

The Legacy of No Child Left Behind

What does the policy address?

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) as a whole deals with educational reform across the United States. The act was an attempt to push the country's educational system into the 21st century by addressing multiple issues such as scarce funding available to rural and urban areas, lowering graduation rates, and the lack of accountability regarding student education within school systems.¹

Rural and urban schools have always struggled with adequate funding. In fact, problems within these areas were very similar as a 1993 study found that rural and urban schools would both deal with issues such as underfunded programs, a higher rate of dropout and poverty. This act was created to address some of these issues.²

The Issues³

- High dropout rates in schools → low graduation rates
- Dropout rates for minority students were much higher than white students
- Lack of resources for rural and urban schools
- Poor academic performance

What NCLB wanted⁴

- Implementation of national standardized tests
- Improvement of math and reading skills
- Improve funding for low-income areas
- Improve graduation rates

Vulnerable Population

The major goal was to decrease the dropout rate in the United States by addressing the inequality in dropout rates by providing support for students who are at risk of dropping out of highschool to raise academic achievement. It attempted to address the strong need for well-funded schools that serve low income and minority students who have proven to be underserved by the education system. In 1995, Black students had a dropout rate of 15% compared to Hispanic students at 32% and White students 10% . Students of Color are more likely than their White counterparts to drop out before graduation.⁵



¹ Klein, A. (2018, October 25). No Child Left Behind Overview: Definitions, Requirements, Criticisms, and More. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/no-child-left-behind-overview-definition-summary.html>

² DeYoung, Alan. (1992). At-Risk Children and the Reform of Rural Schools: Economic and Cultural Dimensions. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED362339>

³ Hauser, R. M., Simmons, S. J., & Pager, D. I. (2000). High School Dropout, Race-Ethnicity, and Social Background from the 1970s to the 1990s. *Center for Demography and Ecology*. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED449277>

⁴ Dee, T., & Jacob, B.A. (2010). The impact of No Child Left Behind on students, teachers, and schools. *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* (pp. 149-207).

⁵ Stark, P., Noel, A., & McFarland, J. (2015). *Trends in the high school dropout and completion rates in the united states: 1972-2012*. Department of Education. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015015.pdf>

What were the gaps?

NCLB law does not address detailed solutions for the big problem of high dropout rates. It only addresses a financial solution of student dropout rates. To meet the stated objectives the policy provides funding for programs that will achieve the policy goals. The act sets guidelines for budgets and grants funding to state education agencies that provide programs that meet the objectives of the law. This aspect of the law ignores the individualized needs of students who are at risk of dropping out of high school. This makes assumptions on what students need to succeed in school. Due to the laid out objectives and guidelines for grant funding the law assumes the reason students drop out of school is because they are undersupported in their academics, due to lack of funding in their school. However, there are other circumstances that could lead to a student dropping out. For example lack of funding in a household requiring a student to leave school and work to provide for their family. Or a student who is struggling with mental health and does not have resources to support them continuing their k-12 education. In response to the assumed needs of students, the law values a standardized solution to the perceived needs. While the values within the policy do provide good support to students it does not provide all the support students need to prevent them from dropping out of school before graduation.⁶

Who else was impacted?

Schools, teachers and administrators are the groups that were most affected by NCLB. There were requirements that schools had to meet under NCLB that had to do with accountability. Each state had to create an Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) plan, these were supposed to ensure that students' reached proficiency in math and science. If these goals were not reached, schools were subject to different accountability techniques. Teachers' jobs were put in a precarious spot as students' failure to reach proficiency can result in the termination of a teacher. NCLB did give states' more flexibility in regards to funding and grants. As long as a school met accountability requirements, they were able to use funding as they wished. The purpose of this was so that schools could use funds to improve areas specific to their school. NCLB aimed to benefit underprivileged families by giving people the option to send their kids to better school districts if their school was underperforming. The overall goal of NCLB was intentional, but the outcome had consequences.⁷

Support and Opposition

Teachers in different states had different experiences with NCLB. However, overall teachers' supported the principles introduced in the act, their main concerns were how some of the provisions brought by the act would actually affect the students (Murnane & Papay, 2010). NCLB allows states to choose their own academic standards. Because the requirements are so strict, and schools must meet the requirements, schools often chose curriculums that required lower standards. People argued that this is a "one-size fits all penalty system". The reason for this is that schools that needed more resources were having funds taken away from them, while the schools that were better funded and had access to resources were getting more funding.⁸

⁶ McFarland, J., Cui, J., Rathbun, A., & Holmes, J., (2018). *Trends in high school dropout and completion rates in the united states: 2018*. Department of Education. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019117.pdf>

⁷ Husband, T., & Hunt, C. (2015). A Review of the Empirical Literature on No Child Left Behind from 2001 to 2010. *Planning & Changing*, 46(1/2), 212–254.

⁸ Murnane, R. J., & Papay, J. P. (2010). Teachers' Views on No Child Left Behind: Support for the Principles, Concerns about the Practices. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 24(3), 151–166. <https://doi-org.proxy.mul.missouri.edu/10.1257/jep.24.3.151>

Looking Forward

If the goal of NCLB was to close gaps in academic achievement and student success by addressing issues that contribute to academic failure, then poverty is an issue that needs to be addressed, as it is a critical factor in school failure. Changes in teaching curriculum alone are not enough to combat low levels of academic success, as Gerstl-Pepin found out through a case study in a high poverty school. Only by addressing the effects of poverty, and by focusing on social and emotional interventions, was the school able to increase academic success rates.⁹

The inequities of economic disparity create a climate where policies like NCLB cannot be successful singularly but require poverty mitigation through policies outside of education. This is a multifaceted issue in need of a multifaceted response. In order for a child's life chances, including academically, to improve then the milieu in which the child lives must also be changed. Focusing only on the educational dimension of a child living in poverty will not alter the challenges faced in the child's home, their health, or the barriers faced by the parents. This is a shortfall for NCLB as the constrained focus on education alone shifts all focus from economic inequality away from corporations and politicians, and places the onus on the education system itself. As a result of this reframing of accountability, the real causes—poverty, lack of living wages, stable housing, health care—remain unchecked, and forces other policies to foot the bill or ignore it completely.

⁹ Gerstl-Pepin, C. I. (2006). The Paradox of Poverty Narratives. *Educational Policy*, 20(1), 143–162.
doi:10.1177/0895904805285285