



## NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND: PROMISE OR RHETORIC?

**T**HE TITLE of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act conjures a vision of a school in which all students achieve at high levels. The past 12 months have, however, left open the question as to whether the title reflects bright promise or empty rhetoric.

NCLB's start has not been auspicious. The few parents who accepted the NCLB-mandated offer to move their students from so-called failing schools generally cited reasons unrelated to the quality of education. Many urban districts — daunted by the numbers of students and schools involved, lack of transportation, and crowded facilities — appear to have ignored the mandate.

Disturbed by the state-level response, Secretary of Education Rod Paige, in a letter dated 22 October 2002, commended a few states, while using such terms as “defenders of the status quo,” “enemies of equal justice,” and “apologists for failure” in a scathing denunciation of those that have “lowered the bar to hide the low performance of their schools.”

The secretary is correct in observing a mixed state-level reaction. However, he is missing the point if he fails to see the problems stemming from flaws in the act itself, from a rush to implementation, and from the clear intent to impose a single program on states without regard to school improvement efforts already under way.

The goals of NCLB are surely worthy. Success for every child, identifying and addressing the needs of low-achieving students, and strategies such as annual testing and the provision of tutoring are beyond debate and deserve support.

What, then, is the problem? Start with a schedule that required implementation even before the final regulations had been issued. Move to a cookie-cutter approach to reform that appears to deny flexibility and to place in jeopardy the very states that have done the most to improve achievement. Consider sanctions designed to punish rather than to build either the desire or the capacity to succeed.

Look at the impact of the goal of proficiency for all students by 2013-14. What purpose is served by a goal that cannot be met? Would it not have made more sense to accept the title of the act as visionary while augmenting it with challenging but realistic and achievable goals for states and schools?

What purpose is served by labeling schools as “failing” before determining why such schools had high concentrations of students below the proficiency level? Is the label fair if the school is found to have a high concentration of students who present particularly difficult challenges? Are the staff members in such a school likely to be challenged or simply turned off by being termed “failures”?

Can NCLB succeed? Not without a more realistic and flexible approach! Improvement cannot be mandated. It will come about when principals, teachers, and their support groups buy into the need for it, believe that it is possible, and come to believe they can do it. Even then, their efforts are likely to fail without strong support from outside the school.

My sense is that achieving the conditions for success requires recognizing that schools cannot do the job alone. This recognition must be accompanied by programs to address the needs of children long before they reach school, by before- and after-school programs to reinforce what happens in school, and by attention to the nonschool factors that prevent many students from achieving. Without the national commitment that such an approach requires, NCLB is likely to fall into the category of high-sounding, but useless, rhetoric. — *Lowell C. Rose*, executive director emeritus of Phi Delta Kappa International.

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