

## Foreword

Few things are more indispensable to the United States than good schools. Today more than ever, a quality education is the gateway to achieving the American dream and the best guarantee of equal opportunity, good citizenship, and an economy capable of mastering modern global challenges.

In 1965, as part of the War on Poverty, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the landmark Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which aimed to strengthen the United States by allocating substantial federal resources to public schools for the first time. Those of us in Congress who worked for its passage hoped it would enhance schools' capacity to provide a good education for all and would offset the debilitating effects of poverty, inequality, and discrimination.

In the three decades that followed, works like *A Nation at Risk* and Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* made painfully clear the magnitude of our challenge to improve K–12 education. Congress responded by passing the Goals 2000 Educate America Act, which President Bill Clinton signed in 1994. The act raised academic standards in schools, provided a framework for measuring student progress, and offered more support for students to meet high standards. It made a difference. From 1994 to 2000, federal education funding increased substantially. By 2001, forty-nine states had set academic standards for schools, fifteen states assessed students annually to measure progress, and enrollment in afterschool programs tripled. Despite this progress, immense achievement gaps still plagued our schools. As the century ended, assessments of math and reading skills showed that 17-year-old Black and Latino students performed at grade level at rates far lower than 17-year-old White students. The Education Trust (2004) reported that, in 2001, 1 out of 10 Latinos and 1 out of 20 African Americans dropped out of high school, compared to 1 out of 30 Whites.

Those shameful statistics — and countless others — spurred me to work with President George W. Bush on the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which reauthorized the ESEA. For the first time, NCLB made a commitment that every child — Black or White, Latino, Asian or Native American, English speaker or English language learner, disabled or nondisabled — would be part of an accountability system that holds schools responsible for the progress of all students. It required every state to implement content and performance standards specifying what children should know and be able to do, and it urged states to create high-quality assessments so that students' achievement of those standards could be accurately measured. It

expanded support for early reading and literacy skills and offered extra tutoring to students in struggling schools. It aimed to improve the quality of instruction by requiring all schools to provide a highly qualified teacher for every child. Most importantly, the act recognized that to move forward with these dramatic changes, schools would need a continued infusion of federal resources, because the cost of the reforms was obviously too great for state and local governments to bear alone.

In the five years since its passage, however, NCLB has produced both strong support and vociferous criticism. To supporters, it is responsible for the slow but steady narrowing of achievement gaps. To critics, it is a simplistic law that has sanctioned some schools unfairly, forced educators to “teach to the tests,” and strained the resources of cash-strapped school districts even further. Some have even called for the act’s repeal.

To NCLB’s harshest opponents, my answer is simple. We can’t turn back the clock. It would be outrageous to return to a system that permits schools to ignore groups of students, expects less of some children than others, or accepts low performance without improvement. Instead, we must renew our commitment to the act’s noble purposes and make commonsense changes consistent with its core principles. As the act comes up for reauthorization in 2007, I’m hopeful the president and Congress can work together to improve it, and that the new Democratic majorities in the Senate and the House of Representatives will increase our ability to make the necessary changes.

Our first step should be to fully fund the act, which we have failed to do every year since its passage. This year, the president’s proposed budget for the act is \$15 billion short of the authorized level. The president and the Republican Congress have shortchanged states and school districts by an astounding \$56 billion in promised funds since 2002. We need to invest in our public schools, not abandon them. Full funding for the act must be our first priority as the law is reauthorized.

We also need to revisit the law’s assessment and accountability provisions. Accountability is only as good as the tests used to measure progress, and some states use tests that need substantial improvement. Some use exams that are not aligned with the standards that students must meet. Others have manufactured artificially high test-score gains by lowering standards and adjusting test scores in order to avoid consequences under the law’s accountability framework. To end this race to the bottom, we need to shift our understanding of the act away from the idea that it labels and penalizes schools toward a more productive framework that helps schools and states aim higher rather than lower. We should use the well-regarded National Assessment of Educational Progress — the “nation’s report card” — as a benchmark for the rigor of state exams. States should also align their elementary and secondary school standards with their standards for college entrance and success, creating seamless preK–16 systems that guide students from the beginning of their education to the attainment of a college degree.

Teachers also deserve all the resources they need to help students achieve at higher levels. In many schools, the most valuable resource teachers require is time. Yet the United States ranks eleventh among industrialized nations in the number of days children attend school. Innovative approaches are needed to extend the school day and year in high-need schools. We should recruit AmeriCorps volunteers to coordinate academically oriented extended-day programs for students and to assist teachers during the school day. We should create incentives to increase the concentration of higher-quality educators in low-performing schools, by raising salaries for teachers and principals with strong track records of success who work in hard-to-staff schools, and by creating “career advancement systems” in which highly effective teachers serve as instructional leaders for new or less-successful teachers. To help teachers improve their teaching, we should invest more in training them to use data to improve instruction. To help parents, we should replicate Boston’s successful initiative to place parent-family outreach coordinators in every high-poverty school. We should also offer grants to school districts to support community programs that address children’s social and emotional needs.

Finally, as it becomes ever more critical for our citizens to obtain a college education to compete in the global economy, we must maintain the No Child Left Behind Act’s focus on elementary-grade literacy while simultaneously expanding its provisions on math, science, and high school education. We should provide scholarships and bonuses for highly qualified math and science teachers to work in high-poverty schools, and we should fund summer institutes to improve the professional development of current teachers in those subjects. High school students still struggling with reading should have greater access to literacy programs. We should also use the act to build on the successful efforts of many districts to create smaller learning communities within larger high schools, and we should expand dropout prevention and recovery programs as well.

We know these reforms can work. Experience shows that each year yields greater success when educators commit in the long term to higher standards, better teacher training, stronger accountability, and extra help for students in need. The initial implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act has been flawed, but we cannot abandon its vision of an America in which every child is important and every person is able to enjoy the benefits of our society.

Right now, we have an outstanding opportunity to consider how that vision will be fulfilled. This special issue of the *Harvard Educational Review*, which brings together eminent voices in education policy and research to comment on the future of the No Child Left Behind Act, is an important part of that discussion. I’m grateful to the *Review* for this timely contribution, and hope everyone with a stake in the act’s reauthorization will read and carefully consider the pieces within.

The vision of education as a cornerstone of our democracy is as enduring as America itself. John Adams articulated this view in the Massachusetts Con-

stitution of 1780, when he wrote that education of the people was “necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberty.” More than two hundred years later, we need to recapture that spirit and make “No Child Left Behind” more than a mere slogan.

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## Reference

Education Trust. (2004). *Education watch: The nation, key education facts and figures*. Washington, DC: Author.

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