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Education Outlook

Can NCLB Survive the Competitiveness Competition?

By Frederick M. Hess and Andrew J. Rotherham

Some see the George W. Bush administration's American Competitiveness Initiative (ACI) as the perfect complement to the No Child Left Behind Act's (NCLB) equity focus. The prospects for synergy of these two agendas, however, are not bright.

American schools have spent the last five years under the spotlight of NCLB. The statute's relentless push to close the racial achievement gap and to pursue universal proficiency in reading and math has focused unprecedented attention on basic instruction.

This push, however, has also raised concerns about a slighting of high-achieving students and the advanced instruction they need for national competitiveness. The problem has taken on more urgency as study after study shows an America unprepared to compete in an increasingly global marketplace. Pulitzer Prize–winning *New York Times* journalist Thomas Friedman gave this worrisome trend a name when he titled his 2005 bestseller *The World Is Flat*. Friedman described a continent-connecting communications, transportation, and financial marketplace in which high-level science, math, and language skills would be more crucial to American well-being than ever. That same year, the National Academy of Sciences reviewed the trends and concluded rather ominously that the "scientific and technical building blocks of our economic leadership are eroding at a time when many other nations are gathering strength."[1]

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Last year, just ahead of an Educational Testing Service report that 61 percent of opinion leaders identified better math, science, and technology skills as essential to a healthy American economy,[2] the Bush administration launched ACI. In order to "ensure America succeeds in the world," a White House press release said, President Bush proposed training 70,000 new high school teachers for Advanced Placement (AP) courses in math and science and bringing 30,000 new math and science professionals to teach in classrooms.[3]

What does this new emphasis on competitiveness mean for schooling? Is it consistent with the NCLB requirements that have so thoroughly dominated education policy for the past five years? Are the two agendas on a collision course? And what are the implications for the future of federal education policy?

A Bit of History

For all the popular attention Thomas Friedman has garnered, his central insight is hardly new. Robert Reich, secretary of labor under President Bill Clinton, made many of the same arguments in his influential 1992 book *The Work of Nations*. And fears about China and India today are more

than a little reminiscent of—and tinged with the same hysteria as—discussions of "Japan, Inc." in the 1980s or the Sputnik crisis of the late 1950s.

Historically, there always has been an unavoidable tension between efforts to bolster American "competitiveness" (read as efforts to boost the performance of elite students, especially in science, math, and engineering) and those to promote educational equity. Champions of particular federal initiatives tend to argue that the two notions are complementary, but trends of the last fifty years show that the ascendance of one tends to take attention from the other.

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The great investment of energy in high achievers in math, science, and language by the National Defense Education Act of 1958, for instance, largely dissipated when the Johnson administration and the Washington education community turned their gazes to the equity issues of the Great Society. Those concerns gave us Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, which focused on educationally disadvantaged children. The ESEA ethos was, in turn, supplanted by the dictates of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, a report from the blue-ribbon presidential panel that warned that the United States had engaged in "unilateral educational disarmament." But while Ronald Reagan the next year called for "tougher standards, more homework, merit pay for teachers, discipline, and [putting] parents back in charge"[4] as a means of re-arming American school systems, the standards movement born in response to his challenge was soon overshadowed by the desperate condition of urban schooling.

The "rigor-centric" reforms of the 1980s were then dropped or defanged in all but four or five states, while "adequacy" lawsuits and growing attention to achievement gaps re-elevated the equity agenda. This time the push for equity culminated in NCLB (the reauthorization of the canonical federal education text, ESEA), the 2002 law marked not only by a relentless attention to elementary and middle school math and reading achievement, race- and income-based achievement gaps, and "universal proficiency," but also by its bipartisan support: NCLB passed in the U.S. House on a 381 to 41 vote and in the U.S. Senate by 87 to 10.[5]

NCLB and ACI

In some form or other, NCLB was as necessary as it was inevitable. For too long, inadequate instruction in essential skills and abysmal performance by poor, black, and Latino children had been tacitly accepted as the status quo. But aside from the inclusion of science on NCLB's proficiency radar, this mighty federal attempt at ratcheting up standards for the underserved has swamped sensible concerns about advanced instruction.

The result? Today, 71 percent of adults think U.S. high schools are falling behind when it comes to helping students compete for scientific and engineering jobs against students from other countries, and 64 percent reportedly think education reform is necessary if America is to remain globally competitive in the next decade.[6] The results of international assessments, like the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, lend credence to the public's concerns. Just last year Senator Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.) declared, "Perhaps nowhere is it more obvious that we are falling behind than in math and science. For a nation that prides itself on innovation and discovery, the downward slide is shocking."[7]

Amid this atmosphere of urgency, President Bush unveiled ACI. The plan called for $5.9 billion in new spending in fiscal year 2007 and more than $136 billion in spending over the course of the next decade. The vast majority of the latter sum would fund research agencies and research and development: $50 billion for the National Science Foundation, the Department of Energy's Office of Science, and the National Institute of Standards and Technology; and $86 billion to fund the research and development tax credit. Despite the rhetorical centrality of education in the policy debate on competitiveness, only $380 million—just one-fifth of 1 percent of the total—was earmarked to support math, science, and technological education in K–12 schooling, and even that amount has fallen prey to political infighting among various members of Congress.

Different Diagnoses

Is meeting the global competitiveness challenge to train elite scientists and engineers compatible with NCLB? The preferred line for most federal school reformers—both right and left—is to deny any real conflict between the two. And major national voices, from the Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights to the Education Trust to the Business Roundtable and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, have stood shoulder-to-shoulder in reassuring policymakers and voters that NCLB and ACI fit hand in glove.

"We can no longer afford the inequities that have long characterized our system of education," says Charles E. M. Kolb, president of the Committee for Economic Development. "As our need for educated workers grows, the American workforce is going to come increasingly from the ethnic groups that have been least well served at all levels of American education. By 2020, some 30 percent of our working-age population will be African-American or Hispanic, nearly double the percentage in 1980."[8]

But there are still tensions. The equity-leaning camp postulates that by providing the poor—and generally minority—students who fall out of the education pipeline a solid education and access to college, the nation will dramatically broaden the extent of its development of human capital. While such an approach obviously can benefit from the larger pool of students that a successful equity approach would provide, the emphasis here is on improving the quality—not the quantity—of potentially high-achieving math and science students.

These tensions are made more poignant as influential state-level actors—including key governors, powerful philanthropies such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and business-oriented groups like Achieve, Inc.—push high school standards and math and science education, while federal pressure is focused on bringing up the bottom in K–8 reading and math. But from any short- or medium-term perspective, K–12 schooling seems a flimsy tool for addressing competitiveness in science and engineering. This is akin to signing preschoolers to a baseball team's farm system rather than bringing in top-tier free agents. The reality is that today's third-graders will not receive their PhDs in engineering until about 2025.[9] Consequently, the ability of NCLB to enlarge the pipeline gradually is more relevant to our competitiveness in 2030 than to our standing in the next decade or two. This helps explain why even those most ardently focused on America's economic well-being sometimes see the K–12 debate as less than urgent.

Nonetheless, whatever the substantive merits of the strategy to pursue competitiveness through the schools, it has immense political appeal. Investing in high-achieving students, advanced math and science courses, foreign languages, and AP programs clearly pleases educated, high-income, suburban families—in other words, those most likely to show up at the polls.

It is also less contentious proposing STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) improvements than enforcing NCLB-style accountability mandates. A competitiveness strategy focuses on augmenting the status quo rather than remaking it, and this is an easier task, both substantively and politically, for legislators, governors, superintendents, and school boards.

Finally, while raising the performance floor can be a begrudging and thankless task, addressing STEM topics may produce more tangible and visible rewards. A handful of successful classes, programs, or curricula can yield contest winners, Ivy League admissions, prestigious scholarships, or a bump in AP results—in short, a public relations bonanza.

In light of the challenges, it is surprising how effectively the redistributive focus of NCLB has dominated the agenda in the past five years. This dominance is a testament to the Bush administration's efforts, the moral power of the declaration to educate the children "left behind," the odd coalition both of the left and right that has resolutely supported the law, and the frustration of the public and policymakers with the seemingly intractable troubles of low-performing schools and districts.

But times have changed. The NCLB agenda has so far played out in an environment in which federal spending on K–12 education has risen sharply, increasing from $27 billion in 2001 to $38 billion in 2006. Current massive federal budget deficits, a bipartisan refusal to rein in entitlement programs, and public resistance to tax increases mean that significant new federal spending on education is unlikely. (Spending under NCLB has increased nearly 40 percent.) Meanwhile, at the state level, continued growth in Medicaid spending is squeezing state budgets, an aging population is looming, and concerns about college affordability are competing with K–12 spending. Consequently, school spending in the coming decade is unlikely to keep pace with recent growth.

Where the Public Stands

Compounding the challenge posed by limited funds is the fact that NCLB's public appeal is mixed, at best. The

law has been a source of much unrest among teachers and principals, and nine states have engaged in some form of statutory resistance (though none has actually refused to accept federal education dollars and the accompanying conditions).

The 2006 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll on attitudes toward education reported that 88 percent of the public believes it is very or somewhat important to close the achievement gap between white students and black and Latino students,[10] and 81 percent believe the gap can be "narrowed substantially" while maintaining high standards for all children.[11] Just 19 percent of respondents think the racial achievement gap is "mostly related to quality of schooling," while fully 77 percent believe it is primarily due to "other factors."[12]

Such responses constitute broad but shallow support for NCLB and massive support for a "no tough choices" strategy on the part of elected officials. It surely suggests a public open to arguments that schools cannot and should not focus solely on achievement gaps, but that same public may not tolerate painful reforms intended to address those gaps.

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Moreover, Americans remain surprisingly skeptical about the importance of academic excellence itself. For instance, when asked whether they would prefer that their oldest child get "A grades" or make "average grades and be active in extracurricular activities," just 29 percent of Americans opted for "A" grades.[13] That figure has been stable over the past decade.

And consider that 26 percent of adults oppose requiring students in their local public high schools to take four years of math, 30 percent think elementary students are required to work too hard today, 49 percent reject proposals to extend the school year or school day in their community, 39 percent think there is currently too much testing in their community's schools, and 67 percent think more testing will lead teachers to teach more to the test than to the acquisition of broad academic skills (which three out of four respondents think is a bad thing). These figures suggest that a quarter or more of voters may resist calls for more intensive schooling, longer school days, extended school years, more homework, or beefed-up accountability—whether for closing the achievement gap or for competitiveness.[14]

Politics and Policy: 2008 and Beyond

What does all of this mean for the future of federal policy and its effect on America's students, teachers, and schools?

In theory, NCLB is scheduled for reauthorization this year. Practically speaking, it is an open question whether the administration and Congressional leaders will ram it through as an exhibit of bipartisan comity or whether it will ultimately stall and await the administration that takes office in 2009. In the interim, the Bush administration is gearing up to hold its ground on the law, with the president asserting that reauthorization is a priority, and secretary of the Department of Education Margaret Spellings insisting, "I like to talk about No Child Left Behind like Ivory soap. It's 99.9 percent pure. There's not much needed in the way of change."[15]

Among Democrats, one generally pro-NCLB coalition made up of centrist reformers or "New Democrats" like Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.) of the House Committee on Education and Labor, believes that accountability is the most effective equity strategy the federal government can pursue. These Democrats are more fragmented on the competitiveness agenda, though both the moderates among them and most Democratic governors, who generally have closer ties to business groups, are more likely to regard it as a priority.

There also exists a liberal anti-NCLB coalition united by the belief that NCLB-like policies are damaging teachers, schools, and students. Some from this coalition are following the lead of the National Education Association, parroting the union's resistance to testing, accountability, and disruption. Others believe it is folly to hold schools accountable for erasing the academic achievement gap absent broad changes in social policy—an argument advanced, most notably, by Richard Rothstein. Inattention to such issues as health care, they say, invalidates the assumptions underlying NCLB, whatever the law's other merits might be. Some in this camp, buoyed by critics such as popular education author Alfie Kohn and former National Academy of Education president Nel Noddings, have an aversion to testing and accountability, more generally. Though often more antagonistic toward business interests, this coalition reads Thomas Friedman, too, and its members are not uniformly hostile

to the competitiveness agenda—especially if supporting it means dropping the current emphasis on universal testing and coercive accountability.

Republicans are split as well. While the GOP let President Bush plant the party's flag on closing the achievement gap through NCLB, many Republicans only grudgingly supported the president's strategy of expanding the federal role in education. Former majority leader Tom DeLay, a Republican from Texas, confessed to Rush Limbaugh that he "voted for that awful education bill"[16] only to support President Bush. He explained to Limbaugh, "I came here to eliminate the Department of Education, so it was very hard for me to vote for something that expands [it]." On Capitol Hill, Rep. Peter Hoekstra (R-Mich.) and Senator Jim DeMint (R-S.C.), with the ardent backing of the Heritage Foundation, have enjoyed substantial success this year leading a resurgence of conservatives who are wary of federal involvement in schooling.

Ultimately, the seeming inability to settle on a coherent agenda is due to a simple truth: schools exist to serve both the equity and the competitiveness agendas—and many other agendas as well.

As President Bush recedes from the national political scene, three factions are likely to emerge within the Republican Party with regard to education policy. Business-oriented Republicans who have championed the president's education policies since he was a governor are likely to be squeezed by the tension between the competing agendas. While they have strongly backed NCLB, this community may benefit more—at least in the short term—from ACI. Then there are the more traditionally conservative Republicans. In the wake of the rough 2006 midterm election, which many on the right have interpreted as the comeuppance for undisciplined spending and big-government Republicanism, these small-government conservatives are reemerging as a force demanding a reduction—rather than an expansion—of the federal role in education. Finally, religious Republicans, particularly the evangelical right, may see an opportunity to draw attention to such issues as prayer in school and school vouchers, which have been largely sidelined by the gap-closing and competitiveness agendas.

The politics at work resemble the politics of the late 1990s more than those of the first few years of the Bush presidency. Consequently, moderates in both parties—and perhaps especially the New Democrats—may again emerge as a fulcrum of education policymaking.

In the foreseeable future, elected officials will continue to be cross-pressured by the two agendas. Business interests—notably the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable, and such coalitions as Achieve, Inc., and TechNet—will continue to work to keep competitiveness on the policymaking agenda. Meanwhile, the equity coalition is unlikely to give an inch of ground in its efforts to keep the focus of public policy on gap-closing.

NCLB, however, is highly vulnerable. At its core, it is an attempt to transform the provision of schooling for low-performing students, which means that its benefits are diffuse and targeted to a disorganized and frequently voiceless population. It seeks to do this through measures that impose costs on potent constituencies, particularly teachers, school administrators, and high-achieving communities.[17] The result means that it is a good bet that several of NCLB's sharper edges will be dulled over time. Considering the growing appeal of the competitiveness agenda, the gloomy fiscal picture, and the inability of policymakers to stay focused for long, proponents of the equity agenda ought not take recent gains for granted.

Setting a Smarter Course

Ultimately, the seeming inability to settle on a coherent agenda is due to a simple truth: schools exist to serve both the equity and the competitiveness agendas—and many other agendas as well. Our desire to ignore this banal reality, to "fix" the equity problem, and then to "solve" the competitiveness problem fosters grandiose ambitions and hyperbolic claims that will inevitably come up short. Schools are meant to serve a staggeringly diverse population of students and a raft of competing needs. Buckling down somewhere will almost inevitably mean easing up elsewhere. The best we can hope for is an incremental, awkward stagger toward meeting a stew of public and private objectives.

The truth is that we cannot do everything. This means accepting disagreement and abandoning the tempting dream that we might reach consensus on what needs to be done if only good-hearted souls would examine the right data. It also means acknowledging that every policy decision will yield both winners and losers. What we need in

2007, 2008, and beyond is not bland reassurance or misguided efforts to paper over real divides, but honest and informed debate about whose needs take precedence at a given moment, what to do about it today, and what to leave for tomorrow.

AEI editorial associate Nicole Passan worked with Messrs. Hess and Rotherham to edit and produce this Education Outlook.

Notes

1. Committee on Prospering in the Global Economy of the 21st Century, *Rising above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2005), 2.

2. Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., and the Winston Group, "Keeping Our Edge: Americans Speak on Education and Competitiveness," survey conducted for ETS, Washington, DC, June 2006, 2, available at www.ets.org/Media/Education_Topics/pdf/HW_KeepingOurEdge2006.pdf.

3. The White House, "The American Competitiveness Initiative—Strengthening Math and Science Education," news release, April 26, 2006.

4. Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Annual Conservative Political Action Conference Dinner" (speech, Conservative Political Action Conference, March 2, 1984), available at www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1984/30284g.htm.

5. Frederick M. Hess and Michael J. Petrilli, *No Child Left Behind Primer* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), available at www.aei.org/book851/.

6. Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., and the Winston Group, "Keeping Our Edge: Americans Speak on Education and Competitiveness," 2.

7. "Senator Ted Kennedy on Globalization," Kennedy for Senate 2006, available at www.tedkennedy.com/content/710/senator-kennedy-on-globalization.

8. Charles E. M. Kolb, "Cracks in Our Education Pipeline," *Education Week* (July 12, 2006).

9. Today's third-graders will graduate from high school in about 2016, from college in 2020, and, among those who pursue engineering PhDs directly after college, finish in about 2025.

10. Lowell C. Rose and Alec M. Gallup, "The 38th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* (September 2006): 46, table 18.

11. Ibid., 47, table 19.

12. Ibid., 44, table 9.

13. Lowell C. Rose and Alec M. Gallup, "The 37th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* (September 2005): 53, table 39.

14. Lowell C. Rose and Alec M. Gallup, "The 38th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools," 46, 48–49.

15. Quoted in Ben Feller, "Education Secretary Says Little Change Needed in No Child Left Behind," Associated Press, August 30, 2006.

16. Andrew J. Rotherham, "How Bush Stole Education," *Blueprint: Ideas for a New Century* (March/April 2002): 41–42.

17. Frederick M. Hess, "Refining or Retreating? High-Stakes Accountability in the States," in *No Child Left Behind?* ed. Paul Peterson and Martin West, 55–79 (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003).