Standards-Based Education and the National Education Association

One of the fundamental principles of standards-based education is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. When school practices are reflective of state standards, when curriculum, instruction, and assessment work together, when all of these parts complement and reinforce one another—that is, when the system is aligned—standards-based education fulfills its promise of providing high-quality instruction for every student in the nation.

Throughout the United States, support for standards-based education remains strong. Teachers and schools across the country are using standards to improve student learning—a result of activities that began more than two decades ago with the release of the landmark 1983 report from the National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*. Certainly the standards movement, as originally envisioned, still holds enormous promise for U.S. students and schools, and it retains strong support from the National Education Association (NEA) and its 2.7 million members.

The NEA also supports the goals of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001: high expectations for every child, regardless of background or abilities, as well as a highly qualified teacher in every classroom. We are committed to increasing the effectiveness of the flagship education law in the
areas of academic achievement (Adequate Yearly Progress [AYP]), annual testing, teacher and paraprofessional quality, and school improvement. We plan to continue as the leading advocate for high standards and strong accountability in public education at the state and local levels.

As the media have reported, the NEA has also criticized some of the provisions of NCLB as well as selected aspects of its implementation. Recently we presented the U.S. Department of Education with a request for revisions to the law (see Appendix), several of which I will discuss below.

The NEA and No Child Left Behind

In the most general terms, the NEA believes that the picture presented so far by NCLB’s system of test results and ratings is overly complex, muddled, and often misleading. NCLB is test-driven reform that assumes that teachers can be led to perform better if they are made more accountable for student test scores and that teachers will improve their instruction if sanctions are placed on schools that are having difficulties. Under this law, student scores in reading and math are the basis for school accountability. We consider this an excessively narrow definition of accountability, and we also disagree with NCLB’s emphasis on sanctions rather than on other kinds of motivators, such as public recognition for outstanding schools and teachers.

It also should be pointed out that the nation’s schools, according to many observers, have often received inconsistent and inadequate support in their efforts to meet NCLB’s goals. Several recent reports from the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) have identified many of the problems. In July 2003 the GAO criticized the Department of Education for failing to provide adequate and timely information and assistance to the states in the implementation of NCLB’s requirement that all teachers be “highly qualified” by the 2005–2006 academic year. The NEA endorses this provision of NCLB without reservation; research supports the conclusion that children who have highly qualified teachers—teachers with content knowledge, experience, and pedagogical skills—benefit from their teachers’ expertise. But the GAO found that many states lack the capacity either to
track or to analyze the data needed to determine the number of teachers who are “highly qualified” according to NCLB’s definition. State officials said they did not have the data systems that could track, for example, teacher qualifications by subject; their programs had been developed years ago to document teachers’ credentials for certification purposes and they lacked the resources to update them according to the NCLB criteria. Some respondents added that for teachers in certain categories (such as those in alternative certification programs or special education) the “highly qualified” criteria also had changed, so that they were not even sure what the current standards were.

A GAO report the following year (GAO 2004b) found that schools did not receive the data needed to determine their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) status in a timely manner. In most of the school districts across the country that the GAO visited in 2003 and 2004, district officials found themselves having to wait several weeks or even months after the beginning of the school year to receive their school’s AYP determination. Therefore, the legally mandated requirement that Title I schools judged “In Need of Improvement” provide parents with the option of transferring their children to another school had to be acted upon on the basis of preliminary and often inadequate data. According to another 2004 GAO report (GAO 2004a), 50 percent of the states still had not had their assessment and accountability plans fully approved by the U.S. Department of Education by July of that year, although many of those state departments of education were making critical decisions about their schools even without that approval. The U.S. Department of Education agreed with the GAO’s conclusion that it needed to develop a written plan to help states meet the 2005–2006 NCLB requirements for standards and assessment systems, although it disagreed that there was a need to identify the steps required, interim goals, review schedules, or timelines. The Department of Education was satisfied (though clearly the GAO was not) that “it had a process to monitor states’ progress, though not in writing.”
Teachers' Responses

Without these and other major revisions and corrections, the NEA believes that NCLB does not bring us closer to fulfilling the goals it sets out. In the summer of 2004, I had the privilege of meeting with 250 teachers from 27 states and to spend an hour with each state group. When I asked these teachers how NCLB was affecting their teaching, they reported that they were working harder than ever before but often without seeing very much improvement, if any, in their students’ scores. They felt under extreme pressure to show results, but they often did not feel they were getting the kind of staff development they needed to do so.

Many teachers reported, specifically, that they did not have the time, expertise, or information needed to analyze student data, diagnose areas of strength or weakness, or devise new teaching strategies to help their students perform better. Most reported they had little or no training in this kind of analysis, and furthermore, that the data often were returned too late for them to make instructional adjustments. Also, many said that they were provided with limited instruction in regard to the contents of their state standards and little explanation of how those standards were related to curriculum or instruction.

A study conducted by the University of Illinois on teachers’ understanding of the Illinois Learning Standards (ILS) (DeStefano & Prestine, 2002) would tend to support many of these comments. According to the authors’ calculation, fewer than half of the schools in their study had reached the stage at which standards were well known and accepted by most teachers and administrators. For schools that had reached that level, most were “generally satisfied with their progress” but had neither “a clear sense of how to further ILS implementation” nor “a strong desire to do so.” In many districts, although school curricula had been aligned with the state standards, changes in classroom instruction and assessments had not followed suit. “Although positive attitudes concerning ILS prevailed,” they said, “implementation did not increase significantly.”

The teachers I talked to also expressed serious frustration with the public’s tendency to place all need for change at the classroom door. They seemed
to agree that it is a school’s leadership that makes the most difference in terms of whether a school is able to change past practices and implement programs that support student performance; the most important measures, they said, have to do with changing school schedules, enforcing attendance policies, arranging for appropriate staff development, and improving schoolwide discipline.

It should be acknowledged that in some of these meetings teachers from certain districts reported that they were, in fact, receiving critical help in many of the areas mentioned. They reported that their districts were offering data analysis workshops, arranging for mentor teachers to provide feedback on their instruction, and helping them with strategies for improving the teaching of reading and math. Indeed, following the publication of the Illinois report cited above, the Illinois Department of Education began offering workshops and in-service training for its teachers. Yet even those teachers who reported on continuing education and professional development opportunities often spoke of the need for more time to reflect on this new knowledge and its classroom applications and for collaboration and sharing with their colleagues. They also stated that the allocation of resources often did not match the NCLB goals of raising standards for all children, including those who have been most underserved by the public schools. In general, more affluent suburban districts appeared to be providing the greatest support to their faculty and staff members.

In terms of their specific criticisms of NCLB, teachers reported grave concerns in regard to the narrowing of the curriculum that seems to be taking place as a result of NCLB’s focus on reading and math. These concerns are supported by Gerald Bracey’s 2004 annual “Bracey Report” in the Phi Kappa Deltan, which concludes with the observation that “far too many news stories this year began with sentences like these”:

“To give her third-graders an extra 50 minutes of reading daily, the principal has eliminated music, art, and gym.” “Raymond Park Middle School lost its two art teachers last year. Home economics was eliminated, along with most foreign language classes and some physical education
classes.” “School districts around the nation have cut classroom time and 
funding for art and music.” . . . The Council for Basic Education . . . found 
NCLB producing “academic atrophy” in social studies, history, geography, 
civics, languages, and the arts.

“A little more of this,” says Bracey, “and we can declare, ‘No Education 
Left.’”

Teachers also reported that while they believe in accountability and in 
setting high academic standards for all students, accountability must 
measure instructional performance fairly and be based on more than just 
one standardized test. Some teachers thought that the law’s system of tests, 
rankings, and sanctions was a bureaucratic interference with their ongoing 
efforts to boost achievement for individual students and that the law 
neglected to focus attention and resources on the students most in need of 
help. Teachers felt, for example, that the disaggregation of reported data 
has led to both good and bad changes. On the one hand, some teachers 
stated that the data have allowed their schools to recognize for the first 
time that they are not meeting the needs of all students. On the other 
hand, some expressed frustration with having improved group data but 
not enough individual data. A great deal of teacher frustration appears 
to center on the testing of students with disabilities and students with 
limited English proficiency. Many did not understand why, even with the 
disaggregation of data, NCLB focuses on school accountability rather than 
on the performance of individuals. One comment I heard frequently was, 
“How can I help a student unless I have multiple-year data on that student, 
not just the scores of one class compared to the scores of another class?”

**Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)**

One clear example of the confusion between group and individual 
achievement that frustrates the teachers is the fact that many schools in 
which students’ scores have improved markedly still fail to make AYP. This 
is the case in California, for example, where thousands of schools are facing 
sanctions despite evidence that students are achieving at higher levels. 
Generally speaking, in order for a school to fulfill the AYP requirements
of NCLB, the school and all of the subgroups of its student population (e.g., white, black, Hispanic, economically disadvantaged, students with disabilities) must achieve target scores. Those target scores are determined by the state, as are the number of individuals considered as constituting a subgroup. Therefore, these standards are inconsistent from state to state. They also are unaligned with the measurement and evaluation systems that many states have established on their own, many of them dating from before the advent of NCLB. This leads to a situation in which many schools in many states have received top ratings on state accountability systems but have failed to make AYP.

The best examples are in Florida, where 827 schools given an “A” rating by Governor Jeb Bush based on their overall performance on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test failed to make AYP in 2004 because they had not met the state targets for certain subgroups. In North Carolina, 155 schools designated as North Carolina “Schools of Excellence” or “Schools of Distinction” based on the state’s “ABCs of Public Education” accountability program suffered the same fate. These conflicting ratings confuse the public and undermine the entire concept of accountability. As noted by the Florida Education Association, “Florida is confusing parents and the public with its two grading systems that characterize many public schools as good and bad at the same time. This has led some parents to lose faith in their public schools.”

On a more positive note, the NEA has registered its approval of the May 2005 modification of the NCLB requirement that 95 percent of students in all groups in a school be present on the day of a test for the results to be counted toward AYP. That revision, at least, should eliminate the situation in which Arizona found itself in 2004, when 40 of the state’s top schools received federal failing labels solely because a handful of students were absent on the day of the test. However, for the most part, schools are still measured on the basis of one day of testing.
Concluding Recommendations

Teachers nationwide are more aware of student data than they have ever been, and many are working to improve instruction when provided with accurate information. Teachers welcome accountability and standards. They know that some schools need improvement and that not all schools have high standards for all students. But teachers also know that accurate, reliable testing that is aligned with the standards is only one part of the accountability system; they believe that school improvement must be broad-based and that success on all levels must be credited. If asked, teachers themselves will tell you how to improve their schools. We must pay attention to the recent research and surveys in regard to teacher responses to NCLB and learn from their insights. Ultimately, they are the ones who are responsible for student success or failure.

While many of us may have different positions on various aspect of the law based on concerns raised during the implementation of NCLB, we believe that a number of significant corrections are necessary to make the act fair and effective. We are concerned, specifically, that the act (1) overemphasizes standardized testing, narrowing curriculum and instruction to focus on test preparation rather than on richer academic learning; (2) overidentifies schools in need of improvement; (3) uses sanctions that do not improve schools; (4) in some cases inappropriately excludes low-scoring children from the statistics in order to boost test results; and (5) provides inadequate funding to schools. The NEA has provided the Department of Education with a request for revisions to the law that include the following:

- expanding school accountability beyond the current measure of percent of students proficient on one day on two tests (reading and math)—i.e., allowing states to measure progress by using students’ growth in achievement as well as their performance in relation to predetermined levels of academic proficiency and moving from an overwhelming reliance on standardized tests to using multiple indicators of student achievement;
• decreasing the testing burden on states, schools, and districts by allowing states to assess students annually in selected grades in elementary, middle, and high schools;

• providing more flexibility and more reasonable rules for assessing English language learners (ELL)—even beyond the modifications announced by the Education Secretary in 2004;

• ensuring that improvement plans have been allowed sufficient time to take hold before sanctions that could undermine existing reform efforts are applied;

• extending the revised policies regarding small rural schools and the “highly qualified” teacher requirement to teachers in urban schools as well as certain categories of teachers (such as those in special education) who deserve similar consideration;

• limiting the designation of schools in need of improvement, corrective action, or restructuring to those schools in which the same subgroup of students in the same subject fails to meet AYP for two or more consecutive years;

• targeting choice and supplemental services to students in the particular subgroups that are not meeting AYP standards;

• fully funding Title I to ensure that 100 percent of eligible children are served; and

• raising authorized levels of NCLB funding to cover a substantial percentage of the costs that states and districts incur to carry out these recommendations and funding the law fully without reducing expenditures for other education programs.

Overall, the law’s emphasis needs to shift from applying sanctions to a school that has failed to raise test scores to holding states and localities accountable for making the systemic changes that improve student achievement.
Appendix

Recommended Changes in NCLB

**Progress Measurement**

1. Replace the law’s arbitrary proficiency targets with ambitious achievement targets based on rates of success actually achieved by the most effective public schools.

2. Allow states to measure progress by using students’ growth in achievement as well as their performance in relation to pre-determined levels of academic proficiency.

3. Ensure that states and school districts regularly report to the government and the public their progress in implementing systemic changes to enhance educator, family, and community capacity to improve student learning.

4. Provide a comprehensive picture of students’ and schools’ performance by moving from an overwhelming reliance on standardized tests to using multiple indicators of student achievement in addition to the tests.

5. Fund research and development for more effective accountability systems that better meet the goal of high academic achievement for all children.

**Assessments**

6. Help states develop assessment systems that include district and school-based measures in order to provide better, more timely information about student learning.

7. Strengthen enforcement of NCLB provisions requiring that assessments must:
   - be aligned with state content and achievement standards;
   - be used for purposes for which they are valid and reliable;
• be consistent with nationally recognized professional and technical standards;
• be of adequate technical quality for each purpose required by the Act;
• provide multiple, up-to-date measures of student performance, including measures that assess higher order thinking skills and understanding; and
• provide useful diagnostic information to improve teaching and learning.

8. Decrease the testing burden on states, schools, and districts by allowing states to assess students annually in selected grades in elementary, middle schools, and high schools.

**Building Capacity**

9. Ensure changes in teacher and administrator preparation and continuing professional development that research evidence and experience indicate improve educational quality and student achievement.

10. Enhance state and local capacity to effectively implement the comprehensive changes required to increase the knowledge and skills of administrators, teachers, families, and communities to support high student achievement.

**Sanctions**

11. Ensure that improvement plans are allowed sufficient time to take hold before applying sanctions; sanctions should not be applied if they undermine existing effective reform efforts.

12. Replace sanctions that do not have a consistent record of success with interventions that enable schools to make changes that result in improved student achievement.
**Funding**

13. Raise authorized levels of NCLB funding to cover a substantial percentage of the costs that states and districts will incur to carry out these recommendations, and fully fund the law at those levels without reducing expenditures for other educational purposes.

14. Fully fund Title I to ensure that 100 percent of eligible children are served.

We, the undersigned, will work for the adoption of these recommendations as central structural changes needed to NCLB at the same time that we advance our individual organization’s proposals.

- Advancement Project
- American Association of School Administrators
- American Association of University Women
- ASPIRA
- Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO)
- Campaign for Fiscal Equity /ACCESS
- Children’s Defense Fund
- Citizens for Effective Schools
- Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders
- Council for Exceptional Children
- Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform
- Division for Learning Disabilities of the Council for Exceptional Children (DLD/CEC)
- FairTest: The National Center for Open and Fair Testing
- Forum for Education and Democracy
- International Reading Association
- Learning Disabilities Association of America
- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
- National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE)
- National Alliance of Black School Educators
- National Association of School Psychologists
- National Association of Social Workers
- National Council of Teachers of English
- National Down Syndrome Congress
- National Education Association
- National School Boards Association
- National Urban League
- Service Employees International Union
- School Social Work Association of America
References


———. 2004b. “No Child Left Behind Act: Education needs to provide additional assistance and conduct implementation studies for school choice provision.” December.