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No Child Left Behind: What the Public Thinks

By Frederick M. Hess

This is the first in a new series of essays devoted to key issues in education policy. Frederick M. Hess, resident scholar and director of education policy studies at AEI, will be the primary author of the series.

After the 2000 presidential election during which George W. Bush erased the enormous advantage Democratic nominees had enjoyed on education by relentlessly decrying the "soft bigotry of low expectations," the president worked with Congressman George Miller (D-Calif.) and Senator Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.) to assemble a bill that ultimately sailed through both houses of Congress by a margin of 381 to 41 in the House and 87 to 10 in the Senate. That bill, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), is due for reauthorization this year, and the administration and the Democratic chairs of both the House and Senate education committees have declared its reauthorization a priority. Whether the bipartisan triumph achieved with the original passage of NCLB can be repeated depends on how Congress understands public opinion on the act.

Those initial, historic NCLB majorities reflected the strong public support for the notion of educational accountability at the heart of the bill. In fact, in 1999, 72 percent of the American public said that a lack of adequate standards was a problem for K–12 schooling, more than 90 percent of parents thought students should have to pass a standardized test in order to be promoted to the next grade, and more than 70 percent of the public favored raising the requisite standards, even if it meant significantly more students would be held back.[1]

Then came reality. The sprawling, telephone book–sized law is a complex piece of legislation that includes a bevy of programs and requirements relating to academic standards, teacher quality, reading, research, and dozens of other topics. Not surprisingly, the post-2000 debate over the shape of NCLB has focused on the law's mechanics and slew of awkward compromises. By the time it was two years old, NCLB faced a range of criticisms, from conservatives who denounced federal overreach, to progressive educators complaining of excessive testing. Today, those concerns are legion. With reauthorization of NCLB looming, how widespread is public support for the law?

NCLB and Public Opinion

While all legislation ultimately rests on public support, public accountability systems like NCLB are particularly dependent upon it. Successful implementation of these systems relies on the public trust in admittedly imprecise testing metrics and accountability structures. After all, even

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proponents have difficulty standing firm on the details of any particular accountability system because the essential components of content, testing, passing scores, and sanctions are inherently imperfect.

Such imprecise and seemingly arbitrary measures are at the heart of NCLB. Not surprisingly, the law's testing and accountability provisions have dominated the public debate: they constitute the most visible and significant changes wrought by the law. Most significantly, NCLB requires annual testing in reading, mathematics, and science in grades 3–8, and once again in high school. Each state must establish an acceptable system that uses those test results to determine whether schools and districts are making adequate yearly progress (AYP). These determinations must be based not only on the aggregate performance of all students, but on the performance of mandated subgroups (including those determined by ethnicity, income, and native language). Critically, AYP is not determined by how much students progress in the course of a school year, but on the basis of whether a sufficient number of students are deemed "proficient" each year—regardless of how close to or far from proficiency the students were when the school year began.

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Schools and districts that fail to make AYP are identified as "in need of improvement," and required to adopt a series of mandated remedies each year during which they do not improve. These remedies include allowing students to attend another public school, offering federally funded after-school tutoring, and "restructuring" persistently low-performing schools.[2]

Does the public support these basic elements of NCLB? If they are unconvinced by the requirements, believe that the wrong schools are deemed "failing," or dislike the required sanctions, history suggests that public officials will quickly find excuses to backpedal. Unfortunately, no comprehensive scholarly analysis has yet examined public opinion of NCLB. There are several well-known surveys, however, that can be used to begin to gauge the public's attitudes toward the key elements of the historic law. I have drawn on two polls that provide longitudinal and in-depth examinations of public opinion about schooling—conducted annually by Phi Delta Kappa (PDK)/Gallup and the Educational Testing Service (ETS)—and on one widely respected poll conducted by Public Agenda.

The Shape of Public Opinion

How much does the public even know about NCLB? In 2002, neither PDK/Gallup nor ETS asked how much Americans knew about or how favorably they viewed NCLB. Since 2003, however, PDK/Gallup has asked both questions. In 2003, just 24 percent of respondents said they knew a "great deal" or a "fair amount" about the law, while three-quarters said they knew "very little" or "nothing at all."[3] By 2006, 45 percent of respondents said they knew a "great deal" or a "fair amount," but 55 percent still said they knew "very little" or "nothing at all." While different in the particulars, the ETS numbers show the same trend.

Also in 2003, PDK/Gallup asked respondents to give their impression of NCLB based on what they had heard or read about. That year, 18 percent said they favored the law, 13 percent did not, and 69 percent did not know. By 2006, the favorable figure had climbed fourteen points to 32 percent, and the unfavorable figure increased eighteen points to 31 percent. The percentage that viewed the statute "very favorably" increased from 5 percent to 9 percent, while the percentage that viewed it "very unfavorably" grew from 6 percent to 13 percent. In short, by last year, the mildly favorable 2003 numbers had settled into a rough split.

The 2005 ETS poll suggests a modestly more positive take on the law, with 45 percent of respondents holding a favorable view of NCLB and 39 percent an unfavorable one.[4] Among those with "strong" views, opinion was split, with 19 percent favorable and 21 percent unfavorable. Last year, Public Agenda reported that 24 percent of respondents thought NCLB was leading schools to improve, while 21 percent thought it was "causing problems."[5] Though there was some variation across polls, the emerging picture was of a moderately informed public with mixed feelings.

With that as prologue, how did Americans feel about NCLB testing, accountability, and NCLB-style remedies at the time the law was enacted? And in contrast, how do they feel now?

Testing and AYP. With regard to the testing and accountability requirements of NCLB, there was substantial public support for an increased federal role when the law was passed. In 2002, in the first PDK/Gallup poll taken after the law was enacted, 57 percent of respondents thought that the "federal government's [increased] involvement in local schooling was a 'good thing,'" while just 34 percent thought it a "bad thing." The public also supported legislation that would require schools to use an annual test to track "student progress from grades 3 to 8" by a margin of 67 percent to 31 percent. In fact, respondents seemed surprisingly comfortable with aggressive federal involvement in testing, with 68 percent endorsing the proposal that "all fifty states [be required] to use a nationally standardized test," and just 30 percent preferring to allow each state to design its own test.[6] This is noteworthy because the legislative champions of NCLB carefully avoided any hint of a national test out of concern that raising the question would stoke heated popular opposition and sink the bill.

More than three-quarters of respondents said that local school boards or state governments—and not the federal government—should have the "greatest influence" on deciding "what is taught."[7] It is unclear whether respondents were distinguishing "testing" from "curriculum," had conflicting preferences, or were confused. Nonetheless, receptiveness to federal activity in 2002 is noteworthy given the strong concerns—including my own—about federal overreach.

There is evidence that in 2002 the public was willing to tolerate some narrowing in curricula in return for heightened accountability. When asked about reducing the emphasis on other subjects in order to emphasize math and reading, 56 percent of respondents said it would be a "good thing," and 40 percent a "bad thing."[8] This demonstrates that the public seemed prepared to accept some reduction in areas like history, science, or the arts in order to increase attention to literacy and numeracy.

Four years later, however, things had changed. When PDK/Gallup asked respondents in 2006 whether a test that only covers English and math provides a fair picture of whether a school is in need of improvement, just 18 percent said yes, while 81 percent said no. NCLB proponents rightly argue that this question somewhat mischaracterizes the law, which, for instance, stipulates that factors like school safety, attendance, and graduation rates also are considered when calculating AYP. To the extent that NCLB accountability is perceived to rely on narrow snapshots of school performance, however, its support plummets.

NCLB's focus on year-end performance levels rather than student improvement has also caused much debate, with defenders arguing that this design is imperative if schools are to focus on closing the achievement gap, and skeptics suggesting that such assessment is a profoundly flawed measure of school quality. What does the public make of this debate? In 2006, PDK/Gallup reported that 81 percent of respondents preferred measuring performance based on the improvement that students make during the year, while just 17 percent favored relying on year-end scores. ETS reported results that were consistent, though far less lopsided, with 53 percent of respondents indicating they wanted school accountability based on "student progress," and 32 percent based on "student achievement" as measured against an established standard. The evident preference for the value-added approach over the level-based approach enshrined in NCLB has remained consistent since 2003, when these issues were first raised.

Limited support for NCLB's emphasis on performance snapshots requires federal officials to engage in a delicate dance. PDK/Gallup reported in 2006 that if large numbers of public schools fail to meet NCLB requirements, 48 percent of respondents would blame schools—but 41 percent would fault NCLB legislation itself. If NCLB leads to large numbers of schools being labeled in need of improvement, it might prompt as many as two-fifths of adults to take a second look at an accountability system about which they harbor some doubts.

Achievement Gap. NCLB was largely designed to eliminate the achievement gap reflected in the different levels of academic achievement between white and Asian students on the one hand, and black and Latino students on the other. As former secretary of education Roderick R. Paige declared, "I could make the case that the whole $22 billion in [NCLB] is about closing the achievement gap."[9] Supporters of NCLB's effort to shrink the racial achievement gap frequently cited the finding that the typical black twelfth-grade student performed at about the same level as the typical white eighth-grader.[10] In 2002, was the public aware of this? If so, was it supportive of NCLB's approach to closing the gap?

In 2002, 49 percent of respondents to PDK/Gallup said white students' achievement was higher than black and Latino students', 38 percent thought it the same,

and 4 percent thought it lower.[11] In essence, nearly half of the public was not aware that an achievement gap existed. Of those who said there was a gap, 80 percent thought closing it was "very important." Even among those who thought closing it important, however, there was a belief that schools were generally not responsible for the gap. Just 29 percent of respondents said they believed that the racial achievement gap was due primarily to schooling, while 66 percent thought it due primarily to "nonschool" factors. Respondents in the 2001 PDK/Gallup poll said, by a margin of 55 of 44 percent, that schools *should* be responsible for closing the gap (the question was not asked in 2002).[12] Those numbers have barely changed since the adoption of NCLB.

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Surprisingly, the increased attention paid to the achievement gap in recent years has not raised public concern about the problem. In fact, concern for the gap seems to have diminished. In 2002, 80 percent of the public said the racial achievement gap was very important, according to PDK/Gallup. By 2006 that figure had slid thirteen points—nearly back to its 2001 level—with only 67 percent deeming the gap very important.

The public is optimistic, however, that the gap can be narrowed. In 2006, 81 percent of respondents to the PDK/Gallup poll said it can be "narrowed substantially" while maintaining "high standards" for all children; just 17 percent disagreed.

Americans appear to be divided on the NCLB premise that all students should be held to a uniform standard of achievement. On the one hand, ETS reported in 2005 that 55 percent of respondents believed that "all students, teachers and schools should be held to the same standard of performance," while just 34 percent disagreed. On the other hand, the public may be less supportive of race-based reporting and uniform standards than the ETS results suggest. For instance, the 2006 PDK/Gallup poll reported that 43 percent of respondents believe that test data should be disaggregated by race, ethnicity, poverty level, disability status, and English-speaking ability, while 54 percent disagreed. Support for disaggregation had not increased at all since 2004, when the question was first asked; that year, 42 percent supported disaggregation, and 52 percent opposed it.

Remedies. Americans are of two minds about how to fix broken schools. There is evidence of support for intervention in low-performing schools—Public Agenda reported in 2001 that 74 percent of those who rated their public schools fair or poor said they would like to see more community involvement in them[13]—but little evidence of a public appetite for disruptive change. In 2001 and 2002, PDK/Gallup asked respondents whether they would prefer to see a focus on "reforming the existing public school system" or "finding an alternative" to the existing system, and both years' respondents favored reforming the current system—by a margin of 69 percent to 27 percent in 2001 and 72 percent to 24 percent in 2002.[14] This trend suggests that NCLB proponents would find more public support if they emphasized conventional school improvement over new options such as charter or virtual schools.

When the public was asked if it favored choice and tutoring as remedies for failing schools, it was extremely enthusiastic. By a margin of 90 to 9 percent, respondents favored allowing approved providers to offer after-school tutoring to students in schools deemed "in need of improvement," and by 86 to 14 percent they favored allowing students in these schools to attend another school within the district.[15] But when the treatment shifted from offering options to imposing sanctions, the public was significantly less enthusiastic. In 1999, Public Agenda asked whether respondents thought America's schools were "doing pretty well," had "some good things about them but need[ed] major change," or had "so much wrong with them that we need to create a whole new system." Just 16 percent opted for a whole new system, 19 percent said the schools were doing well, and 62 percent that they needed major change.[16]

Attitudes toward school "reconstitution" reflected those preferences. Two of the school-reconstitution options available under NCLB include changing principals and overhauling the faculty. When asked how they felt about not renewing principals or teachers at schools identified as in need of improvement, the public favored each measure, but only by a relatively modest 56 to 40 percent margin. On the more dramatic step of closing schools identified as in need of improvement, respondents were firmly opposed, with just 21 percent supporting such

a step and 77 percent opposing it.[17] Such responses reflected little support for the more aggressive interventions that NCLB envisioned for schools that persistently fail to make AYP.

Perhaps the most telling signal of the public's reluctance to "punish" low-performing schools was the 2002 response to PDK/Gallup's query about whether these schools should receive additional money from the district. By a 77 to 22 percent margin, respondents favored such action.[18] In other words, contrary to the argument that accountability requires adverse consequences for mediocre performance, the public overwhelmingly rejected such a punitive approach.

Evidence suggests that most Americans continue to be relatively happy with their local public schools, but are mixed on the state of the nation's schools as a whole. . . . There is little evidence that the existence of NCLB has affected public judgments about school quality, school choice, testing, or harsh measures for low-performing schools at all.

In 2003, PDK/Gallup asked for the first time, "If a school is identified as in need of improvement and you had a child there, would you prefer to transfer your child to a school identified as not in need of improvement or to have additional efforts made in your child's present school?" Seventy-four percent of respondents preferred additional efforts in the current school, while just 25 percent opted for a transfer. By 2006 the percentage of respondents preferring additional efforts had increased to 80 percent, with just 17 percent choosing the transfer. This response is important on two counts. First, a public that is generally supportive of choice among traditional public schools typically prefers additional school efforts over the chance to change schools. Second, the question is worded to suggest that parents would be able to move their child, yet respondents still preferred their schools' vaguely defined "additional efforts." Again, there appears to be a strong preference for reforming the familiar rather than providing a new alternative.

At the same time, however, support for charter schooling has increased sharply in recent years. By 2006 that backing was at a 53 to 34 percent margin, up markedly from the 44 to 43 percent margin reported in 2002. Support has typically wilted, however, when charters are framed as being in competition with—rather than an alternative to—traditional district schools. When asked in 2005 if they would support charter schooling if it reduced funding for the local schools, just 28 percent of respondents said yes, while 65 percent said no.[19] That was largely unchanged from the 30 to 65 percent margin reported in 2002, suggesting that growing support for charters was entirely contingent on the promise that they would not compete with public schools.[20]

Has NCLB Improved Schools?

Evidence suggests that most Americans continue to be relatively happy with their local public schools, but are mixed on the state of the nation's schools as a whole. This pattern has existed for decades and there is no evidence that three or four years under NCLB have altered it. In fact, there is little evidence that the existence of NCLB has affected public judgments about school quality, school choice, testing, or harsh measures for low-performing schools at all.

Broadly speaking, NCLB implementation has proceeded amid two conflicting public desires. While there is strong public support for "accountability" in the abstract, there is much discomfort with the various compromises required by NCLB-style accountability in practice. Consequently, those committed to an NCLB that looks a lot like the law Congress passed in 2001 will likely be successful at swaying public opinion to the degree that they frame the law as a nonthreatening system that guarantees quality and provides support and options to needy students. To the extent that the law is seen as prescriptive, disruptive, or punitive, proponents will find themselves struggling against public sentiment.

There is little evidence that NCLB has altered traditional preferences for school-reform strategies. Public Agenda reported in 2006 that when asked what position would most incline them to support a local school board candidate, 45 percent of parents said a call for "more money and smaller classes," 22 percent said support for "more testing and higher standards," and just 9 percent said a call for "charter schools [to] revitalize public education."[21] Similarly, the public broadly supports measures that promise to give more options to

families in low-performing schools, so long as those remedies are not seen as an assault on traditional district schools.

Many parents do not think schools are broken and are hesitant to embrace radical calls for change. In fact, while critics like David S. Kahn, head of a private tutoring company in New York, have argued that schools have worsened in recent decades,[22] the public disagrees. Public Agenda reported in 2006 that 61 percent of parents think schools are better today than when they were growing up, and just 14 percent think they are worse; 65 percent think schools are harder today, and just 9 percent think they are easier.[23] As AYP targets rise and more schools are labeled in need of improvement in the years ahead, public distaste for punitive measures, the genial certainty that local schools are quite good, and a belief that all students will pass the required tests may combine to undermine support for NCLB.

Finally, it is worth noting that NCLB has emboldened its proponents to a degree that could leave them out of step with public sentiment. While Americans are of two minds on the urgency of the racial achievement gap, the responsibility of the schools for the gap, as well as the practice of disaggregation, the Bush administration and NCLB allies have been aggressive about using the law's emphasis on disadvantaged children as a cudgel with which to hammer reluctant states. When Utah was on the verge of opting out of the law in 2005, the U.S. Department of Education mounted a full-scale assault, charging that NCLB critics were insufficiently concerned about the plight of minority children. The Education Trust, the militantly progressive, hard-line champion of NCLB, charged that "[s]ome lawmakers and educators in Utah are expending enormous energy to fend off . . . the federal law that aims to raise overall achievement and close gaps between [ethnic] groups."[24] Similar rhetoric has been directed by the Bush administration toward Connecticut. Because it is unclear that the public fully endorses the assumptions or machinery of NCLB, the long-term effectiveness of such tactics is uncertain. If history of other areas of policy serves as a guide, these tactics may eventually provoke a backlash against moral posturing and federal overreach.

The Future of NCLB

Those who champion NCLB as a means of radically reinventing American schooling—whether through an aggressive embrace of choice, competition, sanctions, or anything else—are challenging a broad and deep-rooted public consensus. Ultimately, they face two choices: either convince the public that preferred measures are merely efforts to reform the public schools rather than dramatically change them, or work to alter the public's preferences. If public opinion moves significantly in the years ahead, due to experience or argument, then the political debate and the vista of possibilities will expand accordingly.

AEI editorial assistant Nicole Passan worked with Mr. Hess to edit and produce this Education Outlook.

Notes

1. Jean Johnson and Ann Duffett, *Where We Are Now: 12 Things You Need to Know about Public Opinion and Public Schools* (New York: Public Agenda, 2003).

2. For a full discussion, see Frederick M. Hess and Michael J. Petrilli, *No Child Left Behind: A Primer* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), available at www.aei.org/book851/.

3. Unless otherwise noted, all PDK/Gallup Poll data is taken from 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* 88, no. 1 (September 2006): 41–53, available at www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kpollpdf.htm.

4. All ETS data is taken from Educational Testing Service, *Ready for the Real World? Americans Speak on High School Reform* (Princeton, NJ: 2005), available at www.ets.org/Media/Education_Topics/pdf/2005highschoolreform.pdf.

5. Jean Johnson, Ana Maria Arumi, and Amber Ott, *Is Support for Standards and Testing Fading? Reality Check 2006* (New York: Public Agenda, 2006).

6. Lowell C. Rose and Alec M. Gallup, "The 34th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 84, no. 1 (September 2002): 44–45, available at www.pdkmembers.org/e-GALLUP/kpoll_pdfs/pdkpoll34_2002.pdf.

7. Lowell C. Rose and Alec M. Gallup, "The 35th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 85, no. 1 (September 2003): 45, available at www.pdkmembers.org/e-GALLUP/kpoll_pdfs/pdkpoll35_2003.pdf.

8. Lowell C. Rose and Alec M. Gallup, "The 34th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools."

9. Roderick R. Paige, "Remarks of the Honorable Roderick R. Paige" (speech, National Historically Black Colleges and

Universities Conference, Alexandria, VA, September 16, 2002), available at www.ed.gov/news/speeches/2002/09/09162002.html.

10. Abigail Thernstrom and Stephan Thernstrom, *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003).

11. Lowell C. Rose and Alec M. Gallup, "The 34th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools," 52.

12. Lowell C. Rose and Alec M. Gallup, "The 33rd Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 83, no. 1 (September 2001): 53, available at www.pdkmembers.org/e-GALLUP/kpoll_pdfs/pdkpoll33_2001.pdf.

13. Steve Farkas, Patrick Foley, and Ann Duffett, *Just Waiting to Be Asked?* (New York: Public Agenda, 2001), 17.

14. Lowell C. Rose and Alec M. Gallup, "The 34th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools."

15. Ibid.

16. Steve Farkas, Jean Johnson, and Tony Foleno, *On Thin Ice: How Advocates and Opponents Could Misread the Public's Views on Vouchers and Charter Schools* (New York: Public Agenda, 1999), 30.

17. Lowell C. Rose and Alec M. Gallup, "The 34th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools."

18. Ibid.

19. The question was not asked in 2006. This omission is potentially significant because support for charter schooling increased from 49 percent for and 41 percent against in 2005, to 53 percent for and 34 percent against in 2006. It is possible that this development was accompanied by a greater public willingness to redirect funding from district schools to charter schools.

20. 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* 87, no. 1 (September 2005): 46, available at www.pdkmembers.org/e-GALLUP/kpoll_pdfs/pdkpoll37_2005.pdf.

21. Jean Johnson, Ana Maria Arumi, Amber Ott, and Michael Hamill Remaley, *Are Parents and Students Ready for More Math and Science? Reality Check 2006.*

22. David S. Kahn, "How Low Can We Go?" *Wall Street Journal*, May 26, 2006.

23. Jean Johnson, Ana Maria Arumi, and Amber Ott, *Is Support for Standards and Testing Fading? Reality Check 2006.*

24. Education Trust, "Utah Must Confront Inequities in Public Education," news release, March 1, 2005, available at www2.edtrust.org/EdTrust/Press+Room/Utah+and+NCLB.htm.