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No Child Left Behind: The Oxymoron of Accountability

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ABSTRACT

The last four years have proven to be particularly difficult for educators. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation is forcing teachers and school systems to reduce curriculum, teach “drill and kill” methods of testing, and reducing passion within the teaching profession. This essay addresses the negative impacts of the legislation and illuminates areas of particular concern. Furthermore, the No Child Left Behind legislation values test scores. In an era of standardized tests, educators are finding it increasingly difficult to teach without linking ideas to specific test questions. This essay discusses difficulties, limitations, and implications for educational equity.

No Child Left Behind: The Oxymoron of Accountability

The last four years have proven to be a particularly difficult time for many educators. No Child Left Behind, the landmark federal legislation calling on educators to improve student performance, has been a detriment to students and teachers. Students are deprived of enhanced and well-rounded curriculum, teachers are pressured to increase test scores, and disadvantaged populations are falling further behind.

No Child Left Behind requires yearly testing in grades 3-8 in reading and math. Due to the strict testing mandates of No Child Left Behind, many schools have begun to cut non-core curriculum (Neill, 2003). In fact, many schools limit classroom instruction to the material that appears on the mandatory standardized exams. This method of instruction represents a true teaching-to-the-test model. Furthermore, Neill (2003) goes on to explain: “The law places too much emphasis on standardized tests, causing teachers to focus on test preparation rather than on real learning” (p. 281). Furthermore, test coaching represents the lowest form of learning. Many education scholars have explained the need and significance of higher-order learning procedures. With the higher-order levels of learning in mind, the “drill-and-kill” instruction method does not adequately represent student learning (Neill, 2003). Due to such high-stakes testing practices, teachers are encouraged to abandon essay exams or any other testing format. The multiple-choice only or “drill and kill” method produces students that lack a well-rounded and curriculum-rich education (Reich, 2003).

Education should prepare students for life; however, high-stakes standardized testing and curriculum reduction does a disservice to education. Meeting a high-stakes test score standard does not necessarily prepare a student for life’s standards

(Sergiovanni, 2000). High-stakes testing seems antithetical to the purpose of testing. According to the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (1999), as cited in Neill (2003), “Test scores should not be used as the sole basis for high-stakes decisions such as graduation or grade promotion” (p.281). If we accept the work of the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, it becomes clear that the No Child Left Behind yearly testing model is ideologically flawed. The manner in which tests are written and scored presents a second flaw. Neill (2003) feels:

Another problem with standardized tests is that many of them are norm-referenced rather than criterion-referenced. In a criterion-referenced test, an attempt is made to measure whether the test-taker has sufficient knowledge or skills required for proficiency in a particular task. Whether one person passes or fails does not depend on how many others are able to pass the test. A criterion-referenced test focuses on what a student is expected to know and is designed to gauge whether a student has achieved the standards or learned the curriculum he or she has presumably been taught (p. 282).

There has, however, been a movement to have state exams adhere to the criterion-referenced format. Nevertheless, these allegedly criterion-referenced exams are made using the same technology as norm-referenced exams; therefore, they end up emphasizing the same ranking and sorting model as their counterparts (Neill, 2003).

Beyond the testing flaws of No Child Left Behind, the law rejects a fundamental principle of learning. Learning is not exclusively represented by a test score. In fact, Elmore (2002) points out, “Relying only on standardized tests dodges the complicated question of what tests actually measure and of how schools and students react when tests

are the sole yardstick of performance” (p.36). Furthermore, many test writers have commented on the margin of error within standardized tests. Neill (2003) points out, “Just as nationwide polls that survey public attitudes always have a margin of error, so too do standardized tests” (p.281). Additionally, school districts with less than abundant funding will administer the standardized test with the lowest overhead, and thus, create an unrealistic standard by which students are judged (Elmore, 2002). Beyond the margin of error and operating expense, learning should represent a life change that is personal and intimate; therefore, it cannot necessarily be quantifiably measured. Miltich (2002) feels:

No more important moment comes for a learner than that in which she is struck, forcefully and clearly, by the notion that she and only she is responsible for her learning. No quantification can account for this revelation, but learners know when it occurs, and afterward they value worthy instructors as guides and allies in their learning experiences. Such an immeasurable outcome is worth more than any portfolio of objective data (pg.7).

Schools should be places of learning and personal advancement. As Reich (2003) puts it: “Schools should not be test-taking factories in which the only thing taught or learned is how to take high-stakes tests” (p.40).

In such a high-stakes environment, teachers are expected to increase scores. This mandate puts an unwarranted burden upon teachers. Under current law, teachers are obligated to show advancement. This obligation or accountability mandate often leads to negative changes in the curriculum (Neill, 2003). However, Jones, Jones, & Hargrove, (2003), as cited in Fusarelli (2004), found mix results on curriculum reduction.

Nevertheless, classroom instruction is often limited to the material that appears on the standardized exams. Non-essential or non-core classes such as social studies or civics are as Neill (2003) says, “Squeezed to the margins of the curricula” and the students suffer the consequences of limited education. Furthermore, teachers and school systems become dishonestly creative in testing. Many schools and school systems find “creative ways of pushing out low-scoring students to boost average test scores” (Neill, 2003).

Furthermore, Fusarelli (2004) argues that “Schools with large numbers of poor students, students of color, and lower attendance rates, will be disproportionately affected by this stringent participation requirement” (p.79). This assertion does, however, assume that minorities miss school with a greater frequency than non-minorities. This assumption appears to be true. According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services (1997), White and Asian students have the lowest absentee rate while Native Americans and African-American students post the highest absentee rates. This could, as Neill (2003) suggests, be linked to the lack of stability and poverty of minority populations.

It has long been noted that minority groups and disadvantaged populations trail in school achievement. This phenomenon has become known as the achievement gap. The reduction of the achievement gap is a fundamental concern for the No Child Left Behind legislation. Nevertheless, the achievement gap will not reduce under the current system. Achievement is a vague and subjective term (Sergiovanni, 2000). Moreover, Sergiovanni (2000) points out, “This system determines which students will be winners and which students will be losers and what the consequences of winning and losing will be, not just for a day, semester, or year but in some cases for a lifetime” (p.78). With lifetime

implications in mind, numerous studies have concluded that middle and upper income students make tremendous advancements in the summer while their counterparts actually lose ground (Neill, 2003). This loss sets poor and minority students up for failure.

The goal of the No Child Left Behind legislation is a worthy goal. Nevertheless, the goals of this movement have left a devastating path behind. This legislation has reduced curriculum and neglected teachers and students, yet test scores are inconclusive. The benefits of this accountability system are at best short-term. The long-term effects of the current accountability movement leave teachers, parents, students, and administrators struggling to find their way. The negative impacts of No Child Left Behind create a system in which many are not advanced due to poor curriculum, lack of higher-order thinking, and rote-learning ability. Sadly, this system not only harms advancement, it leaves a great number of students behind.

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