



Stecher, Brian M.; Epstein, Scott; Hamilton, Laura S.; Marsh, Julie A.; Robyn, Abby; McCombs, Jennifer Sloan; Russell, Jennifer & Naftel, Scott. (2008). *Pain and Gain. Implementing No Child Left Behind in Three States, 2004-2006*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

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Since being signed into law in 2002, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has dominated the landscape of accountability and testing in the US. *Pain and Gain* sheds light on how this law has been received by math and science educators in elementary and middle schools. Commissioned by the NSF and conducted by the RAND Corporation, the report includes extensive survey results from teachers, school principals, and district superintendents. The focus of the book is not policy analysis but rather to provide a data-driven, context-rich window into the opinions of the people actually executing NCLB. As such, *Pain and Gain* is a superb resource for those already familiar with the basic tenets of the law, but seeking a deeper understanding into how it has been received.

The overall report leads readers logically from design to findings to conclusions. The book opens with an

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executive summary that conveys the overall methods and results in four compactly written pages. The first chapter provides an overview of NCLB and describes the methods of the study. The following three chapters describe results for each of the states examined: California, Georgia, and Pennsylvania. The closing chapter then summarizes the results, noting trends and contrasts between states. Finally, a substantial appendix provides detailed survey data.

Each of the chapters on state findings also contains a brief historical overview. These provide critical contextual points to help the reader frame the findings. For instance, prior to NCLB, California already had in place one of most developed and toughest systems of standards-based accountability in the nation. Ironically, under NCLB, this actually resulted in a disadvantage in initial Annual Measurable Objectives. Georgia, in contrast, had much laxer standards, giving it a higher initial proficiency rate and therefore less required future progress.

The findings of *Pain and Gain* are rather uniform between states despite widely differing implementations and backgrounds. Many of the findings also converge with other studies from the US Department of Education (Birman et al. 2007) and the Center on Educational Policy (Rentner et al. 2006). As the authors note, both aspects support the generalizability of the study. Specific curricular findings include a heightened alignment to state standards, concerns about excessive breadth with more material than can be covered in a year, and a general sense that standards have been useful planning guides. Pedagogical findings include increased focus on students near test cutoffs, greater use of progress tests as formative tools, and increased focus on low-performing students. Professional findings include negative effects on teacher morale and ongoing concerns about inadequate funding and time.

Thoughtful and thorough data collection is a notable strength of the report. Aside from the typical limitations of self-reported survey findings, the methodology leaves little else to be desired. The data for the report includes dozens of superintendents, hundreds of principals, and thousands of teachers with annual data collection spanning a three-year period (from 2003-2004 to 2005-2006). A triangulation of face-to-face semi-structured interviews, telephone interviews, and paper-and-pencil

surveys (all of which were piloted with structured think-aloud cognitive interviews) support the construct validity of the findings. The information the reader needs to evaluate the study design is presented in a transparent and forthcoming manner, from cooperation rates (generally around 75-90%) to rationales for the selection of California, Georgia, and Pennsylvania (“to provide diversity in term of geography, demography, and their approaches to implementing NCLB”). Substantial additional demographic, sample size, and standard error data are further provided in the appendix. At times, the data focus is so pronounced that the text feels more like a stream of statistics than prose – not unusual for of the RAND style of objectivity.

Consistent with this stance, readers should not expect particularly bold interpretations of the findings. Some conclusions appear to soft-pedal difficult issues, such as the finding that a majority believe that standards based accounting has had a negative effect on staff morale. The report describes this in mild terms: “concerns about low morale continue, but are becoming less common.” By comparison, a report by the Center for Education Policy (Rentner et al. 2006) is less reserved: “NCLB has escalated pressure on teachers to a stressful level and has negatively affected staff morale in some schools”. Other interpretations are debatable, such as the conclusion that “most educators report that NCLB has had a positive impact on teaching and learning”. In fact, the data from the report has only a minority of teachers in agreement: 20-30% in Pennsylvania, 40-50% in Georgia, and 30-45% in California (although superintendents and principals were more likely to agree).

Fortunately, this limitation is mitigated by a comprehensive presentation of the underlying data. Fully 1/3 of the pages of the book (mainly in the appendix) are devoted to tables of results with standard error margins. The data are split along numerous factors including state, year of survey, grade level (primary or middle), and educator type (teachers, principals, or superintendents). In other words, the results of the report are presented in sufficiently native format to allow readers to draw their own conclusions.

Overall, *Pain and Gain* offers readers a detailed, data-rich window into the perceptions of teachers, school principals, and district administrators. The focus on math and science in K-8 makes this report particularly useful to professionals and researchers focused on those areas, as well as laypersons interested in deepening their understanding about NCLB generally. *Pain and Gain* provides insights into this wide-reaching legislation through rigorously collected data in the framework of a sound study design. In doing so, it provides readers important insights into the views of the educators actually implementing No Child Left Behind.

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## About the Reviewer

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