NCLB Meets School Realities: Lessons From the Field

reviewed by Dan Laitsch — August 03, 2005

Title: NCLB Meets School Realities: Lessons From the Field
Author(s): Gail Sunderman, Jimmy Kim, and Gary Orfield
Publisher: Sage Publishing, Thousand Oaks
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When President Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act (the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act), it was hailed as a unique and bipartisan effort to improve education in the U.S. The bill was passed in the Senate by a vote of 87-10, and in the House by a 381-41 margin, with Democrats in senior leadership positions—Congressman George Miller (D-CA) and Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA)—joining President Bush for the signing ceremony on January 8, 2002. Just three years later, however, the law has created a bipartisan political backlash that has states looking at refusing Federal funding and suing the Federal government, and the U.S Department of Education levying hundreds-of-thousands of dollars in fines for failures to comply with the law. A new book by Gail Sunderman, Jimmy Kim, and Gary Orfield—NCLB Meets School Realities: Lessons from the Field—attempts to document the impact of NCLB on educators, evaluate the success of the law to date, and examine future policy directions that are necessary to bring the law’s ambitious goals to fruition.

As suggested by the title, much of the book examines the tensions between the overoptimistic promise of the law—that it will enable schools to bring all students to proficiency in literacy, mathematics, and science—and the complexities of the classroom—that throughout the education system there are inequities and gaps in resources and reform strategies that work against the stated goal of the law. In fact, the authors document how implementation of the law has exacerbated some of the very problems it hoped to address. The primary focus is on NCLB’s test-based accountability mechanisms and the two initial sanctions triggered by a failure to meet proficiency targets—mandated school choice and supplemental services—although there is also a separately authored examination of graduation rate issues. The title may overreach a little, however, as the book remains silent on many other aspects of the law—including Reading First, teacher quality, and the requirements for scientifically based research. The meat of the text, which revolves around a five year study of NCLB implementation conducted by the authors through the Civil Rights Project at Harvard, is rich with data; however, the study focuses primarily on large districts and metropolitan, urban, and central-city areas with high minority and high poverty enrollments, leaving some of the concerns of rural districts and states largely unaddressed. Despite the large minority representations within the study districts (including the presence of Indian reservations), the ESL and Indian education sections of the law are also left unexamined.

The book itself is a relatively short and easy read, at 126 pages of substantive text broken into seven chapters. Chapters one and two look at the larger statewide picture of NCLB implementation, including the shift in
power from the states to the federal government and the problems inherent in the federally mandated assessment system—not the least of which has been the creation of dual (and competing) accountability systems in many states. The next two chapters examine how educators are dealing with the specific choice and supplemental services provisions. Chapter five is particularly rich in data as the authors present the results of a survey of teacher reactions to NCLB implementation. Dangling awkwardly in a book previously dedicated to data, chapter six discusses graduation rate issues—but often reads more like a persuasive essay than a systematic analysis. The final chapter presents a series of useful and important policy recommendations including the need for strengthened federal-state relations, correcting some of the well documented flaws in defining AYP, strengthening state and local capacity for school improvement, examining the validity of supplemental services as an improvement strategy, refocusing the choice provisions on issues of quality, and perhaps most importantly, reviewing the legitimacy of current accountability systems. In other areas, however, the conclusions seem premature at best (and misdirected at worst), particularly with regard to discussion of graduation rate issues and the unintended consequences of test-based accountability.

The authors analyze data from as many as ten districts in six states: Mesa and Washington Arizona; Fresno and Los Angeles California; DeKalb County and Atlanta, Georgia; Chicago, Illinois; Buffalo and New York City, New York; and Arlington and Richmond, Virginia. While many of the conclusions the authors reach are not new—that NCLB marks a major policy shift in state and federal relations, that the school choice provisions are largely going unused, that both choice and supplemental services face serious administrative burdens and capacity issues, and that current graduation rate information is woefully inadequate—the book offers a much more systematic examination of many of these issues than have previous efforts. The authors also add unique insights as to many of the underlying causes of the challenges states and districts face in implementing these provisions, as they end each chapter with a series of useful—if sometimes overly general—policy observations and recommendations.

Despite the strong data collection and analysis presented in this book, there are also unfortunate gaps. The very useful chapter reporting the results of a teacher survey looks only at teachers in Fresno and Richmond—and even then the results for Richmond go unreported for a noticeable part of the discussion. In their discussion of the school choice provisions, the authors begin the analysis with a look at all ten study districts, but then move to a more detailed analysis of only six of the districts. This changing of the data sample somewhat weakens the systematic foundations of the study, transitioning the report at times into a series of interesting cases and anecdotes rather than a more holistic picture of implementation.

While each chapter presents information that is both useful in its detail, and frustrating in its limits, chapter six deserves special comment. Initially, the chapter focuses on a detailed examination of graduation rate issues, and the tendency for test-based accountability systems to drive up the dropout rate due to the push-out of low performing students. The author (Daniel Losen) then transitions into a critique of the Department’s approach to the graduation rate requirements within NCLB, making a strong argument that the regulations they created have been unclear and that the enforcement has been weak. The result of his analysis is a recommendation that dropout rates should “factor heavily into evaluation of a given school or district’s academic success.”

Although the review of graduation rate issues is timely and important, the analysis is particularly troubling in four aspects: first, there are many other causes of dropout than simply push-out; second, in urban and high poverty districts that frequently suffer tremendous student mobility, documenting student transitions is much more complex than suggested; third, the nature of the reporting requirement in NCLB simply makes such reporting one more way in which schools can fail to achieve AYP (strong graduation rates do nothing to mitigate the emphasis on assessment scores); and perhaps most importantly, the unintended consequence of push-out are not necessarily due to the mechanism (test-based accountability), rather it is the high-stakes nature of the mechanism. Philosophically, there is little difference between using graduation rates or test-scores as high-stakes measures of school success. While Losen does recognize that setting up graduation rates as another high-stakes accountability measure is not a silver bullet, his proposal would appear to use
graduation rates in the same way in which standardized test scores are now used. It is this reliance on high-stakes—regardless of the measure—that creates the impetus for the unintended and unpredictable consequences—consequences that the rest of the book so thoroughly documents.

Despite this issue and some of the other limitations identified in this review, the book is a valuable addition to the body of literature looking at NCLB implementation. The systematic approach the authors use to examine these complex policy issues is refreshing and adds significant strength to their critiques of NCLB—as policy and as it has been implemented. As policymakers begin the reauthorization process, they would do well to look at this book and work to address some of the conflicts and tensions detailed by the authors.

Cite This Article as: Teachers College Record, Date Published: August 03, 2005