

Jennifer Lloyd

Professor Fellingner

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### No Child Left Behind: A Fatality to Education

In January 2002, President George W. Bush drastically altered the United States' education system by pushing No Child Left Behind into law. With the intention of rectifying the "broken" education system at the time, Bush doggedly fought for the institution of this bill. Many presidents prior to Bush addressed this issue through the execution of programs such as "A Nation at Risk" and legislation such as "Improving American Schools Act." Although all of these attempts were constructed around the same purpose, No Child Left Behind was the first one to make a significant impact (Hayes). The stated purpose of this bill is to ensure that *every* student is proficient in reading and math, thus shifting the government's attention from special needs children and poor families to every child. At the beginning of every school year, all schools have to submit student-centered goals, called the adequate yearly process, and there are consequences if they are not met. Currently, all schools are only allowed to have "highly qualified teachers," meaning they must be licensed in the state that they teach (Hayes).

Although the law has good intentions, it was poorly implemented as revealed through all the unexpected consequences. The Rachel Carson Middle School is just one institution that suffered because of this legislation. In short, it was a school of excellence. The school's students received countless awards from competitions and much praise for their academic achievements through their winning the governor's award of excellence four years in a row; and yet, under No Child Left Behind, they were soon considered a "failing school." The reasoning for this label:

5% of the school's students, comprised of Hispanic, black, special needs and poor children, did not pass the state tests (Webley). How can the academic value of an entire school be based on 5% of the student population? Because of instances like this and many other flaws with the legislation, it is obvious that No Child Left Behind is ultimately detrimental to the school systems and needs to be reevaluated.

The first of many imperfections associated with No Child Left Behind is the standard protocol teachers are expected to follow. When Bush introduced this bill, it seemed flawless. It stressed the importance of having highly qualified teachers in every classroom, no matter the ability level of the students, ensuring that every child receives the same chance as all the others. This is problematic because of the ambiguous criteria for a "highly qualified teacher." Each state has the ability to set its own standards for teachers, which creates a discrepancy, because some require teachers to attend workshops, when others do not (Shirvani 49). Furthermore, a recent study proved that raising the standards for teachers actually hurts lower achieving students. Most often, rural schools fall victim to this discovery. Highly qualified teachers tend to move out of the failing school district and leave less qualified replacements (Shirvani 50). The government demands much from its educators, which one would normally view as an admirable request. The problem with these "highly qualified" teacher demands is that they leave a lot of room for interpretation, and ultimately move good teachers out of failing schools, which only lessens the chances of providing the best education for all students.

Another major issue with this legislation is the specific demands it makes and the subsequent lack of funding that the government provides. There is a substantial deficit of federal financial support for the schools that are desperately trying to implement all of the requirements of No Child Left Behind. Between trying to pay for higher salaries for "highly qualified"

teachers and trying to fund scientifically-based reading programs, schools are running low on money and the federal government offers little to no assistance (Hayes 25). The funds No Child Left Behind allocates only cover 10% of the schools' financial needs. The law does not force states to provide more aid to schools so that they can adequately meet the requirements and close the achievement gap. The funds the government provides are not equally distributed. Studies show that financially-strapped schools are using 1/10 the amount of money that wealthier schools utilize during their school year (Shirvani 50). Additionally, a study conducted in 2004 demonstrates that 80% of school districts that reported funds necessary for increasing teacher quality and other expenditures have not been reimbursed at all by the government (Shirvani 51). If the government demands that all schools drastically improve their quality of teachers and education, it must assume the responsibility of providing the necessary funds.

One of the critics' biggest complaints with the institution of this law is the emphasis it places on standardized tests. The government assesses every aspect of the schools, such as quality of curriculum, teachers and students, through the standardized tests generated by every individual state. These specific assessments force teachers to educate their students to pass the tests instead of emphasizing conceptual learning. No Child Left Behind takes learning for the sake of learning out of the curriculum at the schools. Curriculums have been severely altered to match what students are going to find on the test; hence, teachers cannot even teach what they deem important. One experienced high school educator, in an interview, voiced his concern that teachers have made significant changes in the format of their tests now that No Child Left Behind is in place: "We have seen a great change in the social studies department and we aren't even tested! We had to change the way we set out our essays to match the test (whether PSSAs or Keystones). We have also changed our semester exams to reflect those benchmark tests," said

Nathan Hoover, a teacher at York Suburban High School. Schools are forcing educators to teach different material than what they would normally deem essential to their class because they need to do well on the general test designed by the state. Frequently, teachers have to exchange thought-provoking essay questions for either easier essays or multiple choice questions, so that they can resemble the format of the state tests (Shirvani). As Hosin Shirvani states in his critical paper discussing No Child Left Behind, schools have to alter their curriculum for a “state-test approach” instead of a “student-centered approach,” which is ultimately hurting the quality of education for the students.

Moreover, the new curriculums surfacing due to the push for standardized test preparation take the focus away from “good students” and limit the opportunities teachers have to explore higher thinking. Most of the time, the state assessments test rudimentary knowledge, with the intention of ensuring that every student can pass, so the school districts are not in violation of NCLB. This causes teachers to focus more on the lower-achieving students instead of the higher-achieving students, because they know those students are already going to pass the exam. In the interview with Mr. Hoover, he affirmed that he has seen teachers’ priorities shift from focusing on gifted students to granting lower achievers more attention. It is difficult for teachers to justify exploring deeper thinking with some students at the expense of the lower-achieving students, whose test scores directly affect the status of the school and the teachers’ jobs (Shirvani). Conclusively, this legislation not only inhibits the flexibility that teachers once had in creating their own curriculum and vision for the class, it also comes as a detriment to higher-level students who want to be challenged and have their minds stretched.

Furthermore, because of the pressure No Child Left Behind has placed on schools, there has been a recent push to cut recesses and music and art education to provide more time for

students to cram for the state assessments. In William Hayes' book *No Child Left Behind: Past, Present and Future*, he references a recent poll, conducted by W. James Popham, the author of *America's "Failing" Schools* and a leading expert on student testing, where "44 percent of the schools surveyed admitted that they were reducing the time being used for teaching subjects other than language arts and math." He also exposed that throughout the districts, 36 percent spent less time on social studies and 16 percent decreased time for art and music (Hayes 37). Schools are forced to cut out beneficial electives from their students' days because of the heavy demands imposed by NCLB. By taking away the art and music courses, schools deprive their students of opportunities to broaden their horizons and discover passions that they may carry with them for the rest of their lives. Linda Gammon, a band director at Rachel Carson Middle School, advocates the importance of giving children a chance to experience music when she says, "These classes can be the highlight of their day--the only time they feel like they are succeeding" (Webley). Sometimes these "extra" classes are the only reason students decide to stay in school. The repercussions from the implementation of NCLB deprive students of the opportunity to explore their interests and discover themselves.

Lastly, many times students struggle with "outside variables" that the NCLB does not account for, which often negatively influence the students' abilities to succeed in school. Not speaking English as a first language exists as an obvious outside circumstance that would significantly hinder a student's ability to succeed on the standardized test. Even though this is a common occurrence, NCLB does not have any contingencies in place to help these students take the test. How can one expect a student who has not spoken English in his or her life to take a test completely in English and receive a grade that, according to the federal government, must be "at grade level?" Most of these students are already trying to adjust to a new culture and a new

learning system and cannot meet this ridiculous expectation set by the government. When asked in the interview whether or not he thought that “other variables” would affect a child’s performance in the classroom, Mr. Hoover adamantly refuted the notion and proposed these hypothetical situations: “If a young adult has parents going through divorce proceedings, is depressed or has thoughts of suicide, has broken up with a boyfriend/girlfriend, hasn’t had a hot meal for days, or any other number of instances, that student is not going to have his or her ‘head in the game’” (Hoover). These standardized tests place a significant amount of pressure not only on the students, but also on the teachers, who must ensure that all of the needs in a child’s life are met before the focus can be placed on receiving an education. NCLB is an adequate step towards creating a better public educational system in theory, but in reality, it is not based on actual, achievable principles.

When George W. Bush fought for the institution of No Child Left Behind into the U.S. school system, he intended to strengthen the public school system; however, the outcome was unattainable goals, destruction of the love of learning and consequences for teachers. Paul Peterson and Martin West describe in their book *No Child Left Behind?* the unintended consequences of this legislation that are ultimately destroying the educational system: “High-stakes accountability may adversely alter the culture of schooling, narrow the scope of instruction and services that schools provide, constrain teachers, leave less room for creative engagement, shift educational resources into test-specific preparation, and disproportionately punish some groups of students” (59). No Child Left Behind has ultimately strained the educational system and will continue to plague the schools until it is reformed.

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