



# *No Child Left Behind:*

## *Noble Sentiment and Poor Design*

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*Author's Note: The paper that follows is intended to be the first in a series of papers to be published by the Schlechty Center for Leadership in School Reform under the heading of "Occasional Papers." These papers will, as the name implies, appear occasionally. Some will be written by me. Others may be written by other Schlechty Center staff or by people who are in one of the several Schlechty Center sponsored networks.*

## **No Child Left Behind: Noble Sentiment and Poor Design**

By: Phillip C. Schlechty

In my role as CEO of the Schlechty Center for Leadership in School Reform many clients have asked me for my opinion on the issues related to the federal education legislation that falls under the general heading of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). These requests are coming with sufficient frequency that I believe it is time to provide clients of the Schlechty Center a detailed statement of my views. If those outside the Schlechty Center family find what I have to say of interest I will be pleased, but my primary audience is the men and women with whom I and members of the Schlechty Center staff are working to ensure that public education continues to have a vital place in the lives of all Americans.

It is not my intent to provide a blanket indictment or to advocate abandonment of what is, in the main, a noble effort. My intent in this article is to detail some concerns that I believe must be addressed if NCLB is to achieve what I think should be its goal; ensuring that all children have the opportunity to attend great schools and receive the benefit of an excellent education.

As the reader will quickly see, I am not convinced that as it is currently being implemented NCLB can achieve this goal. Rather, what seems more likely to happen is that a few bad schools will become better than they now are, but these schools will never rise to the level of greatness that all children deserve in their schools. Equally worrisome is the prospect that in the effort to make bad schools rise to the level of mediocrity, many good schools may become mediocre as well, and few of the many good schools we have in America will be encouraged to become great.

## A Preliminary View

Having had experience with supporters of NCLB, I know that some may take what I am presenting here as evidence that I am opposed to high standards and to testing. At the outset, therefore, I want to stipulate that I am in favor of the notion of clear, compelling, and challenging standards *for schools* as well as for students. I also believe that testing is one important means of determining whether some of these standards are being met.

There is, however, much more to improving schools than setting standards and attempting to enforce them. If American schools are to educate our children so that they can lead productive and satisfying adult lives, then the systems in which the schools operate must be changed in profound ways. Furthermore, accountability must rest with each community and every school. While NCLB makes a worthwhile attempt to address issues of accountability, it does so at the expense of the very individuals it seeks to assist. If a major effort to improve public schools is to succeed long-term, a number of issues surrounding the NCLB legislation must be addressed:

- NCLB gives standardized testing *the* central place in assessing school quality. Standardized testing, regardless of the way it is done, is neither an accurate nor adequate measure of school quality. A too-heavy reliance on test scores as measures of school quality will result in some schools appearing to be much better than they are and some much worse, just as too-heavy reliance on quarterly profit and loss statements can make business corporations appear to be in better or worse shape than they are.
- The emphasis NCLB gives to the development of low-level skills in reading and mathematics, while laudable on the surface, can serve to distract attention from other curriculum areas that should be of equal concern to citizens in a democracy. Under pressure to produce test scores in reading and arithmetic, teachers may overlook or look past, history, art, music, and even science. That this is already happening cannot be denied.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Amanda Ripley, "Beating the Bubble Test," *Time Magazine*, March 1, 2004.

- NCLB gives preference to programs that can be “scientifically demonstrated” to work in existing schools, but its definition of *science* excludes any science other than that which involves the experimental method. There is much that affects student learning that cannot be studied through experimentation, and to overlook or look past these things is to miss much that is important regarding the quality of schools and life therein.
- NCLB has an implicit bias toward immediacy and the “quick fix,” exemplified by the tendency to give preference to programs that result in quickly improved test scores. This means that programs and activities that are intended to produce profound changes in schools and long-term improvements in the quality of student learning will be discounted in favor of programs that produce short-term and possibly less significant results.
- The bias of NCLB toward short-term results will almost certainly discourage pursuit of dramatic changes in educational practice, the kind of changes that must occur if America is ever to realize the dream of ensuring that all children are well educated and that they all achieve at high levels. Unless there is some near-term evidence that dramatic changes are underway in public education, it seems likely that the schools will be abandoned by increasing numbers of middle class families, as well as less affluent families that place a high premium on quality education. The consequence will be that the public schools will be transformed into highly-regimented training centers for the children of the poor, especially poor children of color and those who are recent immigrants.
- NCLB is clearly more focused on fixing truly “bad” schools than on making good schools great.<sup>2</sup> Though it is essential to ensure that no student is forced to attend a truly bad school, and there are far too many bad schools, there is a real possibility that in the effort to improve a relatively few bad schools, reformers will adopt strategies that lead to regression toward the mean.

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<sup>2</sup> Obviously I did not coin the term “good to great.” For that turn of a phrase I, like many others, must give credit to James Collins. See James Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't*, (New York: Harper-Collins, 2001).

The strategies needed to improve test scores in low-performing schools may, in fact, be counterproductive in schools where the vast majority of students are already performing well on these tests. Put differently, in the well-intended effort to ensure that no child is left behind, we stand in danger of abandoning the core promise of the American dream, the promise that through the provision of *great* public schools every child in America will have the opportunity to *get ahead*, however he or she comes to define the word. If all children are to learn at high levels it will not be enough to make bad schools adequate or tolerable. What we need are strategies that encourage all schools and those who lead them to strive for greatness. Like so many other initiatives inspired by bureaucratic impulses, NCLB is in danger of substituting mediocrity for excellence, thereby ensuring that those NCLB most aimed to help—the poor and, especially, poor minority children—will still not experience the excellence they deserve. At the same time, these policies may encourage many who are now sending their children to good schools to abandon them on the grounds that the strategies being used to improve bad schools are making good schools mediocre.

### **The Testing Problem**

Central to the controversy over the effectiveness of NCLB is its reliance on standardized tests as the primary measure of school quality. The problem, of course, is found in determining whether what is tested is in fact what students really need to know and to be able to do in order to be effective citizens, thoughtful human beings, and bearers of the markings of what might be thought of as culturally literate and well-educated individuals. It is certainly true that the requirement of testing does not *preclude* teachers from teaching this “something more,” even if it is not tested. Unfortunately, there is a rule in organizational life that runs as follows: “We attend to those things that are measured, particularly to those measures that are taken into account by people who count.”

*If improved test scores are highly valued by those who count, such scores will almost certainly be attained by some means. Unfortunately, when that which is being tested excludes much that is important to ensuring quality education for all children, the potential for the emphasis on test scores to distort the purposes of schooling in America is quite real. One should never confuse good test scores with a guarantee that the producer of the score has the qualities of mind and of character that great schools should aim at developing.*

A second problem is that standardized tests seldom, if ever, reveal whether knowledge gained is in keeping with the collective goals of the community and society. A standardized test cannot, for example, reveal whether or not facts learned in a history class and demonstrated on a paper-and-pencil test will come into play when the student is called upon to make a decision regarding his or her position on an issue such as immigration. This means that there is no way to differentiate between students who have a profound understanding of what they have learned and those who have a superficial understanding adequate only to producing test scores.

There are, to be sure, some tests that attempt to address this issue. This is, after all, what authentic assessment is all about. Unfortunately, authentic assessments, while adequate to persuade particular audiences in specific situations, are generally not up to the task of convincing universal audiences in situations that can be generalized.<sup>3</sup> NCLB seeks programs that work, or claim to work, in all situations.

Proponents of “scientifically-demonstrated” programs that define science only in terms of experimental models, which is the case with NCLB, are not likely to embrace authentic assessments as a reasonable basis for evaluating the quality of schools. Such assessments introduce a great deal of uncontrolled variance into the process precisely because they take local context into account. Equally damning, at least in the eyes of those who take a *hard* line on the issue of science, authentic assessments often use data that are difficult to convert into a form that can be treated with statistical procedures.

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<sup>3</sup> Ernest House discusses the difference between persuasive and convincing evaluations in his book *Evaluation with Validity*. See Ernest House, *Evaluating With Validity* (New York: Sage Publications, 1980). Proponents of NCLB might do well to read this book in preparation for any future actions they might want to take.

Not only does NCLB seem to be oriented toward *context-oblivious* evaluations rather than *context-specific* evaluations, but also it is clear that, political rhetoric notwithstanding, the idea of local control and local decision making have little place in the NCLB agenda. Local officials are free to choose only so long as they choose from a predetermined menu, and so long as the results produced conform to a predetermined formula—a formula developed and enforced by federal bureaucrats.<sup>4</sup> This seems a rather peculiar posture for those who claim to be part of the conservative tradition in American life.

### **Retention of Knowledge**

The question of *retention of knowledge* also presents a problem for those who would use standardized tests as the primary means of assessing the merit and worth of schools.

Because standardized tests are given at specified points in time, they reveal little about retention of knowledge. Knowledge gained and lost over a short period of time must certainly be of less value than knowledge gained and retained over a long period of time. It also seems reasonable to argue that schools and teachers that help students develop and acquire knowledge that they retain over a long period of time are qualitatively better than schools that focus primarily on short-term results.

There is little doubt that schools where students do not learn enough to do even moderately well on most of the standardized tests used under the auspices of NCLB are probably bad schools. It may even be the case that schools where *all* students learn what they need to learn to do well on these tests, even if they quickly forget most of what they learned when they “reviewed” for the test, are better schools than are schools where all students or particular categories of students do poorly on the tests they are given. It is doubtful, however, that such schools are really *good* schools, even though the criteria of NCLB would encourage the public to believe that they are.

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<sup>4</sup>The referent here is the procedures used to determine “adequate yearly progress,” but we should also be concerned about the procedures used to determine the effects and effectiveness of school improvement efforts and the failure of those who are developing these procedures to be sensitive to local context variables.

What seems to be beyond dispute is that truly *great* schools are schools where nearly all students learn a great deal, and where they develop such a profound understanding of what they learn that they retain that learning over a sustained period of time. More than that, students in such schools can use what they learn in a variety of contexts and come to appreciate how disciplined knowledge can be used to advance their understanding of what is going on in the world around them, and of what might be happening to them and to their neighbors. In a democracy such learning is essential, especially in an age of information overload and media manipulation of public sentiment.

The kind of testing NCLB encourages almost certainly will discourage schools and teachers from addressing what Bloom<sup>5</sup> and his colleagues have called “higher-order” learning. The fact is that the more complex and profound the knowledge to be tested, the more difficult it is to construct a test that is sufficiently objective to meet the standards of “science,” i.e., the standards set by those bent on pushing standardized testing as the solution to the ills of our schools. As a consequence, tests—at least those that are used to evaluate schools—are likely to be more concerned with sampling knowledge at the lower end of a scale of complexity and profundity.<sup>6</sup> This tendency pushes schools and teachers to give preference to teaching students those things that can be easily and objectively tested. As a consequence, higher-order learning (learning that involves a profound grasp of complex information and ideas) comes to be devalued. *The result of the effort to ensure that “no child is left behind” is that we stand in danger of ensuring that few students, at least in public schools, will ever “get ahead.”*

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<sup>5</sup> Benjamin S. Bloom et al. (ed.), *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I, The Cognitive Domain* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1956.)

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Bloom and his colleagues have provided educators with a very useful and widely-used taxonomy that uses a continuum to describe the kind of knowledge and skills being tested. At the lowest level, test items assess the recall of facts. At the highest level, a good test requires evaluation and synthesis. The higher up the scale one goes on Bloom’s Taxonomy, the more difficult it is to construct tests that are objective and that can be scored in a way that is sufficiently efficient in terms of the time and resources required for a mass audience. The result is that most tests used to assess school performance tend toward the lower end of Bloom’s Taxonomy. Some of the more sophisticated tests move up to the middle ranges of the taxonomy (analysis and application). Seldom, however, do standardized tests assess the student’s ability to evaluate and synthesize information, and when they do, the procedures used (for example, portfolio assessments) are viewed with suspicion by many who want to use “hard science” to assess the effectiveness of schools.

## Science or Scientism?

Ideology has to do with the use of ideas to further the agendas of particular groups, parties or interests. The way the term “science” is used by many of the proponents of NCLB refers more to ideology than to an appeal for objectivity, self-correcting processes, and disciplined discourse and inquiry. Even the American Educational Research Association, certainly an advocate of science as applied to educational problems, recognized this fact when one of its standing bodies endorsed the following statement:

The fact is that there is much about schools and the schooling process that cannot be understood through experimental studies. Indeed, there is so much about schooling that is so context-driven that any effort to understand schools and school quality by fastening on, as NCLB does, the characteristics of children in schools and giving scant or any attention to the conditions in which the schools exist must be misleading.<sup>7</sup>

A school standing in the middle of a wooded lot on the edge of a small town in rural Minnesota that serves primarily poor children is certainly in a different context than is a school that serves children that are equally poor in the heart of inner-city Minneapolis. Teachers who have graduated from a rural high school in North Dakota where they now teach are likely to present students with a qualitatively different kind of experience than are teachers who commute from the suburbs to teach in an inner-city school—even when the credentials of the two sets of teachers may “objectively” seem the same.

In the 1950s and 1960s, scholars of a liberal bent used test scores to demonstrate that differences between and among schools make little difference in the life chances of children. Society, rather than the schools, was viewed as the source of variance in student learning. Nowadays conservatives are using the same types of test-based data to support their claim that variance in schools is the only meaningful determinant of variance in student outcomes. Clearly, both the left and the right use “science” to justify their claims. “Science” so used is not science: it is “scientism.”

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<sup>7</sup>“Minutes of the Council,” *Educational Researcher* (Volume 32, Number 5: June/July 2003, pp.39-45).

## **Innovation or Enhancement?**

In his book *The Innovator's Dilemma*,<sup>8</sup> Clayton Christensen distinguishes between two types of innovations: those that are sustaining and those that are disruptive. Sustaining innovations are intended to improve effectiveness and efficiency and to make it possible for the present system to perform *up to capacity*. Disruptive innovations call upon the system, and those who work in it, to do things they have never done. Sustaining innovations are sufficiently congruent with existing systems that they have little impact on either the structure or the culture of the system. Disruptive innovations, if they are to be employed effectively, require dramatic alteration in both the structure and the culture of the organization.

Sustaining innovations are neither more nor less than extensions of the present systems. For example, PowerPoint is an electronic elaboration of the slate board and the overhead projector. The use of PowerPoint does not require an alteration in the role of the teacher or any other structural aspect of the school. It simply makes it easier for teachers to do what they have always done, though perhaps more colorfully, effectively, and efficiently.

Disruptive innovations, on the other hand, require changes in the way vital functions are carried out in the organization, such as the way people and programs are evaluated, the way new members are recruited and inducted, and so on. Such changes are *systemic* changes. They involve alteration in the structure of rules, roles, and relationships, and in the culture in which they are embedded so that critical functions of the organization (recruitment, induction, and evaluation) can be carried out in dramatically different ways. For example, if teachers are expected to work in teams or to make decisions collectively, then the definition of the role of "teacher" will likely need to be changed, and the authority ascribed to that role will need to be modified. It is clearly easier to install innovations that work in the present system than to re-invent the system itself.

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<sup>8</sup> Clayton M. Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma* (Boston: Harvard University Business Press, 1997).

NCLB confronts those who would improve America's schools with a basic problem: because of the bias toward immediate results, school improvement efforts likely to be approved of in the NCLB framework are limited to those that are achievable within the context of the present systems that shape behavior in schools.<sup>9</sup> The reason for this is probably obvious. The installation of disruptive innovations—those that will be needed if schools are to ensure that all children learn at high levels—requires supportive changes in the culture of schools and in the social and political structures that are required by this culture. Such changes take time and are not immediately reflected in test scores.

The consequence is, or may be, that the only kinds of reforms that will produce the types of results demanded by NCLB are those that occur *outside* the context of public schools, for example, charter schools or entrepreneurial online ventures. Because they are new, such ventures do not typically have an existing structure and culture with which to contend. These new ventures start with a new slate. Existing schools must contend with the past as well as invent the future.

Thus, while public schools are compelled by NCLB to try to make schools work *up to* their present capacity by installing sustaining innovations that have been shown to produce short-term gains in test scores, those working outside the system of public education will be positioned to employ powerful innovations that go beyond the capacity of the present system, but which will make possible dramatic improvements in student learning. Should this happen, the future of public education in America will be bleak indeed. And, without a strong public education system committed to excellence for all students, the result may be excellence for the few and mediocrity for the masses.

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<sup>9</sup> It is not a secret that large publishing companies and the designers of some so-called research-based programs spend a great deal of time and money attempting to persuade government officials to look with favor on the programs and materials in which they have an interest. They also work hard to rationalize their efforts at persuasion by appeals to “science.” In this regard, they behave no differently than do lobbyists for the pharmaceutical industry or the automobile industry. There could be no clearer example of what the word “scientism” means.

## **Bad Schools, Good Schools, and Great Schools**

There seems to be a consensus that a preponderance of what some would call “really bad” schools are in urban areas. When schools in impoverished rural areas are included, most of the “bad” schools in America can be identified.

It is also the case that poor children attending schools in more affluent communities, and poor children of color in particular, do not do as well on standardized tests and on many other measures of achievement as do their classmates. *Indeed, one of the positive benefits of NCLB is that it makes this fact painfully obvious.* The fact is that the education of poor children, especially poor children in urban schools, has long been a focus of attention by the federal government, and for the most part this attention has yielded meager results.

By continuing to concentrate attention on fixing truly bad schools, as opposed to inspiring excellence in all schools, NCLB distracts attention from the fact that most schools in America are not bad at all. Indeed, most are pretty good schools.<sup>10</sup> The problem is that too few are great schools, and what America needs are great schools for all children.

The intent of NCLB is noble, but the design is flawed. It is, of course, essential to address the problems of these truly bad schools, but it is also essential that the goal be to achieve greatness and excellence rather than a slightly improved level of mediocre performance. As things now stand, even if the results of NCLB turn out as intended, all that will be guaranteed to poor children is that they will possess enough short-term knowledge to do relatively well on tests that do not assess higher-order learning.

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<sup>10</sup> As the *Phi Delta Kappan* annual Gallup poll consistently shows, most parents are generally satisfied with the schools their children attend, though they, like non-parents, are less happy about the condition of American public education more generally. Many professional educators also believe that the schools of America are in better shape than some critics would have the public believe. Unfortunately, when educators try to make the affirmative case for the public schools, they too often become so defensive that it makes them appear to be whiners and self-serving apologists for the status quo rather than persons committed to quality education for all children.

There will, however, be no reason to think that the students who learn enough to perform in this way will be able to use what they have learned in contexts other than the context of the test, nor will it be likely that they will retain what they have learned so that the learning affects their lives after school is out. This being the case, poor children may end up being better trained, but better training is not the same thing as good education.

### **Equity *and* Excellence**

Historically, high-quality education has been reserved for the elite. Today both conscience and reality make it essential that America's schools provide an elite education for nearly every child. NCLB may reduce the number of really bad schools that exist by producing more mediocre schools in their stead.

None of this, however, addresses the question of how America will ensure that all children have access to truly great schools, that is: schools in which nearly all students learn at high levels; schools in which what students learn is of great value to the student and to the society; schools in which what students learn is retained over time; schools in which students truly become life-long learners; and schools in which students learn to be well-educated citizens who can use their minds well, even in the face of the many "hidden persuaders"<sup>11</sup> bent on controlling their thoughts and actions.

### **Where to from Here?**

The most pressing concern when one looks at NCLB is that in the effort to comply with the mandates flowing out of this legislation, educators may be discouraged from pursuing the kind of changes needed to ensure that all students have access to truly great schools. To bring about the changes that will be needed to ensure that all children can get ahead, school leaders need to be encouraged to transform their schools from places that produce compliance to places that encourage and nurture engagement.

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<sup>11</sup> Vance Packard coined the term "hidden persuaders" in his now classic book by the same title. See Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: Pocket Books, updated Edition 1984).

As years of research relating to time on task has shown, compliance can produce test scores.

Compliance will not, however, produce knowledge that will be retained or employed outside the context of school.

NCLB encourages school leaders to find better and more efficient ways to produce compliance, compliance sufficient to ensure: that all children learn enough to do passably well on some standardized test; that they attend school regularly, even if the attendance is grudging; and that they stick around long enough to graduate. This may be some form of improvement, but it certainly will not produce the excellence that Americans have the right to expect of their schools. Excellence will only occur when the compliance models that produce quick gains in test scores are replaced by innovations that increase student engagement in academic work.

The introduction of such changes is certain to be disruptive and will require time to show positive effects. Unfortunately, those who are most adamant about supporting NCLB have little sympathy for such a long-term agenda. They, like some business leaders who have run their businesses into the ground in order to produce quarterly profits, want results now, and they are only concerned with the immediate bottom line—by which they mean test scores.

Educational leaders, like those business leaders who have built their businesses to last over time, must be concerned with results too, but the results they must concentrate on are those that are most likely to ensure long-term survival and organizational integrity; that is, results that serve the customer well. Businesses that make a profit over the long term do so by providing products and services that customers continue to want to buy, not that they feel compelled to buy. Schools that want to improve student learning do so by providing students with schoolwork that engages their minds, as opposed to schoolwork that they simply feel forced to complete, forget, and move beyond.

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