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No Child Left Behind: A Perspective
By Ken Meyer

The bar has been raised in the United States and our system of public education must adapt to the new parameters of global competition. Public education in the United States has not necessarily declined; the rest of the world has caught up and is now providing a higher level of competition in the market place at all levels. The No Child Left Behind Act is meeting the challenge and has ushered in a new era in public education, focused on the fundamentals of accountability and results for schools all across the country.

Introduction
The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, known now as The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), while still young since its most recent reauthorization, is growing into a very dynamic piece of federal legislation, which characterizes the crucial link between the federal and state government cooperation and interrelationships. NCLB also promises to have a very positive impact on the education of all children in the United States as well as setting a high bar for educational proficiency and achievement for the rest of the world to follow. This federal/state partnership exemplifies the critical importance of meeting a national priority as set forth by the president and Congress through a strong cooperative effort at all levels of government.

While not without controversy and even resistance, NCLB is already having a significant and positive impact all across the country. The achievement gap is beginning to narrow and overall achievement is now being scientifically measured, providing a critical tool in allowing new and dynamic instructional strategies to emerge and be developed to meet the challenges of competing in a global and highly technical economic environment of today and well into the future.

The primary objective of NCLB is to assist states with the closure of the chronic nationwide achievement gap, which has consistently existed for decades between low income, predominantly minority students, and the more affluent mostly majority white students in the country as well as raise overall achievement in reading, math and science for all students. This gap also exists between the majority student population and the limited English proficient students as well as special needs children. For proper perspective it is important to understand why this issue has been elevated to the status of national priority. According to recent studies, U.S. high school aged students consistently lag far behind peers in other peer industrialized countries as well as young and growing capitalist economies in the very critical areas of math and science literacy and comprehension, the root of economic innovation and entrepreneurial expansion. As outlined over 20 years ago with the published report A Nation at Risk, in order to remain an economic leader in the future, the United States must improve educational skills in math and science.

Signed into law on January 8, 2002, NCLB established a set of accountability criteria for states to follow in order to continue participation in the ESEA programs, most notably the significant level of Title I funding flowing to the states for disadvantaged students.

Major Accomplishments and Successes
“Despite ongoing complaints, the federal No Child Left Behind Act has become implanted in the culture of America’s public education system.” Lynn Olson, Education Week, December 8, 2004

Often misunderstood and sometimes misrepresented, NCLB requires that every state establish its own set of academic performance standards against which all children in grades three through eight, and one time in high school, are to be tested. The states are then further required to set up a valid and reliable system of testing these students once a year for the purpose of gathering information to determine where there are significant problems, deficiencies and challenges and then directing resources to help solve those problems. The intended goal is to provide information to all stakeholders, including the public at large, on the condition of the level of effectiveness and success of all public schools in the country. As with any major reform effort, the challenge is in the details of implementing this law at the state level. In small print, NCLB is over 700 pages long and that does not include the voluminous regulations and guidance, which have been promulgated by the secretary of the U.S. Department of Education for the states to follow.

Despite the challenges and problems encountered,
however, with implementing the requirements of NCLB, to date every state is in compliance with this law and the culture of public education is slowly changing in this country to a system built on accountability and results (outputs), not just the amount of money being spent (inputs). This cultural shift is creating a dynamic new perspective on how children will be educated in this country well into the future. It is built on the premise that gathering solid information is the first step in identifying problems and then creating new solutions to the challenges of a changing world. Success is taking root.

Northeast. Fourth-grader Tiajha Battles, determined to pass the first round of state tests, did everything she could to prepare for the tough exams, and the Foxfire School faculty (Yonkers) did everything they could to help. She stayed after school three times a week for extra tutoring. She came to class on Saturday. She worked with a reading specialist. Her mother attended workshops so she could learn to help her struggling child achieve. Across Yonkers, thousands of students like Tiajha have moved up the academic ladder as the district infused new programs to boost achievement for all students. The new programs have resulted in higher test scores and the closing of an academic achievement gap. Back in 1999, nearly two-thirds of the city’s African-American and Hispanic eighth-graders scored “1” on the state’s four-point grading scale in the state-wide math exam. Today, one in five black and Hispanic students scored “1” on that test. At Foxfire, in 1999, one in four students scored in the lowest level on the state’s fourth-grade English exam. Today, that proportion plunged to one in 25. (The Journal News, 2/24/05)

Northeast. Before the 2003–2004 school year, reading and math proficiency measured by the New Mexico Standards-based Assessment forced Desert View Elementary School into a probationary status. But Desert View’s reading scores increased from 20 percent proficiency on the exam in 2002–2003 to 42 percent in 2003–2004, while math scores during the same period improved from 20 percent to 46 percent. The introduction of new teaching methods during the 2003–2004 school year prompted the striking improvements. And, the better scores have had a positive effect on the school. “You can see the uplifting of the instructional mood in the school,” said Assistant Principal Fernando Carrasco. “Teachers and kids are not afraid to tackle the test now.” And, in recognition of the turnaround, Principal Susan Yturralde and bilingual kindergarten teacher Lorna Clark flew to Washington, D.C., and were allowed to sit in the First Lady’s box as the president gave his State of the Union Address. (The El Paso Times, 2/4/05)

While NCLB requires that every state create its own set of academic standards and system of testing against those standards, a further requirement is for
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The fact that every state has its own set of standards leads to a system of testing against those standards. While there has been a lot of activity from various constituent groups and experts in psychology and education evaluation, this posed some of the most significant challenges for implementation of NCLB across the country. Any major reform in any law can cause anxiety and concern about the true impact of NCLB on their schools. A common theme began to emerge in some states which argued that the federal government had no right to dictate terms of public education at the local level. This argument evolved into a national debate of state sovereignty and resulted in the introduction of numerous resolutions and bills in state legislatures across the country expressing concern and discontent over the requirements of NCLB versus the level of funding associated with the requirements. However, although a few states took a serious look at pulling away from NCLB, in the end there was not one bill at the state legislative level which passed both houses and made it to a governor’s desk for signature into law. As state policy-makers became more familiar with the actual requirements of the federal law as well as the level of funding their respective states were receiving to implement the law, while not necessarily in full agreement with the provisions of NCLB, realized that the level of funding was too important for the benefit of disadvantaged children than to forego its acceptance.

The debate will undoubtedly continue.

Funding

One of the most pronounced criticisms of NCLB and largely without merit is the question of funding.
Many critics have claimed that NCLB is an unfunded or under-funded mandate from the federal government to the state governments. The philosophical debate notwithstanding, the facts are clear that NCLB is very well funded relative to the requirements of the federal law. Since the inception of NCLB, total funding for the program has grown to almost $24 billion, an increase of 65 percent from FY 2001 to 2006. It is important to view these funds in terms of what is actually being required of the federal law. For example, while creating smaller classrooms may be a worthwhile endeavor for a state, school or district, it is not a requirement of NCLB. What is required under NCLB, including testing, school choice transportation, supplemental services, professional development, etc., is well funded. When measured against the actual federal requirements, funding is very strong for NCLB.

Furthermore, education funding in the United States has been and always will remain the primary responsibility of state and local governments. Any education program created by the federal government is intended to be supplemental to the overall effort, NCLB included. In addition, it is a grant program in which states may or may not choose to participate. As such, since it is voluntary on the part of states, it is incumbent upon state policy-makers to determine if the funding flow is adequate, relative to the requirements of the law.

IDEA/Special Ed

One of the biggest challenges in education has always been relative to providing instructional services to the special needs population, including those with the most severe cognitive limitations. As the special needs population has grown over the years, this has become of more significant concern to policy-makers. On April 7, 2005 Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings held a meeting of Chief State School Officers, invited from every state, to announce, among other things, a significant modification to the manner in which NCLB rules could potentially apply in the states to the special needs students across the country.

The modified requirements of academic achievement for students with persistent academic disabilities and served under the IDEA requirements has been well received in the states and underscores the Department of Education’s commitment to listen, gather information and then create rules which and allow states more latitude to deal with the most significant problems.

Summary

Over the past several decades we have seen the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emergence of many new free market economies and democracies across the globe. These new and growing economies are creating new challenges for the United States to maintain its prominence as the economic leader of the world. The world’s economies are now inextricably linked together in a digital framework where the factors of production are no longer necessarily limited by geography, time and distance. This new economic world is based on technology the fundamentals of which being an educated workforce proficient in the areas of reading, math and science and motivated by an entrepreneurial drive for success and excellence. The bar has been raised and our system of public education must adapt to the new parameters of global competition. Public education in the United States has not necessarily declined, the rest of the world has caught up and is now providing a higher level of competition in the market place at all levels.

The No Child Left Behind Act is meeting the challenge and has ushered in a new era in public education focused on the fundamentals of accountability and results for schools all across the country. It is changing the culture of education. NCLB is empowering parents and arming them with valuable information about their childrens’ schools and providing them with choices and options regarding how to hold schools accountable for success so that future generations can enjoy the same opportunity for prosperity as preceding generations of Americans. NCLB is having a positive impact and the achievement gap is narrowing.

About the Author

Ken Meyer is the deputy assistant secretary in the Office of Intergovernmental and Interagency Affairs, U.S. Department of Education. A graduate of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, Meyer is a former state legislator and businessman in Tennessee. He was asked to join the Bush administration in 2002 and works for the development and implementation of the communication effort for No Child Left Behind.