
The Seven Deadly Sins Of No Child Left Behind

The pending reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is prompting much discussion about what should be done to improve NCLB. But Mr. Houston believes that the law has been taking U.S. education in entirely the wrong direction and that a totally new agenda is needed.

BY PAUL D. HOUSTON

HAVE YOU ever considered that the remedy for being lost is not to drive faster? You have to stop and change direction. For five years the major school reform agenda in America has been the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which was part of the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Now ESEA is up for another reauthorization by Congress, and everyone is wondering what is going to happen next. It has been suggested that NCLB be expanded to high schools or that more interventions or national standards be required. But more is not the solution. It is time to change direction.

It is now universally accepted, even by those who authored the bill, that NCLB is flawed and needs fixing. In fact, describing the law as flawed might be charitable. If you take the definition of “sin” as a “shameful offense,” then it could be argued that NCLB is full of sin because it has proved itself to be an offense against good education. For that reason, merely adding a growth model to the accountability provisions or creating some additional flexibility for English-language learners will not fix the underlying structural weaknesses of the law. Neither will adding more money. You can’t get something designed for one purpose to be effective at fulfilling a very different purpose, no matter how many resources you apply to it. While there are aspects of the law that could be fixed, there are flaws in it that are so fundamental that there is not enough paint and spackle in

the world to make them presentable.

Many will dismiss any criticism of NCLB now just as they have dismissed previous criticism. In the past, critics have been accused of exhibiting “the soft bigotry of low expectations” and have been labeled “apologists for a failed system.” The generic response to critics has been that educators don’t want to be held accountable. Now the contention is that America is failing to remain competitive in the

PAUL D. HOUSTON is executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, Arlington, Va.

global economy and that if we don't put more rigor into the education system our children will not be able to compete. None of these retorts are accurate or particularly useful.

THE NEED FOR A SYSTEMIC SOLUTION

One could argue that there is much in the U.S. education system that is not effective and needs to change and that NCLB's focus on accountability has helped to illuminate this need. Some educators may have held inappropriately low expectations for their students, so requiring schools to disaggregate test-score data by race, disability, socioeconomic status, and English proficiency helps make certain that schools do not paper over the lack of success of some of their students. But the most fundamental problem facing education is that the current system is perfectly designed to yield the current results. If we are not happy with the current results, a systemic solution is called for. NCLB, which adopts assessment as its key strategy, does not begin to deal with education in a systemic way.

The deadly sins of NCLB are largely the result of a set of wrong assumptions about the problems facing schools and children. If we continue to fix things that are not really broken, we will simply break those things that work while the real problems go unattended.

Sin Number 1: Assuming that schools are broken. Most education reform is driven by a belief that the system is badly broken and must be fixed. In fact, the system is quite successful in fulfilling its historical mission of preparing children for an agricultural and industrial economy. It is not broken. It is a well-oiled machine doing the wrong thing.

The problem is that the world now requires a different set of skills. Indeed, the jobs that the education system was designed to fill are in short supply. What is required is a hard look at what schools need to produce and then a total retooling aimed at achieving that end. Schools haven't failed at their mission. The mission has changed.

Some might argue that NCLB will lead to the retooling needed in education. But that is true only if you believe that the road to the future is paved with low-level tests that measure discrete bits of knowledge. The reality is that anyone in business will tell you that successful workers in the new global economy must have skills of collaboration, ingenuity, problem solving, comfort with ambiguity, and a dozen other things — none of which are tested for and subsequently taught as a result of NCLB. Schools that focus on 21st-century skills are doing so in spite of NCLB, not because of it.

The truth is that many schools and school systems in the United States work remarkably well for most students. Furthermore, the system is made up of over 50 million chil-

dren, over 95,000 schools, and over 14,000 districts. Most of these children, schools, and districts are pretty successful, even under the restrictive expectations of NCLB. Even using AYP (average yearly progress) under NCLB as a measure, most kids meet most of the standards. Were it not for the "all or nothing" aspect of the scoring system, only a small fraction of the schools in America would be having difficulty making AYP.

And even the harshest critic of public education must admit that the majority of students are not failing. Nevertheless, we have constructed a federally mandated system

Most education reform is driven by a belief that the system is badly broken and must be fixed. In fact, the system is quite successful in fulfilling its historical mission of preparing children for an agricultural and industrial economy. It is not broken. It is a well-oiled machine doing the wrong thing.

that treats all school districts, schools, and children pretty much the same — whether they are failing or succeeding dramatically. Would a business that has a high failure rate in one factory and a low one in another subject both to the same treatment? Would a doctor treat a patient with a head cold the same way she would treat one with lung cancer? Any rational response to our educational challenges would examine the range of school performance and act accordingly.

Sin Number 2: Conflating testing with education. Testing is an important part of the educational process. Teachers need to know what kids know and how they are progressing, and the public has a right to have a snapshot of how well benchmarks are being met. But testing must be kept in perspective. A number of states were making significant progress on their statewide plans before NCLB was implemented, and they had to step back from more sophisticated uses of assessments to meet the lower standards set by NCLB.

When student achievement is discussed, it has now come to mean test results. Yet the least sophisticated citizen among us understands that there is much more to education than what can be tested. When our sole emphasis is squarely on a single aspect of education, the entire process gets distorted. One of the greatest dangers posed by NCLB is that

we will reach a point where most kids meet an acceptable standard set by the tests but do so at the expense of a broader and deeper learning experience. Setting standards can be useful, but only if the standards do not lead to standardization. A wise man once pointed out to me that training makes people alike and education makes them different. If we put too much emphasis on a lower, common denominator, we will be sacrificing higher possibilities for our children.

Sin Number 3: Harming poor children and ignoring the realities of poverty. ESEA was originally created to address the needs of poor and minority children. While great strides have been made, much remains to be done.

Those who wrote and voted for NCLB ostensibly did so out of a belief that we should not leave some children behind. However, broadening the law's requirements well beyond those most in need to include all schools and all children has caused educators to take their eyes off the ball. A recent study showed that the children closest to making AYP, not those most in need of assistance, are the ones receiving the bulk of the attention. Drilling poor students on basic skills while their middle-class counterparts partake of a richer curriculum will not close the real learning gap between students. It simply further limits the possibilities for poor children.

While Washington has created a system that ostensibly

helps poor children, it doesn't want to talk about the impact of poverty on school success. Those who see poverty as an intervening variable have been accused of having lowered expectations for disadvantaged children. This has meant there has been no real discussion about what might be needed to *really* leave no child behind. While history is replete with stories of heroic exceptions (e.g., Lincoln was born in a log cabin and became President), there is no evidence that whole groups of people have been elevated by ignoring the chains that bind them.

Everyone in America knew which children were being left behind long before NCLB became law. A massive system of testing was not required. When you are born without adequate prenatal care, when you do not have sufficient health care as a toddler, when your parents do not know how to provide cognitive stimulation and cannot afford high-quality preschool programs, chances are you will come to school with a working vocabulary that is just a fraction of the vocabularies of middle-class children. You have already been left behind.

Still, most educators put their shoulders to the wheel and try to push it uphill anyway. Sometimes they succeed. But when they fail, as they often do, they know that any law that fails to acknowledge the broader systemic issues that cause some children to be hobbled by circumstances is a law that will not work. The sad fact is that schools can and should help disadvantaged children — but schools can't do it all. Leaving no child behind also requires us to leave no family and no community behind.

The inequities that exist between school districts and between states further complicate the issue. For example, the children in Cuyahoga Heights, Ohio, receive twice as much financial support for their schools as do the children in nearby East Cleveland. Yet the taxpayers in Cuyahoga Heights have to tax themselves only about one-third as much as those in East Cleveland in order to create this unequal result. At the same time, children in California are not getting nearly the same level of school support that the children of Connecticut get.

How can we pretend to have a national law that holds educators accountable for outcomes when the resources are so uneven? Put most simply, some children get left behind because our society, through a series of

A New Agenda for Education

It's easy enough to level criticisms when a law such as NCLB misses its mark by so wide a margin. But what would a new agenda for U.S. education look like? The following steps can serve as an initial blueprint for building a new agenda for U.S. education.

- 1. FIX THE ASSUMPTIONS.** Stop the blame game. Put an emphasis on systemic thinking that looks at what it would take to retool the education system to respond to the new mission of preparing all children to reach their highest levels. Stop blaming the professional educators who must carry out this retooling, and construct a system that supports their work. Create schools that children want to go to, schools that emphasize meaningful and engaged learning and acknowledge that imagination is as vital at age 18 as at age 5.
- 2. PUT TESTING IN CONTEXT AND EMPHASIZE DEPTH IN EDUCATION.** Put the emphasis on testing into a broader context. Use models to measure growth, but continue to find ways of disaggregating data to allow schools to see clearly where they are succeeding and where improvements are needed. Challenge schools to continue to emphasize the depth and breadth of education. Help schools shift from a "coverage" mentality to one that focuses on depth and "metacognition." Emphasize that the work of schools is *educating* children, not *training* them. Put the focus on educating the whole child, not just the parts that decode and cipher.
- 3. USE A CHANGE STRATEGY THAT EMPHASIZES COLLABORATION.** Take a page from the Irish playbook and create a new model of accountability that creates a collaboration between states and local districts in which the role of states is to build capacity for change and improvement at the local level. Create a system of ensuring quality that touches on all the major parts of the learning process. Restore a sense of trust and mutual support.
- 4. FOCUS ON A STRATEGY FOR ADDRESSING POOR CHILDREN.** Go back to the intent of ESEA and focus the money and effort on those who most need help. Forget about trying to use a limited program to "reform" all of American education. Understand that just as nation building in other countries requires enormous resources, so does dealing with the plight of poor children at home. End what I call the "hard bigotry of inadequate resources" by developing a Marshall Plan for America's Poor that provides adequate health care and pre-school programs for those in need and creates "human enterprise zones" where large numbers of poor children live. Stop pretending that money doesn't matter. The only people who believe that are people with money.
- 5. RENEW AMERICA'S COMMITMENT TO INNOVATION.** Require and support the teaching of art, music, and drama in all of America's schools. Make certain that any language assessment includes creative writing. Develop programs that value and support innovative thinking in schools. Put a new emphasis on a broad program of gifted education. Require any new mandate in education to undergo an "innovation protection assessment" to make certain that it does not unintentionally undermine creativity. Emphasize attracting and keeping creative teachers and leaders in our schools by enacting a new version of the National Defense Education Act that supports students going into teaching and forgives the student loans of those who teach in hard-to-staff schools. Create a dialogue — a real two-way conversation — between America's educators and business leaders about what we need to do to maintain America's innovative edge. — PDH

policy decisions, has chosen to leave them behind. Testing and sanctions on schools will not change that reality.

Sin Number 4: Relying on fear and coercion. Motivation has always been the key to good education. Unfortunately, NCLB relies for motivation on the blunt force of threats and punishments. It starts by assuming that those at the top know better than those farther down the line, even though those nearest the bottom are charged with actually doing what is needed to educate children. By us-

ing fear and coercion as a change strategy, NCLB ensures compliance but blocks the pursuit of excellence for teachers and children. While you can beat people into submission, you can't beat them into greatness.

You can't inspire children by means that either turn them off or traumatize them. Children are subjected to days of examinations annually, with the time taken away from instruction. Indeed, we have actually reduced the time we spend on instruction so that we can increase the time we

spend on measuring the results of instruction. To offset this, many schools have chosen to neglect subjects not covered by the tests, so that the curriculum has narrowed. Many children have chosen to turn off and not try. Others have felt traumatized by the pressure. Cognitive scientists are

Those at the federal level do not — and cannot — know better how to educate a child than those working at the child’s level. In other professions, while guidelines are created for public safety, bureaucrats don’t try to second-guess the work of professionals who deliver services.

clear that the emotion of fear blocks clear thinking by impeding neural processing. Any educational model that relies on fear undercuts its own aims.

Collaboration, not coercion, is what is needed. While most educators believe accountability is an important part of the public education experience, supporters of NCLB fail to see that other options for accountability exist. Accountability systems will work only where there is collaboration and trust between the federal government and the schools. Good accountability systems would be broader in nature and would actually allow us to examine the broader needs of a child’s learning.

Sin Number 5: Lacking clarity. Any accountability system should be clear and understandable to those it is accountable to: parents and other citizens. Most parents find the AYP model to be confusing and, when explanations are given, counterintuitive. Why would you measure completely different groups in the same way and compare the results? Why would a school that fails to make progress in one cell be treated the same as one that fails to make progress in all cells? Why would you hold special education children, who have individual education plans because of their needs, to the same standard as children who do not have the same needs? Why would you test children in English when they do not yet speak English? Any accountability system needs to have a sense of authenticity if it is to be useful.

Sin Number 6: Leaving out the experts. Those at the federal level do not — and cannot — know better how to educate a child than those working at the child’s level. In other professions, while guidelines are created for public safety, bureaucrats don’t try to second-guess the work of profession-

als who deliver services. For example, pilots, while subject to rules and regulations, are still presumed to know better how to fly the plane than their passengers. No federal law that takes the professionals out of the decision-making process will ever work. Professional judgment must be taken into account if we have any hope that NCLB will work. Jamming a comprehensive set of mandates down the throats of those who must carry out the mandates is doomed — not just because of the insurgency it creates, but because many ideas that look so good in Washington just don’t work in Weehawken.

Sin Number 7: Undermining our international competitiveness. Finally, the greatest sin committed by NCLB is a sin of omission. NCLB fails to address the core question for America: How do we sustain our place in a global environment? NCLB’s answer is that drilling our children will allow them to compete with the Chinese. Yet the real winners in the coming competition between East and West will not be the nations that focus on basic skills but those that cultivate high-level skills and ingenuity. In that regard, America has had an edge for some time.

Our society seems to produce unusually creative and entrepreneurial people. Most of those people went to our public schools. In fact, much of America’s creativity emanated from those in our society who had been left behind. Whether in music, sports, or technology, innovation comes from the edge, where many of those children who are left behind congregate. These individuals have enormous capacity to lift our society to new levels through their creativity.

Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer has pointed out that fear of evaluation, an acceptance of absolutes, and mindless ideas about our mistakes can stop us from being creative and responsive to the world. She has said that such mental paralysis comes from “anything hierarchical [that] suggests that there is a single metric — a ‘right’ way of understanding the world.” If America is to continue to lead the world, we must begin to undo the damage created by a system that is built upon the notion that there is a single right way to do education.

How can we sustain our creativity while paring down our education to a stimulus-response system of learning that reduces knowledge to a series of test bubbles and communicates to children that what is on the test is the only thing worth learning? The great danger we face is that, in our rush to build skills, we undermine our wisdom. Then we will all be left behind. For that reason NCLB needs to be deposited in the dustbin of history, and Congress, with the assistance of educators and other citizens, needs to think more broadly and deeply about how to build on and make use of the talents of our poorest citizens. **K**

Copyright of Phi Delta Kappan is the property of Phi Delta Kappa International and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.