

## **NCLB: Fix It Recommendations**

**By Sarah M. (Sally) Butzin**

The good, the bad, and the ugly. As the nation's education law called No Child Left Behind (NCLB) comes up for reauthorization in Congress this year, everyone is taking sides. The detractors believe the law should be called "No School Left Standing," and fear the real intent is to destroy public education. The supporters believe that NCLB has raised the bar on mediocrity, exposing the dirty little secret that poor and minority children were being passed along and left behind as teachers made excuses and blamed the children for their poor performance. No one seems ambivalent.

Some have observed that support for NCLB increases the further one gets from the classroom. Politicians and business leaders love it. Teachers are nearly unanimous in their opposition, while no one has asked the students. But I'm guessing they too would not speak highly of the pressure and stress placed upon them to test well.

I fall somewhere in the middle of the debate. As a longtime educator who now works with elementary educators across the country who are literally trying to teach "outside the box" using an instructional method called Project CHILD (Changing How Instruction for Learning is Delivered), I have been observing the implementation of NCLB up close and personal. It hasn't been a pretty sight. NCLB has been stifling innovation, rather than encouraging it as the law had intended. It needs to be fixed.

The original tenets of NCLB were to provide standards, accountability, and choice. The notion was to establish a set of basic academic standards that all students should achieve, hold schools accountable for meeting these standards for all their students, and then give educators the choice of how to meet the standards. In addition, parents would be given choices to help their students escape failing schools by using vouchers to send them elsewhere, as well as accessing free supplemental tutoring. These are noble goals that offered hope for transforming the old style of education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

But something else happened along the way. The educational bureaucracies at the U.S. Department of Education as well as state education agencies added more rules and regulations than ever, even micromanaging how many minutes of reading must be taught each day, and prescribing certain textbooks that must be used. Likewise the hustlers and unscrupulous vendors seized on the opportunity to game the system and rake in millions of tax dollars for untested ventures and ill-conceived charter schools that became virtual cookie jars for some charter operators.

It's not too late to return to the original intent of NCLB and fine tune it. Fix it, don't nix it. It would be a shame to return to the old days of low expectations and one-size-fits-all teaching. But NCLB as currently being administered and implemented must be fixed before all our creative teachers leave in disgust, and more children drop out of the system altogether. Here are a few suggestions.

Standards. Redefine the basics to incorporate the research on multiple intelligences, while admitting the common sense notion that not every child has the aptitude for advanced subjects like Algebra. Children are talented in different ways, from athletics to the arts, interpersonal skills, and the like. Insist that every child who has the intellectual capability must be able to read, write, and do basic math by the time they leave elementary school. If there are children who are struggling with the basics despite extra time and help, do not retain them for multiple years in the third grade as happens now. Instead, start those children on a path where they can be successful based on where their talents lie.

Beyond elementary school, give students more choices to explore multiple subjects. High school needs to be completely revamped to take advantage of technology and the world beyond the classroom. As one bright student I know told his dad, “High school is killing my mind.” The idea of “majors” that Florida is starting to put in place is a step in the right direction.

Continue to insist on “highly qualified teachers,” but broaden the definition to include experience and pedagogical skills rather than relying only on credentials and coursework. There are many successful teachers who have been deemed “unqualified” and unfairly stigmatized under NCLB. Reward teachers based on student outcomes that are more broadly defined as discussed earlier.

Accountability. Continue to rely on well-designed tests such as the FCAT to measure certain academic skills, but broaden accountability to include affective measures such as school climate, safety, and job satisfaction of the faculty and staff. Tweak the AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) measures for all the subgroups of students to accept the reality that children who do not speak English, who come from homes with no parent support, and other factors outside the school’s control may not progress at the same rate as more fortunate students. These are not excuses, these are realities.

Level the playing field to assure that all entities that accept public tax dollars be held to the same standards as the public schools. The belief that private schools and home schools can be monitored and held accountable by parents alone is nonsense. Not all parents make good choices as evidenced by the tragic numbers of abused and neglected children in our foster care system. There is a compelling public interest to protect children from bad schools that bad parents choose for them. Not all choice is good.

Tighten up accountability on the private supplemental service providers. They should only receive tax dollars based on student outcomes. How do we know that all these funds diverted from the public schools to private vendors have paid off in improved student performance? The entire SES program is ripe for an auditor general inspection, including reports of vendors paying off parents to choose to enroll their children in particular programs.

Choice. Broaden the definition of choice to include opportunities to choose innovation over stagnation. Remove the restrictive requirements that stifle proven programs and methods that work. For example, several schools in Florida have been forced to abandon using our Project CHILD program despite a 99% success rate on the third grade FCAT. This is because the teamwork and specialized methods in Project CHILD fall outside the 90-minute rule, and the rule that every elementary teacher must teach reading. Other successful programs have

experienced the same fate if they are not on the “approved” list of textbooks that each district is required to purchase. And why require textbooks at all? Is this the standard we want to set for children in the age of technology?

Continue to offer the choice for parents and students to attend quality schools that meet their needs, and to escape failing schools. Competition is good, as it alerts schools to the reality that what they are offering is not satisfying to their clients. Charter schools also need to be freed from the curriculum regulations and restraints that limit their ability to innovate.

Public education is at a crossroads. I hope our leaders will have the wisdom to keep the good in NCLB, fix the bad, and throw out the ugly.