The debates about the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act are as plentiful as they are heated. Open any schoolhouse door and you can enter arguments about “teaching to the test” versus “preparing students for society,” or “moving back to basics” versus “teaching the whole child.”

These disputes have one glaring commonality: they are moot. Like many laws, the NCLB Act has certain aspects that work well and others that fail miserably. But its pros and cons are dwarfed by the inescapable fact that the answers to the woes of public education lie not in federal regulations, reams of test data, curriculum outlines, school choice options, or school designations; rather they are found in the hearts and minds of the 50 million children attending American public schools.

Defining Success

For generations, we have used such clinical terms as “good school” or “bad teacher,” based on narrative recommendations and parent feedback, and requiring little quantitative data. In recent decades, we have honored schools as “Blue Ribbon” or “Distinguished,” based on schoolwide test scores and class pass rates.

The NCLB law ignited a flame of controversy in the heart of the American school system by providing definitions for such essential elements as highly qualified (HQ) teachers and adequate yearly progress (AYP). Stoking the fire were news reports of such inconsistencies as the 2003 Montana Teacher of the Year not meeting HQ standards (Dobbs 2004), and the fact that 19 of the schools that earned U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon status had simultaneously failed to make AYP in 2002 (Neill 2003).

Today, public education comes packaged with standards and definitions. We have criteria for determining growth, competence, proficiency, and exemplary performance. But are the definitions and tools accurate, precise, and correct? The answer is a clear maybe. Although data and criteria provide indications of achievement or lack thereof, thereby offering hard evidence to support descriptions of “good” or “bad” schools, this is not enough.
NCLB targets whole schools and student subgroups. But what about 50 million kids who could benefit from some individualized attention?

Pete Hall
Students, not Subgroups

Under NCLB, schools make AYP by demonstrating that a set percentage of all students, as well as a set percentage of students in each relevant subcategory (race, language proficiency, poverty, and special education), pass their state’s standardized assessments.

What makes this provision questionable is a recent Associated Press study asserting that schools are hiding (not counting) the scores of nearly 2 million students in racial subcategories that have fewer than the minimum numbers required for reporting (Bass, Ziegler Dizon, and Feller 2006). For example, in Massachusetts the minimum n-size for a school to report subgroup scores is 40. Therefore, if a school has 42 black students, it must report their proficiency. However, if the same school has just 38 Hispanic students, their scores are not reported or counted in making AYP.

But what really matters is not the school’s yearly progress or the progress of its subgroups. It is the test scores of individual children. We need to shift our focus from subgroups to students.

Children Are Learning

National data, taken from the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress, show that student achievement in the foundational skills of reading and mathematics is increasing (U.S. Department of Education 2005), especially in some of the demographic subgroups. For example:

- America’s 9-year-olds are posting the best scores in reading and math in the history of the NAEP;
- Reading scores for black 9-year-olds reached an all-time high, up 30 points since 1971;
- Math scores for black 13-year-olds reached an all-time high, 40 points better than 1973;
- Reading scores for Hispanic 9-year-olds reached an all-time high, up 26 points since 1975;
- Math scores for Hispanic 13-year-olds reached an all-time high, 32 points better than 1973; and
- Fourth-grade English-language learners reached all-time highs in reading and math.

Changing Direction

Whether or not you believe that nearly 2 million students’ test scores are scooped under the rug, everyday reality poses these questions:

- Does a single test covering a few grades in two subject areas adequately summarize a school’s effectiveness?
- What about the grades that aren’t tested?
- What about the kindergarten classes that first introduce students to school, many of whom have never spoken a word of English prior to their arrival?
- What about the many preschool classes, public and private, that prepare our children for the rigor and experiences of school life?

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INSPIRATION for change
What about the curricular areas not tested, but important developmentally, such as science, social studies, the arts, and physical education?

What about students’ psychological well-being and a component of growing up healthy that we call asset development?

Nearly 26 percent of U.S. public schools failed to make their AYP targets last year. There are more than 300 public schools in Nevada alone that are on either the “watch” list (for schools failing to make AYP one year) or the “needs improvement” list (for failing to make AYP twice or more). On paper, these schools meet the NCLB definition of “failing” because an insufficient number of students in the relevant subcategories failed to pass the standardized tests. But are they really failing their children?

As educators and as parents, we know the answer. Students like Channel, a sixth-grade student in California whose parents are in the midst of a bitter custody dispute, prove what schools can do for individual students. Channel used to hide under her desk and refused to work until one teacher spent countless hours in a successful effort to connect with her. Now she is happy and eager to work, all because a teacher chose to view her as an individual student with individual needs.

Is it a reasonable goal to reduce the achievement gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” and between historically disparate racial groups? Yes, our students, our children certainly need to achieve proficiency in the most elemental skills of literacy and math—reading, writing, communicating, computation, and problem-solving—in order to survive and flourish in society.

But we cannot allow ourselves, as educators, to become so consumed with providing these skills that we forget our greatest obligation and responsibility: to offer each young life the best, most positive, well-rounded, academically rigorous, individually strengthening experience we can six hours a day and 180 days a year for 13 or more years.

**Making the Giant Leap**

In American public schools, thanks to NCLB, accountability has moved from looking at whole school populations to subgroups separated by race, language, special needs, and socioeconomic status. But in order to truly measure the effectiveness of schools, teachers, and programs, the lens of accountability must focus even more strongly on individual children.

Let’s say a school makes AYP and increases the percentage of English-language learners scoring proficient on the state reading test from 25 percent to 60 percent. That’s tremendous, but what about the other 40 percent?

What do we tell Derek’s parents when the newspaper reports that his school in rural Illinois is top-notch but their son, a fifth grader, didn’t make it? Or what about the Los Angeles school that didn’t make AYP, but in which Jessica, a fourth grader who entered school three years ago,....
Success Stories

In 1995, long before NCLB, the Kennewick Public Schools in Washington state—a district with 50 percent of its students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch, and 15 percent English-language learners—set a goal of having 90 percent of third graders reading at or above grade level.

“Absurd,” said the school board; “Achievable,” responded district officials. Less than a decade later, nine of the district’s 13 elementary schools had reached the goal, with an overall literacy rate of 88 percent (Fielding, Kerr, and Rosier 2004).

Principal Alfonso Jessie of Cascade Elementary School in Atlanta espouses a belief that all children can learn—a common statement in education today. But for Jessie it’s a mission. His school, with an 86 percent poverty rate, has made literacy a priority. In 2005, 93 percent of his first graders passed the state reading exam, followed by 98 percent of second graders, 93 percent of third graders, 93 percent of fourth graders, and 92 percent of fifth graders (Carter 2005).

In Reno, Nevada, Anderson Elementary School was the only school in the state to fail to make AYP for four consecutive years. It subsequently earned the distinction of being the only high-poverty school in Nevada to earn a “high achieving” designation. An insatiable appetite for self-improvement and relentless teamwork saw the student passing rates more than double over a two-year span. The resurgence was so dramatic that state legislators honored the school with a new designation: Exemplary Turnaround School (Hall 2005).

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Web Resources

Education Trust’s Web site is committed to closing the achievement gap between the haves and the have-nots.

www.edtrust.org

The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory offers research-based designs to improve teaching and learning.

www.sedl.org

The National Center for Educational Accountability is dedicated to the collection and application of student data to identify best practices in education.

www.nc4ea.org

The National Conference of State Legislatures has a site designed to offer research, technical assistance, and opportunities for policy-makers to exchange ideas about pressing issues.

www.ncsl.org

References


Pete Hall is principal of Sheridan Elementary School in Spokane, Washington. He previously served as principal of Anderson Elementary School in Reno, Nevada, which is referenced in this article. His e-mail address is petehall@educationhall.com.
The Audacity of Adequate Yearly Progress

In 2001 the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act passed both houses of Congress with strong bipartisan support. And why wouldn’t it? Who could say they didn’t want all children to succeed? Who could say they didn’t want all schools to be successful? Who could say they didn’t want all teachers to be effective? The act was signed into law in January 2002 and put into effect during the 2002–2003 school year. It was during the summer of 2003 that students, teachers, and parents were first introduced to the method by which NCLB’s goals would be measured—a method soon to be known throughout the land as adequate yearly progress (AYP).

Our public education system has always taken pride in its efforts to provide the best possible education for all our children. But for years the system has fallen quite short of this goal, with few consequences. As a result, there are many who are calling for the removal of AYP because they can’t stomach its “punishment” provisions. What are the “punishments” they find so offensive? Is it the extra help that schools receive when they don’t make AYP? Tutoring after school becomes available at no cost to parents, and students identified as academically weak are given extra help and lots of support in their learning. This doesn’t seem like punishment to me.

Is it the requirement that all students be able to read and do mathematics on grade level that is so distasteful? Do we actually want 25 percent, 35 percent, or even 50 percent of our students to fail? There always will be the haves and the have-nots because that’s the American way. But does it have to be the future American way? Please don’t tell me that some of us really don’t want all students to graduate from high school and go on to higher education. I realize that achieving this goal would put a strain on our colleges and universities, but it seems to me that a more educated society is a nice problem to have.

And so we are stuck with a system that has the audacity to “punish” schools, teachers, and students who need help in attaining lofty goals. The nerve of those who would force us to reach for the stars!

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