Fixing a Flawed Law


In each of the eight sections of this book, the authors address the intent of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, citing the reality of its inequities and flaws, and proposing repairs and corrections.

The authors suggest that many students, schools, and school systems are being severely and perhaps irreparably damaged by NCLB’s many problems, including underfunding and the demand that all subgroups meet the same arbitrary standard. “The broad goal of NCLB is to raise the achievement levels of all students, especially underperforming groups, and to close the achievement gap that parallels race and class distinctions,” writes Linda Darling-Hammond. However, the authors agree that until our society levels the inequities of factors like race and poverty in the lives of our children, the achievement gap will continue to exist.

The authors look carefully at how NCLB measures achievement. Stan Karp uses New Jersey’s High School Proficiency Assessment as an example. He points out that a student may raise his or her score from 50 to 199 and it “counts for nothing,” but “moving a student from 199 to 200 is success.” Instead of the one-size-fits-all testing of NCLB, George Wood proposes that we call for a nationwide moratorium on high-stakes testing until there is some proof that these tests are linked to quality education and future success.

Noting that the “key promises within the law have wide support,” the authors call for a much broader and more equitable form of accountability, which would include a recognition of the local nature of public education, adequate funding, and assessment that relies on different measures of student achievement.

This book clearly articulated for me the unrest I feel as I encourage my teachers to help our students raise their test scores, and it reminded me of my overarching commitment: to create a climate for learning.

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Beware of Backsliding


While many districts struggle to meet the mandates of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and its demands for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), some districts have found the secret to turning around low-achieving schools. But how do they ensure that their schools keep achieving? Many make the slow but steady climb to AYP safety, only to find that scores eventually plateau and tend to slip back into a failing mode.

In Leadership and Sustainability, Michael Fullan discusses why this happens and offers practical advice to school administrators, districts, and systems to prevent the sort of backsliding that jeopardizes long-term results.

Fullan begins by discussing the problem of sustaining achievement and the reasons why many districts fail to get ahead. In subsequent chapters, he examines the roles of principals, districts, and educational systems in sustaining achievement in schools.

As in most of Fullan’s writings, deep change is the core message. In this book, change is nurtured by capacity-building and collaboration. Capacity-building, one of the most critical elements, is described as a series of planned, sequential sharing sessions that allow teachers to grow from each others’ experiences.

Fullan explains the need for embedding communication with the collaborative efforts required in school planning. Parents and other stakeholders must understand the district goals in order to complete the circle of accountability that is such a large part of systematic change.

Our district has begun to apply peer coaching, collaboration, and cross-curricular meetings in a thoughtful and systematic way in the struggle to stay ahead of NCLB mandates. Now the challenge is to make it last.

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