

ROBBING ELEMENTARY STUDENTS OF THEIR CHILDHOOD: THE PERILS OF NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

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The *No Child Left Behind* Legislation has altered the landscape of elementary schools across the nation. This alteration has left many educators and parents wondering whether children are being robbed of their childhood in order to meet the legislation's many mandates. Across the nation, traditional school days, instructional programs, and programs such as recess, music, and art, along with programs for the gifted and educationally disabled, have been eliminated or altered beyond recognition. This paper addresses those concerns by citing evidence of the potential harm to students and by interviewing stakeholders who have direct involvement with the children as either teachers or parents.

The playground at Maple Street Elementary School is quiet these days. The only movements on the swing sets are a result of a strong west wind edging the swings back and forth. The long lines that once formed for trips down the sliding boards are empty. There are no softball or kickball games nor are there any games of tag or duck-duck- goose being played. There won't be a fifth grade musical this year. Children will not be learning to play the recorder nor will they be learning to march to rhythms or learn the traditional songs that have transcended the years of music instruction in elementary schools. There will be no art to display. Daddies' old long sleeved shirts that were handed down to children to cover up school clothes to keep from being stained with tempera paint and water colors are no longer need-

ed.

No, Maple Street Elementary School is not closing. It is squeezing every minute of the school day to meet the mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and in so doing many parents and educators are questioning whether the nation's elementary school students are being robbed of their childhood.

Maple Street Elementary School is a metaphor for elementary schools across the nation. It represents attendance centers in both urban and rural communities that have students with various degrees of abilities, that have multiplicities of family compositions, and that are multicultural. With all the diversity among Maple Street's student body, the one commonality is that each student has affective and social needs that, according to some, are being com-

promised.

The NCLB legislation, passed in 2004, has left many states reeling as they scramble to meet the many mandates required. It has been reported (NASSP, 2006) that none of the nation's states have been able to meet the 'quality-goal' outlined in the act. As a result, at least one-half of the states are facing the possibility of receiving reductions in federal funding for educational programs. Many are asking whether NCLB's purview of educational quality and the purview of parents and educators are congruent. In many cases, parents are becoming vocal and angry in what they see as a set of standards that are robbing children of activities that develop them affectively and socially (Schacter, 2005).

The impact of NCLB has been felt in many different fashions by the nation's elementary school children. Not only are the so called 'normal children' being impacted by the act's mandates, the children who are identified as 'underserved' are also feeling the impact. These are children who are receiving services in gifted education programs, special education programs, and programs for the educationally disadvantaged (Browder & Cooper-Duffy 2003; Ferrell, 2005; McMahon, 2005).

On the other hand, there appears to be little compromise on the horizon regarding NCLB and its expectations. According to U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, the nation's parents and educators have had expectations that are undeniably too low, resulting in a set of standards and goals that have reflected those expectations for students. Spellings credits NCLB for the raising of those stan-

dards and indicates that the nation's education report card is improving with encouraging results indicated by reading scores that have increased more in the last 5 years than in the previous 29 years combined. Spelling maintains that a great deal of work lies ahead and that schools are headed in the right direction (Hardy, 2006).

It appears that battle lines are forming among proponents of the act and those (primarily parents and educators) who feel as if the act is compromising the holistic needs of the nation's children. The focus of the latter group continues toward calculating the cost of developmental growth that is achieved outside the strict academic setting, but is nevertheless attained in the school setting.

NCLB and Recess

A trend seems to be affecting school districts in the United States. Many are beginning to implement "no recess" policies under the belief that "recess is a waste of time that would be better spent on academics" (Johnson, 1998, p. A1).

Officials in many school districts indicate that it is the new emphasis on high-stakes testing that is to blame for dwindling recess time (Axtman, 2004; Deseret Morning News, 2006). This trend concerns parents, principals, and teachers who feel that recess is a vital part of the school day to students. Recess allows students to exercise and to work off pent-up energy. More than that, recess is perceived by many to be a laboratory for forming social relationships and finding one's place in the world.

Axtman (2004) contends, "The loss of recess, according to experts in child health

and psychology, results in a more sedentary, stressed-out youngster who may encounter significant difficulties learning to socialize. Like the loss of PE, art, and music - it's also a blow to the 'whole child' approach to education - which says that playing is as important to learning as the multiplication tables are to math (p.1)"

Parents are becoming increasingly concerned, and vocal, about the lack of physical activity in schools (Axtman, 2004; Deseret, 2005). Duffrin (2005) reports a recent survey of 487 schools in the Chicago, Illinois area which indicated that not only was there no recess, also there were only one to two days of physical education classes per week as the norm in elementary schools. The survey revealed that fewer than one in five schools—18 percent—provide daily scheduled recess for all kids, and only about one in 16-six percent—provided for a recess of at least 20 minutes.

Nationwide, parents are so troubled by the sense that recess is under siege, that the Cartoon Network and the National PTA have launched a "Rescuing Recess" campaign. In a recent PTA survey, more than half of PTA leaders indicated they think the daily recess in their schools is at risk (Rescuing Recess, 2006)). The campaign is supported by the Center for Disease Control and other national experts who believe that recess provides children the daily exercise they need and improves their ability to participate and learn in class.

The National Association for Sport and Physical Education recommends that elementary school children get at least one hour of exercise per day, preferably in 15-minute bursts (National Association for

Sports and Physical Activity [NASPA], 2003). Researcher Charles Corbin said, "Without any question, the number one barrier to physical activity in schools is the perception that time spent in activities such as physical education and recess will undermine academic learning. The evidence does not support this assumption. We now know that making time for physical education and physical activity does not reduce academic learning and it may actually increase it." (as quoted in NASPA, 2003).

The Effects of NCLB on the Gifted

While it should be a concern of educators that all children perform at grade level, it is just as important to remember the learning needs of those who excel academically. What is NCLB doing to our brightest children? Researchers and experts (Gallagher, 2004; Kaplan, 2004; Mendoza, 2006) in the field of gifted education have been concerned since the inception of NCLB regarding its impact on the gifted child. The concern is that curriculum may be 'dumbed-down', the pace may be slowed down, and little credence may be given to the individual needs of the gifted learner.

One parent (Gentry, 2006) of a gifted child publicized her concern regarding NCLB and its effect on her daughter's education. This parent was a veteran teacher of 20 years whose five year old child entered school already reading. The child also had exceptional math skills and an interest in fractions and negative numbers, which did not exist in the kindergarten state benchmarks or standards. When the parent asked the classroom teacher if she had

asked her little girl to count to 100, the parent was told that those standards were not expected until the spring. Further, the parent was told there was nothing to worry about since the child had already met all the standards. In essence it did not matter that the child had exceptional and advanced math skills or that her learning needs were not being met. The teacher was quite content to address the current standards as mandated by NCLB. The classroom teacher considered herself to be very effective – having met the educational goals and objectives.

Classroom teachers also provide a good resource for evaluating the effects of NCLB on the gifted learner. In one study (Mendoza, 2006), 10 classroom teachers were interviewed with questions regarding the impact that NCLB had on their students. The teachers were located in four school districts in Colorado. They taught in various schools ranging from poor to affluent, low-performing to high-performing (according to standardized tests), and taught either elementary or middle-level education. The teachers were asked questions that related to: (a) how NCLB had affected gifted children in their school and class, (b) if classroom teachers provided adequate instruction for the gifted at their school, and (c) if professional development was available to classroom teachers for differentiating curriculum for the gifted in lieu of NCLB. The findings and conclusions of the study are summarized as follows:

1. Gifted children who had been overlooked before were underserved more than ever.

2. Teachers were constantly being told that it was more important to bring the low-scoring children up to proficient and proficient students up to advanced. Thus, the advanced students were not a priority.
3. Gifted children were missing their gifted education classes so they could be included in test preparation. Thus, pull-out programs, which may have been the only services for the gifted, were being eliminated.

In one western state, teachers were provided a two-day seminar on strategies for improving test scores. The presenter explained that teachers should not be concerned about students who scored in the bottom or top quartile since it was the students in the middle who statistically made the most gains in scores (Gentry, 2006).

One might speculate that gifted learners have always been overlooked and viewed as unimportant. Yet, evidence mounts (Gentry, 2006; Mendoza, 2006) that NCLB has increased the lack of attention given to this population. These are, however, our future leaders. It is from this group, one will discover a cure for a debilitating disease, solve problems related to technology, or produce inventions for the betterment of mankind. Yes, our purpose should be to provide excellence and exceptional learning opportunities to all children including the gifted, talented and creative. Or perhaps our motto should be “Leave No Child Ahead.”

The NCLB Effects on Students with Disabilities

Children with disabilities are also being heavily impacted by the mandates of NCLB. Since the 1997 amendments to IDEA, children with disabilities have been provided access to the general curriculum and been included in the general assessment, but NCLB also requires grade-level testing for *all* students. While this may sound good in theory, the ramifications of present practices as the result of these mandates are frightening and highly suspect for the actual benefit for children with disabilities.

Because of efforts to provide "highly-qualified" teachers, many states are going to what they call a co-teaching model for children with disabilities. Instead of students being provided the individualized instruction that they require in order to be successful in the curriculum, students with disabilities in departmentalized content areas are being placed in grade level curriculum in order to be taught by "highly-qualified" content area specialists (No Child Left Behind, 2001). However, this content area specialist might have very limited knowledge (typically, one introduction class in special education) about teaching a child with a disability. A teacher in California reported "I can no longer have my own students. This year was horrible. All of my students failed the first semester of math. Two-thirds of them failed English for the year. Fewer resource students graduated than in any year I can remember." Similar complaints from teachers across the nation have been documented (National Education Association, August, 2006).

Accountability mandates for NCLB have also resulted in many assessment practices that are questionable, such as many states are requiring *all* students take a statewide assessment that all non-disabled children take. For example, in Georgia, all students are required to take the new Georgia End-of-Course Tests (EOCT). A special education teacher described her students' (all who were labeled as mild-to moderately mentally retarded) experiences with EOCT. A high school senior with an IQ of 60 "who reads on a second-grade level and adds $8 + 4$ on his fingers" (Johnson, 2005, p.293) was expected to show his progress by "explaining what the y- intercept is of a line with a slope of -3." Likewise, Albrecht and Joles (2003) reported that Indiana requires all students to pass a statewide test for graduation. They found that students with high-incidence disabilities are significantly more likely to show a lack of progress than their non disabled peers. Of course, this result should not be surprising; after all, students with disabilities are provided services through IDEA because they do, in fact, have a disability. Most special educators would probably agree that it would really be desirable if simply putting students with disabilities in regular classrooms and/or giving them grade level assessments would take away a disability. Unfortunately, it does not; in fact, failing a high stakes test is just one more affirmation for children with disabilities that they are inadequate, often resulting in "stigma of failure, lowered self-esteem, anxiety, an increase in the number of students dropping out of school, and the loss of educational advancement and career opportunities"

(Albrecht & Joles, 2003, p. 87).

Some administrators and teachers are confused with exactly what they are supposed to do. For example, one teacher in Arkansas wrote that in her self-contained classroom with high school students who have moderate to severe disabilities, the students could not have goals based on their present level of performance (PLOP). Instead, students use grade-level goals, regardless of their functional or skill level. In essence, if a child has an IQ below 50, for example, the attention is not on his present level of performance, but on the grade he/she happens to be in. It is difficult to discern how a school district could possibly show growth for a child with limited cognitive functioning with a goal written for a normally functioning non-disabled child.

School districts are allowed to give one percent of their students an alternative assessment, but this also can be problematic. In Arkansas, teachers have reported that alternate assessments are very labor-intensive, with some assessments taking as much as 200 hours of the teacher's time for *one* student. More importantly, hours of instructional time that could be spent on actually teaching a child are wasted on meaningless tasks for bureaucratic rhetoric about how well students with disabilities are doing. Still others have reported that the assessment is more about how creative the teacher can be rather than how well the student is doing. Pressure is put on teachers and students by their school districts to ensure that all perform at an independent level. Other states are experiencing similar concerns. A teacher in Pennsylvania reported, "Some teachers have resorted to

saying a child has reached a goal when they haven't while others, like myself, remain honest in our reporting of the goals but have pressure put on them when the goals are not met" (NEA, 2006).

All of this assessment is *not* free. A report by the Government Accountability Office estimated that states will spend between 1.9 to 5.3 billion dollars to develop, score and report the tests required by NCLB (Associated Press, 2007). One just has to question that if all that money was to be put back into schools for teaching students, training teachers, lowering student-to-teacher ratios, and updating school resources, would not our nation's children be much better served?

Summary

Although there are proponents and adversaries in the NCLB legislation, evidence continues to grow to suggest that many children are being negatively impacted by its enforcement. The children being impacted represent programs across the educational spectrum and include children with special needs, children who are identified as gifted and talented, and children who are in regular education programs. Programs such as art, music, and recess are being shortened or eliminated so school districts can meet the requirements of this legislation. The larger question remains: Is No Child Left Behind robbing American children of their childhood?

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