

## LEAVING BEHIND NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

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When the NCLB Act was enacted in 2002, it was authorized for a five-year period. It is now up for reauthorization.

Legislators on Capitol Hill are lining up in two major camps: those who want to retain it with modifications and those who want to scrap it altogether. Indeed, "there are no votes in the . . . House for continuing the . . . Act without making serious changes to it," according to Rep. George Miller, the chair of the House Education and Labor Committee, in a speech to the National Press Club at the end of July. Such attitudes should be sufficient to energize a vigorous and meaningful debate about the current state of education in this country.

Unfortunately, none of our leaders is knowledgeable enough for that to happen. Both camps are filled with the uninformed and educationally inexperienced. Whatever discussion ensues between them, therefore, will represent a massive bipartisan incompetence out of which, in all likelihood, a muddled bipartisan compromise will emerge. Consequently, five years hence, we will be sailing in the same educational boat as we are now, but that boat will be foundering even more precariously.

Rep. Miller's speech made that inevitable outcome manifest. Characterizing the NCLB as a "bold" plan, he described it as an attempt to raise expectations and implement high standards for schools and students. He added that it was left to the individual states separately to set these standards and to assess them.

His evaluation of the legislation is that it "has brought some positive changes." What are these changes? They boil down to this: "Now, for the first time we know exactly which students . . . are not learning and performing at grade level." In other words, the major positive change wrought by NCLB is that we now know how badly we are failing. The legislation that was meant to remedy the system's failure has done little more than shine a slightly brighter spotlight on that failure.

The failure is undeniable. After the modest initial marginal improvements of the type that inevitably follows every new program—no matter how misguided—"earlier progress made by the states actually petered out," according to a recent 12-state study (reported in *Education Week*) under the direction of Bruce Fuller, an education professor who leads the Policy Analysis for California Education center at Berkeley.

Rep. Miller's assessment of this, in a masterpiece of understatement, is: "We didn't get it all right when we enacted the law." He rightly wonders "what we are going to do next" to give the law the three Fs that he claims that it lacks: fairness, flexibility, and funding.

Apparently, the boldness of the NCLB (and its alleged positive impact) is merely that it mandated accountability for our schools. With that judgment, one would have to agree.

The disturbing enigma is that Miller's three Fs for improving NCLB amount simply to a program of ways for states to weasel out of accountability by legitimizing some of their shoddy excuses for their lack of progress.

For example, his proposal for achieving fairness and flexibility involves de-emphasizing the test as the sole criterion for determining school progress. He wants to add additional criteria, although the only new criterion that he cites explicitly is using high school graduation rates too. This proposal is both foolish and dangerous. Anyone conversant with current graduation rates should know that this would catapult even more schools into a failing status. In addition, if it were made an official criterion, it would be an invitation to schools to pass even more ill-educated students through the system in order to inflate graduation rates artificially.

Miller adds, "States will be allowed to develop better tests." The loophole here is the word "allowed" rather than "required." Furthermore, the proposal is impotent unless we establish a national committee to certify the adequacy of state tests. Since most current state tests are revealed as grossly inadequate when their results are compared to the more reliable National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), without such a national standard, we will only guarantee a perpetuation of the status quo.

Because of this, the one positive proposal that he makes will prove inefficacious. That positive proposal entails inviting employers and colleges—both of whom agree that our students are unprepared both for the workplace and for the college classroom—to be partners in an effort to elevate educational standards. Without a nationally cohesive coordination and oversight of this effort, individual states will vary as widely as they do now.

In addition, Miller institutionalizes loopholes when he declares, “Schools with specific problems in specific areas should be allowed to use instructional interventions that are appropriate to their needs.” One could sail an aircraft carrier through this escape hatch. It makes all his talk about accountability a phantom: if there is no standard, there is no meaningful accountability.

Miller has three other proposals for improving our schools: “performance pay for principals and teachers”; focusing on high schools; and increasing school funding. If he had wanted to concoct a recipe for educational failure, he could not have picked more appropriate ingredients.

Performance pay is notorious for the capricious subjectivity with which it is applied and for its ineffectiveness.

Focusing on high schools rather than on elementary schools means that we will never break the cycle of unpreparedness and remediation.

Talking about funding per se (rather than about reallocating current funds) is to miss the lesson that recent decades have been marked by the biggest increase in funding for our schools in our nation’s history simultaneously with their biggest failure: money is not the answer.

The bottom line is that without a nationally mandated curriculum and nationally rigorous tests (modeled on the NAEP), Democratic and Republican legislators will find a bipartisan way to sink our schools even further into the mire of failure—Miller’s unacknowledged fourth F.

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