

Introduction

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has changed the educational discourse in the United States. Terms such as “accountability,” “adequate yearly progress,” and “highly qualified” — barely mentioned a decade ago — have become more prevalent in the national vernacular. With an accountability system driven by high expectations, ambitious deadlines, public reporting, and the threat of serious consequences for schools that fail to comply with the policy mandates, NCLB, the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965 (ESEA), has moved accountability for student performance to the forefront of the nation’s consciousness.

Since NCLB was passed by Congress and signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2002, there has been no shortage of literature and commentary on the topic. However, while opinions on NCLB abound, they have tended to remain ill-informed and have rarely moved beyond criticism of or support for the act. With reauthorization pending, the time is approaching when the education community will have to answer the ultimate question: What should the fate of NCLB be?

In the course of developing this Special Issue of the *Harvard Educational Review*, the Editorial Board committed itself to introducing research that would provide our readers with relevant analyses and diverse perspectives on NCLB. The complexity of the act lends itself to countless entry points for analysis, and for this Special Issue we chose issues of implementation as our entry point. Recognizing that the act’s ambitious goals and demanding requirements touch the lives of millions of people every day, we asked a variety of stakeholders with differing professional identities, political orientations, and viewpoints to bring to bear their insights on NCLB, based on both their research and their direct experience. In *Assessing NCLB: Perspectives and Prescriptions*, researchers, academics, policymakers, decisionmakers, practitioners, citizens, and students share both their *perspectives* on the act’s impact and their *prescriptions* for its reauthorization.

Representing the diversity of those involved with NCLB — from those who shaped it to those who live and work with it — these authors prepared research-based articles, commentaries, and essays to speak to *HER*’s wide audience, many of whom are affected daily by NCLB and thus are poised to con-

tribute to discussions and hearings on the next reauthorization of ESEA. This Special Issue addresses multiple aspects of NCLB: various historical and legal contexts that serve as a foundation for understanding and critiquing the act; the law's impact on education, administration, and intervention at the state level; the public's role in shaping, benefiting from, and responding to NCLB and its initiatives; and the impact of NCLB on learning and teaching.

NCLB in Context

As one of the nation's most ambitious educational initiatives, NCLB is rooted in the United States' long-standing ideological commitment to equal opportunity for all its citizens. The authors of the first three articles engage with the broader legal, social, and political context of U.S. public education to present a more nuanced discussion of the legislation. Former secretary of education Rod Paige provides a historical context on the design and rationale of NCLB and also responds to critiques of the legislation in "No Child Left Behind: The Ongoing Movement for Public Education Reform." In "From New Deal to No Deal: No Child Left Behind and the Devolution of Responsibility for Equal Opportunity," historians Harvey Kantor and Robert Lowe explore NCLB in a social and political context. Kantor and Lowe argue that NCLB's potential is limited by the lack of federal support for social and economic provisions that are essential to educational success. Education attorneys John W. Borkowski and Maree Sneed offer a legal perspective in "Will NCLB Improve or Harm Public Education?" Borkowski and Sneed discuss NCLB's implementation, including the benefits of disaggregating test scores by subgroups and the need for adequate federal funding for testing.

NCLB and the State

Conflict between federal expectations and state implementation has long existed in education policy in the United States. The next group of authors discusses the capacity of states to comply with NCLB, particularly when its requirements conflict with preexisting state education reforms. In "Domesticating a Revolution: No Child Left Behind Reforms and State Administrative Response," Gail L. Sunderman and Gary Orfield discuss the role of state education agencies in implementing NCLB and their capacity and expertise to meet its requirements. Connecticut's former commissioner of education Betty J. Sternberg and Connecticut attorney general Richard Blumenthal add firsthand state-level perspectives in their respective essays, "Real Improvement for Real Students: Test Smarter, Serve Better" and "Why Connecticut Sued the Federal Government over No Child Left Behind." Sternberg and Blumenthal explain how NCLB clashes with Connecticut's established reform plan and discuss why the state decided to take action against the federal government even while supporting NCLB's goals.

NCLB and the Public

Since ESEA was passed in 1965, federal involvement in education has included a call for public involvement, and the 2001 NCLB reauthorization made parental involvement one of its four pillars. In “Getting Ruby a Quality Public Education,” policymaker and researcher Arnold F. Fege takes a historical look at public and parental engagement from *Brown v. Board of Education* through NCLB. Frederick M. Hess analyzes trends in public opinion to explore views about education since the passage of NCLB in “Accountability without Angst? Public Opinion and No Child Left Behind.” John Rogers, in “Forces of Accountability? The Power of Poor Parents in NCLB,” uses a case study to illustrate how parents can *and do* demonstrate “public power” to maintain accountability in their communities.

NCLB in the Schools

Aware that students, teachers, and administrators are often directly affected by educational policies, the authors in this final group explore the implications of NCLB at the school level. Linda Darling-Hammond, in “No Child Left Behind and High School Reform,” considers how NCLB fails to attend to major lessons learned from recent high school reforms and offers recommendations that allow for a more productive and responsive federal involvement in education. In “Troubling Images of Teaching in No Child Left Behind,” Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan L. Lytle analyze and critique the legislation’s portrayal of teachers and educational improvement. They call for an amended policy that would consider the inherent complexities of teacher learning. And, finally, we hear directly from students, whom the act is intended to serve. In “High School Students’ Perspectives on the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act’s Definition of a Highly Qualified Teacher,” Veronica Garcia draws from the letters of high school students Wilhemina Agbemekplido, Hanan Abdella, Oscar Lopez Jr., and Rashida T. Registe and shares their observations on what it means to be an effective, highly qualified teacher.

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In this Special Issue, we recognize the absence of empirical research that directly assesses whether schools are achieving the ultimate goal of leaving no child behind, particularly those students who have been historically underserved by the public education system. However, such research is rare, given the long-term nature of the goals of NCLB, the years and layers of data needed to assess its sustained effectiveness, and the complex analyses needed to identify the impact of such expansive legislation. Nonetheless, recognizing that a sound theoretical foundation, a realistic implementation plan, and clear communication of goals and priorities are also important elements for ambitious policies, we asked the contributors to this Special Issue to consider

these components when probing whether NCLB is creating the right conditions for its own success.

The outlook and concerns of the high school students, school administrators, policymakers, historians, attorneys, and researchers who contributed to this issue differ significantly, yet all agree that the act's fundamental goal of leaving no child behind is honorable and merits universal support. It is from this point of consensus that we hope more stakeholders, policymakers, and researchers will continue to assess the potential and limitations of this landmark legislation. Our aim is that this Special Issue of the *Harvard Educational Review* will both contribute to the educational discourse on the No Child Left Behind Act and deepen our readers' understanding of this complex educational policy.

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Special Issue Editors

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