

Can NCLB Be Saved? Should It Be?



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Supporters and critics alike of the No Child Left Behind Act are beginning to suspect that the law will unravel like a cheap sweater if action is not taken soon and definitively. Two recent reports have fueled a new sense of urgency to fix NCLB or face abandoning it.

One reports on a survey of nearly 700 parents of school-age children, which found that most parents support the concept of school reform embodied by NCLB. But they oppose the punitive measures contained in the law, particularly when it comes to the schools their children attend. Civil Society Institute's Results for America project sponsored the survey by Opinion Research Corporation.

The other report comes from Harvard University, analyzing NCLB's effects during the first year of implementation, 2002-03. Analysts found that the federal government's accountability requirements have interfered with state-led school reform and assessments. The report from Harvard's Civil Rights Project also points out that NCLB's sanctions are particularly hard on schools with large populations of minority students and require much less of affluent, mainly suburban schools.

These findings compare with those of Phi Delta Kappa International's 35th annual PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, which was reported in the *Phi Delta Kappan* last September. That poll found that a majority of the public knew little about NCLB, supported the idea of school improvement and accountability, but favored strategies other than those found in NCLB for improving education for all children.

The problems fostered by NCLB work against the law's noble intent and have lead states and districts across the nation to oppose the law. For example, several districts in Connecticut and Vermont have refused federal funds rather than comply with NCLB requirements. Seven states, to date, have passed resolutions critical of the law or sought waivers of some of the law's provisions. Utah may opt out of NCLB altogether.

Common sense points to the law's most obvious flaw: absolutism. No one believes that the goal of 100% proficiency is achievable, not by 2013, not ever. And punishing schools for imperfection in an imperfect world simply is not a realistic or reasonable approach to improving education. Fixing this goal alone would be a starting point for those who would save NCLB from itself — before the backlash that is now gaining momentum forces abandonment of the law, good intent and all.



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