*

GROUPS	YEARS			GAINS	
	1994	2002	2005	1994-2002	2002-2005
<b>Nation as a Whole</b>	260	264	262	+4	-2
<b>Whites</b>	267	272	271	+5	-1
<b>African Americans</b>	236	245	243	+9	-2
<b>Hispanic Americans</b>	243	247	246	+4	-1

Math scores show a somewhat different pattern. In math, overall gains are larger and rates of increase are similar for the pre- and post-NCLB periods – indicating that NCLB has had no effect.

With troubling results like these, the next thing to do is ask whether they can be corroborated by the third test, the State assessment. Perhaps something is happening that we do not understand. Perhaps some states had particularly bad scores over the 2002-2005 period and dragged down other states. That would be the hope – but, unfortunately, it's not the reality.

In 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading, for example, African-Americans in California gained 14 points over 1994-2002 but lost 1 point in 2002-2005, while California Hispanic Americans advanced 21 points (2 full grades) in the pre-NCLB period but only 1 point post-NCLB. In Massachusetts, African Americans gained 16 points in 1994-2002 but lost 1 point over 2002-2005, while Hispanic Americans there picked up a striking 25 points (more than

two full grades) in 1994-2002 but lost 4 points in 2002-2005. In Virginia the gains for African Americans were 13 points in the early years and 2 points in the latter period, while Hispanic Americans first gained 13 points but then lost 6 points.

In fact, across all states for which data were available for 1994, 2002 and 2005, for African Americans 20 of 30 states had greater rates before 2002 and 4 states had greater rates of gain after 2002. For Hispanics, in 3 of the 13 states the gain rate was greater after NCLB was signed into law in 2002 and in 10 states the rates of gain were greater.

While eighth grade reading scores for the State assessment don't go back as far as 1994, if we use the earliest available year, 1998, as a base, the gains both before and after 2002 are depressingly low. Finally, the math results generally track those of the Main assessment: they show scarcely any difference between rates of gain before and after NCLB – indicating, again, that NCLB had no effect.

These findings not only contradict Secretary Spellings' contention that NCLB is working, but they also suggest that all the 1999-2004 gains that she touted came in the first three years of the period, before NCLB was enacted.

In fairness, it should be noted that a considerable body of research suggests that large-scale education reforms rarely show effects within three years. So while the reading tests seem to be saying that something changed around 2002 to arrest U.S. reading gains, it could be argued that, at this point, we really can't say with confidence whether NCLB is working to improve, maintain or limit student literacy. We only know that no plausible case can be made that it is working.

In light of all this, the rush to reauthorize NCLB seems unwise at best. It looks especially unwise, however, in view of another series of discouraging NCLB studies.

Those studies – 13 in all – address the central NCLB provisions providing school choice, supplemental services, and sanctions for schools that fail to meet accountability standards for four to five years. Presented at the American Enterprise Institute in late 2006, the studies found that use of these NCLB provisions has been minimal, implementation erratic and weak, and evidence of effectiveness largely lacking. Where data were available, they showed no positive effects on student achievement. The similarity in conclusions across the 13 studies was notable.

For those who want to believe that the NCLB initiatives eventually will have an effect, this evidence is bothersome but nothing that better implementation can't fix. However, those who insist on "staying the course" must also ignore the fact that, in the past, there has never been clear evidence of similar interventions producing positive effects. In other words, the results, while disturbing, should have been no surprise.

What is surprising is that common sense is being overwhelmed in Congress by an urge to renew the No Child Left Behind statute this year.

One can understand the pride of ownership for the law that's felt not only by the Bush White House but also by Sen. Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts and Rep. George Miller of California. Those two education committee chairmen have toiled long and hard for the public schools, particularly to help the most vulnerable children, and they played large roles in the creation of NCLB. They need to pause for a moment now, however, and think about whether they might be about to damage the opportunities of those very children, as well as of all other students. What, after all, is the rush?

What is needed today is a long, honest look at the evidence, both from the past and on the horizon. The 2007 Main assessment is being administered again this spring. It would make far more sense for Congress to wait until it sees the reading and math results from that test before it acts, and it needs to ask honest brokers – people with research expertise but “no horse in the race” – to analyze those data and other issues.

Many decisions, of course, must be made with imperfect evidence available. But making decisions with no study showing that a program works and evidence suggesting that it may be doing harm does not seem like a wise course.