

Stateline

The Midwestern Office of The Council of State Governments

Volume 14, Number 11 • November 2005

More than three years after the No Child Left Behind Act was enacted at the federal level, state legislators and school officials in North Dakota continue to assess the law's positive and negative effects on education in the state. Concerns include a lack of funding, new requirements for teachers and the increased emphasis on testing.



“One size doesn't fit all,” says state Rep. Margaret Sitte, a Republican from Bismarck and longtime teacher. “School districts in rural states aren't inner-city Chicago.

“For example, the choice provisions that were touted in No Child Left Behind as being so wonderful just won't work in a rural state like North Dakota. We're not going to see many of the promises or fruits of the law.”

She and others worry that the upshot of NCLB in North Dakota is a top-down approach to education policy — one at odds with a system that has served the state well for so long.

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North Dakota adjusts to changes in era of No Child Left Behind

by Tim Anderson

As its consistently high graduation rates and test scores show, North Dakota has long been a state that values results in K-12 education.

But equally valued has been a tradition of strong local control in the public schools.

That virtue, state legislators and educators say, helps explain much of the resistance in North Dakota over several key aspects of the No Child Left Behind Act.

More than three years after the enactment of NCLB, the state's challenge has been as much about adjusting to new requirements as it has been about reaching the law's intended goals for students.

“There are some good things people see in the law,” says Rep. David Monson, assistant minority leader in the North Dakota House. “Generally, though, you're much more likely to hear negative feedback about it than something positive.”

Concerns have most often centered on new requirements for teachers, the greater emphasis on testing and a lack of funding to carry out the law's mandates. And underlying much of the resistance is a belief that the federal law doesn't suit the needs of a state educational system made up largely of small, rural school districts.

Adjustments on both sides

North Dakota's concerns have not gone unnoticed. The federal government, in fact, has been making adjustments of its own so that the law is more workable for the state.

A case in point is the greater flexibility given to North Dakota in fulfilling NCLB's “highly qualified” teacher provisions — requirements that have been a lightning rod for criticism.

“We had 35-year teaching veterans being told they were not qualified,” explains North Dakota Rep. Phillip Mueller, a Democrat from Wimbledon.

That led not only to resentment among teachers, but also fears among school administrators that experienced instructors would choose to retire rather than go back to school for training seen as unnecessary and onerous.

Earlier this year, the U.S. Department of Education agreed to give North Dakota more leeway in its definition of highly qualified.

The news was welcomed by educators and state legislators alike.

But Monson, a superintendent and teacher for a small school district in northeast North Dakota, still has reservations about how that provision of the law is impacting the allocation of resources in his state.

“We're using title money to send these teachers back to get highly qualified, some of whom have been teaching for 25 years at that grade level,” he says.

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Stateline Midwest is published monthly by the Midwestern Office of The Council of State Governments.

Annual subscription rate: \$60. To order, call 1-800-800-1910.

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Concerns about funding, testing follow No Child Left Behind

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“That’s money we could be using directly for kids.”

Funding has been another common complaint about No Child Left Behind, among state as well as local school officials.

“Our school districts tell us all the time, ‘Don’t tell us to do something without the money to pay for it,’” says Mueller, a former teacher.

“Well, that’s the way we feel about the federal government and No Child Left Behind. Funding has been woefully short.”

Monson says his school district has received more dollars under No Child Left Behind, particularly during the first year it was implemented, but expenses also have gone up due to additional mandates.

“The federal government seems to have an awfully big say in how we do things in proportion to how much it puts in,” he adds.

“Its carrot is pretty small and its stick is pretty big.”

Help for struggling schools

Like most in North Dakota, Monson’s school district has met adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements as defined in NCLB and determined by results on state assessments.

Schools in the state that haven’t met AYP have most often been those with high populations of Native Americans or other minority groups.

According to state Superintendent Wayne Sanstead, thanks to the targeted assistance provided under NCLB, the state has put more staffing and resources (such as help in developing curriculum and instructional strategies) into these struggling schools and districts.

That strategy often has proven to be effective, he says, but sustaining and expanding on those academic gains will be contingent on a greater financial commitment.

“The reality is that you when you have a small state, you have a small staff [in the Department of Public Instruction],” he says.

“The burden on us is overwhelming. The federal government has to help our state build capacity to carry out the broader requirements and responsibilities [of NCLB].”

More reporting and testing

Sanstead sees other potentially positive long-term effects of No Child Left Behind as well.

He says new reporting requirements for schools and districts make them more accountable to the public, pushing them to improve student performance.

The state, meanwhile, has strengthened its system for developing standards as well as assessments of student learning.

“I’ve been encouraged by the emphasis on accountability,”

“The federal government seems to have an awfully big say in how we do things in proportion to how much it puts in. Its carrot is pretty small and its stick is pretty big.”

Rep. David Monson
North Dakota

Sanstead adds.

Mueller, though, also believes that emphasis has a potential downside — too much high-stakes testing.

“If there was a single area I had a concern about, it would be the testing,” he explains.

“I think we’ve taken a little creativity away from our students and our teachers. When you start teaching strictly for tests, it becomes a problem.”

The increased amount of time spent preparing for and administering the assessments also takes time away from actual teaching, Sitte says.

She also is concerned that standards are being set “artificially low” so that schools and students can meet AYP. 🚩

National assessment shows rise in fourth-graders’ test scores, mixed results for eighth-graders

Among the mandates in the No Child Left Behind Act is a requirement that states participate in the biennial National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP).

Dubbed the “nation’s report card,” the NAEP is the only nationally representative and continuing assessment of what America’s students know and can do in various subject areas.

State participation is required in fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math.

In October, NAEP results for 2005 were released by the National Center for Education Statistics.

They provide the first comparative data between years since NCLB was implemented. Nationally, results showed the following:

- Achievement levels in reading remained nearly stable between 2003 and 2005. Average fourth-grade scores increased by one point (on a scale of zero to 500) between 2003 and 2005, while achievement levels among eighth-graders fell by a point. For both grade levels,

Midwest’s 2005 report card: Student proficiency levels on the NAEP

State	Fourth-grade mathematics		Eighth-grade mathematics		Fourth-grade reading		Eighth-grade reading	
	Below basic	Above basic	Below basic	Above basic	Below basic	Above basic	Below basic	Above basic
Illinois	26%	32%	32%	29%	38%	29%	25%	31%
Indiana	16%	38%	26%	30%	36%	30%	27%	28%
Iowa	15%	37%	25%	34%	33%	33%	21%	34%
Kansas	12%	47%	23%	34%	34%	33%	22%	31%
Michigan	21%	38%	32%	29%	37%	32%	27%	28%
Minnesota	12%	47%	21%	43%	29%	38%	20%	37%
Nebraska	20%	36%	25%	35%	32%	34%	20%	35%
North Dakota	11%	40%	19%	35%	28%	35%	17%	37%
Ohio	16%	43%	26%	33%	31%	34%	22%	36%
South Dakota	14%	41%	20%	36%	30%	33%	18%	35%
Wisconsin	16%	40%	24%	36%	33%	33%	23%	35%
U.S. average	21%	35%	32%	28%	38%	30%	29%	29%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

scores in 2005 were two points higher than in the first year of the national assessment, 1992.

- Math results improved at both grade levels. On the same scale of zero to 500, average scores increased by three points for fourth-graders and one point for eighth-graders. Since the first assessment in 1990, average

math scores have increased by 25 points in grade four and by 16 points in grade eight.

- Achievement gaps between white, Hispanic and black students narrowed between 2003 and 2005, though at a slower pace than in previous years.

The nation’s report card also gives policymakers the opportunity to evaluate how students in their states are doing compared to the rest of the country.

There were only three cases in which Midwestern students scored below the national average: Illinois fourth-graders in both subject areas, and Michigan eighth-graders in math.

On the flip side, Minnesota and Kansas fourth-graders had the second-highest math scores in the United States.

Minnesota eighth-graders had the nation’s second-highest math score.

More information on the results is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard>.