

Poll on NCLB: Americans Want a Useful Overhaul of Education Policy

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A new USA Today/Gallup poll¹ shows that a strong majority of Americans support a major overhaul of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) or total elimination of the law. Among all respondents with opinions about NCLB, only about a quarter said, “Keep basically as is.” Democrats, Republicans and Independents share these opinions in very similar ratios. (NCLB is the current version of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, ESEA.) More precisely: 16 percent want to “eliminate law”; 41 percent said, “keep with major revisions”; 21 percent replied, “keep as basically is”; and 21 percent had no opinion or did not know enough to say.

What is it the people want to change? From other surveys and qualitative evidence from gatherings around the country, such as those held by Public Education Network,² people understand that standardized testing is out of control, eating up too much time and narrowing the curriculum. People grasp that the sanctions that punish troubled schools are not helpful and that many schools lack the resources to do a good job. They also recognize that under NCLB, districts and schools have narrowed the curriculum to spend more time on the tested subjects of reading and math. They have cut social studies as well as science, arts, and physical education, and some have even eliminated recess.

Department of Education (DOE) Secretary Arne Duncan pays lip service to the public desire to overhaul the law. He recently said that NCLB has been too narrowly focused on standardized testing, yet keeps pushing for states to use student test scores as a “significant factor” in evaluating, awarding tenure, firing, and paying teachers. This would only increase the stranglehold these tests have on schools even though overwhelming research shows this is a flawed, inaccurate, and counterproductive process. Duncan says new tests being developed by two multi-state consortia will be better assessments than those that have been in use.³ But proposals from the consortia suggest otherwise, showing that the new tests will remain predominantly multiple-choice with a mostly vague nod to “performance tasks.” Under Duncan’s proposals, we would see a major increase in the amount of centrally controlled testing that will make NCLB seem like the “good old days” of standardized testing only once a year. But the tests will still be in two subjects.

Ideas are afoot to allow states to add in tests of other subjects, but that “cure” could be worse than the “disease.” Just as reading and math have largely been reduced to preparation for multiple-choice tests and trivial “five paragraph essays,” so could social studies and other subjects.

It is unclear whether Congress will do better. Two years ago, now House Education Committee chair Rep. John Kline (R-NM) protested the federal testing requirements. Will he lead his committee to honor that protest? Will it dawn on members from both parties in both houses that the intense focus on testing has failed to improve our nation’s schools? Duncan would reduce punishment for most schools, leaving them off the hook (and perhaps enabling the suburbs to separate even more from the consequences befalling low-income urban and rural areas). But schools facing the worst consequences from poverty, segregation, and inequality will continue to suffer misguided sanctions as a result score lowest on tests. Duncan’s “Race to the Top” policy presented four largely flawed “turnaround” models purportedly showing how to help low performing schools.⁴ But when challenged, DOE could not even muster a fig leaf of evidence to back up such proposals.

Using test scores to judge teachers and principals has become the new currency in reform circles, with sadly misplaced faith in the badly named “value-added” models that experts say are not valid assessment tools.⁵ Will Republican legislators decide that imposing such requirements on the states is another example of federal over-reaching? (We hope so.) Will Democrats oppose policies that would be used to smash unions and impede real reform? (Again, we hope so.)

Building local and state pressure for positive change just might help ensure the overhaul the public wants and deserves, such as the recommendations of the Forum for Educational Accountability.⁶ Passively watching won’t change anything, and makes it likely we will see less funding, continued wrong-headed federal intrusion, more testing and even higher stakes. 📖

Notes

1. www.gallup.com/poll/145952/Americans-Lean-Toward-Revising-No-Child-Left-Behind.aspx.
2. www.publiceducation.org.
3. www.hepg.org/hel/article/485.
4. voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/teachers/new-study-blasts-popular-teach.html.
5. www.citizensforpublicschools.org/editions-of-the-backpack/spring-2011-backpack/student-test-scores-are-a-dangerous-way-to-judge-teachers.
6. www.edaccountability.org.

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