

Reviewed by William L. Brown
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The back cover of this volume includes praise from Arne Duncan (the U.S. Secretary of Education), Gary Orfield (codirector of the Civil Rights Project at UCLA), and Susan B. Neuman (who has served as Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education at the U.S. Department of Education). The authors who contributed include such respected scholars as Robert L. Linn and Richard F. Elmore. Clearly, the thoughts expressed deserve the attention of everyone who is interested in (and concerned about) the state of education in America today.

The book begins with a chapter about “Our Children’s Burden: A History of Federal Education Policies,” written by Amy Stuart Wells who is Professor of Sociology and Education at Teachers College. The point of view expressed

is of public education as the bulwark of social welfare policy. The author sees the United States as “stingy” in regard to providing a safety net compared to those provided by Western European nations. She particularly singles out President George W. Bush for choosing a “small town” (Hamilton, Ohio, with 60,000 residents) for the signing venue for No Child Left Behind (NCLB), instead of an urban community, thus showing that “many of our policymakers tend to be [far removed from] the day-to-day experiences of poor children in troubled urban communities.” Yet, the Hamilton City School District had been named the number one urban school district in Ohio, and its superintendent, Janet Baker, was named Ohio's superintendent of the year. Hamilton’s graduates include a number of successful authors, artists and professional athletes.

The second chapter, written by Michael T. Nettles, Catherine M. Millett and Hyeyoung Oh (all from the University of Michigan), chronicles “The Challenge and Opportunity of African American Achievement.” A number of graphs are included, showing various achievement comparisons for white and black students. Most of these are very helpful in understanding the achievement gaps between these groups of students as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Unfortunately, an editing error slipped through so that the y-axis of two of the graphs is labeled “Percentage of Students” where the scale is from 230 to 300, which are most likely mean scores (not percentages) of students. This is only a minor distraction, however, from the wealth of information presented in the chapter.

Perhaps the most widespread criticism of NCLB is the concept of “Proficiency for All” included in the legislation. This concept is rightly labeled an oxymoron in chapter five, written by Richard Rothstein (Teachers College, Columbia), Rebecca Jacobsen (Michigan State University) and Tamara Wilder (University of Michigan). The authors state, “NCLB’s requirement that all students be proficient in math and reading at the same ‘challenging’ standards ignores the reality that, even under the best circumstances and in the best

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schools, children’s abilities vary widely.” They cite a statement made by former Commissioner of Education Harold Howe wherein he notes that “… most educators are aware that any group of students of a particular age or grade will vary widely in their learning for a whole host of reasons.” He indicated further that it “defies reality” to think that particular skills or learnings can be accomplished at any given age or grade.

In chapter eight, entitled “A Federal Foray into Teacher Certification,” Susanna Loeb and Luke C. Miller (both from Stanford University) note that only a handful of states identified the characteristics of a “highly qualified teacher (HQT)” in accordance with the federal guidelines, and that seven states did not provide any data at all by the September 2003 deadline on this aspect of NCLB. They repeatedly maintain that states are abusing the law’s flexibility in defining their requirements for HQTs. As of 2006, only 29 states met all of the federal requirements for elementary teachers, and only 12 states met all of the requirements for middle and secondary teachers.

The accountability systems in use by states are problematic as well. “Schools with low internal accountability … generally adopt responses that least challenge established instructional practice and stress compliance with external directives. Teaching test items is one standard response.” Although such practices may minimally improve performance of some students on the external tests, they do not improve the internal processes of schools. They eventually lead to frustration when the standards are ramped up as 2014 approaches and students are mired in insufficient performance improvements.

The authors note that the current situation has been created by a major failure in political accountability, wherein “policymakers at state and federal levels have been allowed to engage in unchecked regulatory drift with no countervailing responsibility for the capacity problems they have created.” They propose a principle of reciprocity, wherein “schools have to respond to external pressures for performance, but, at the same time, policymakers have to
submit to the discipline of providing the capacity necessary to produce the performance.”

The final chapter of the book, written by the editors, deals with “A Vital and Viable Agenda for Reauthorizing NCLB.” They note that the 100% proficiency target is especially illusory when applied to English language learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities. By definition, these students are not achieving at high levels because they either have severe English-language deficits or because their disabilities have a detrimental effect on their educational achievement. Whenever these students reach an acceptable level of proficiency, they are removed from the subgroup and replaced by other low-achieving students with deficits or disabilities. Since the law requires all subgroups of students to achieve proficiency by 2014, the continual stripping of the proficient students from the groups of ELLs and students with disabilities guarantees that this goal can never be reached (at least for these subgroups).

The authors close with the observation that “the federal government has overstepped its appropriate regulatory role in its insistence on a rigid cascade of consequences for schools that are not meeting their [Adequate Yearly Progress] targets. To build instructional capacity in low-performing schools requires more local assistance and less federal regulation.” As a result, the authors state that “[t]he current cascade of consequences should ... be scrapped and replaced with an effective system of state-based technical assistance and accountability for school and district capacity building.”

A recent report from Education Sector, entitled “Restructuring,” provides a wealth of information on the failures of restructuring under NCLB. The report’s author, Robert Manwaring, served as director of policy for the Governor's Committee on Education Excellence, a committee California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger appointed to develop a comprehensive long-term reform strategy for improving K–12 education in the state. The report highlights the case of Markham Middle School in Los Angeles, where $3 million in extra funds were
expended over a period of 11 years in a failed attempt to turn around its very poor record of student achievement. Among the steps taken was a takeover of much of the school’s governance by the Los Angeles Unified School District Superintendent’s Office. None of these efforts were successful in improving student academic performance.

Although the authors and editors of this volume believe that a strong federal role in education is desirable, they are realistic in understanding that just because something can be described in theory doesn’t mean that it can be successfully carried out in practice. The current crop of politicians and policymakers in the nation’s capitol are very long on theory but quite weak in implementation. Dictating that all students will be proficient by 2014 is a good case in point. The frustration created in schools and districts across the land by the ineffective requirements of NCLB is inexcusable in a free country. Punishing sincere educators who are working hard to carry out their professions has severe consequences on morale and job effectiveness. It is time that the folks who make our laws give more attention to the unanticipated consequences of the laws and policies that they put in place.

About the Reviewer

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