

# *Why No Child Left Behind Matters*



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The federal government's landmark and bi-partisan 2001 legislative renewal of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, *No Child Left Behind*, will have a profound impact on every school district, school building, and classroom in the country. While the actual legislation is some 1,400 pages in length, the key provisions appear to boil down to a few critical components, notably:

- Every child in the country at specified grade levels must achieve state-determined and tested levels of proficiency in math and language arts by the 2004-05 school year. They will then need to reach predetermined proficiency levels in science starting in 2007-08. Proficiency will be defined on a state-by-state basis.
- Every school must come up with a plan for adequate yearly progress (AYP), which will provide annual benchmarks for ongoing improvement in performance for *all* students.
- The AYP benchmarks will need to be met, not only by the total student population, but also by nine subgroups, broken down in the categories of gender, racial/ethnic minority (four groups), disability, limited English proficient, low income/economically disadvantaged, and migrant.
- All schools must employ "highly qualified teachers."
- Ten percent of all Title I funds must be spent on professional development.

While there may be debate over a number of elements included in the legislation, the concept at the heart of *No Child Left Behind* is both highly laudable and highly consistent with the mission of the International Center for Leadership in Education since its inception in 1991 – achieving a rigorous and relevant curriculum for *all* students. Nonetheless, moving from the *concept* of NCLB to measurable and sustained improvement for every student will be difficult.

We at the International Center have spent the last 12 years identifying individual schools across America, as well as abroad, which have been most successful at achieving high academic standards for *all* kids through a relevant education. In the process, we have learned a great deal about the characteristics that need to be in place for this goal to be achieved.

Two areas are central to our findings about what schools can do to promote academic growth for all students: (1) make decisions about curriculum priorities based on data, and (2) provide instruction that appeals to students' learning styles and interests.

### **Data-based Decision Making about Curriculum Priorities**

In the national quest to raise standards over the last several years, every state has added more and more to the menu of what it expects classroom teachers to do as far as curriculum and instruction are concerned. Highly successful schools have recognized that they cannot just keep adding to the load. They have decided to take some things off the plate and to base those decisions upon good data.

In working with as many schools as we at the International Center have had the privilege to do – some highly successful, some struggling to be successful – we have seen that the schools that have moved forward conquer the instructional overload that most schools face. Too many schools that struggle to improve proficiency for all students are data rich but analysis poor. On the other hand, the most successful, high-achieving schools have brought focus to their instructional programs by using data to answer two simple questions:

1. what is on the test
2. what will students need to know and be able to do once they leave school.

Knowing the answers to these key questions is critical if instructional and curricular priorities are to be set.

Over the past several years, in cooperation with subject-matter and curriculum specialists in individual states, the International Center has correlated state tests to state standards/benchmarks/performance indicators in math, science, and English language arts. This data is referred to as the **Curriculum Matrix** and, at time of writing, a state-specific analysis exists for 30 states, with more state Matrix data being completed week by week for the remaining 20 states and District of Columbia. In addition, the International Center has conducted its Curriculum Survey of Essential Skills with 18,000 people – educators, parents, business representatives, community stakeholders – to obtain their opinions on which standards are essential, nice to know, or not important for students in their post-school responsibilities. This information is also included in the Curriculum Matrix.

The International Center undertook this effort because we saw so many schools in which everything in the curriculum was a priority and therefore nothing was a priority. The International Center’s research shows that equal weight is not given to every state standard/benchmark/performance objective when it comes to the state testing program. Furthermore, according to the national survey, the relative importance of the standards varies in terms of students’ post-school responsibilities. If students are to reach proficiency and make adequate yearly progress, schools need to have access to data that will assist them in identifying what is most important to teach.

The International Center has used its research and other relevant resources to help states and districts to bring focus to instruction. The data provided has proved helpful in several ways:

- The data can be used directly to inform curricular and instructional decision-making and priority-setting in the “overcrowded curriculum.”
- The alignment of the standards to the national survey of what graduates need to know and be able to do once they leave school can be helpful in determining instructional priorities. The data can be disaggregated according to the opinions of educators, the general public, and the business community. The data can also be compared to the priority given in the state testing program.

## **Learning Styles and Student Interests**

When instruction plays to a student’s interests, learning style, and aptitudes, he or she will do better in school. Therefore, if we want students to do well in math, science, and language arts, we need to focus instruction in a way that is consistent with the students’ needs.

Of course, students have great variations in learning styles, aptitudes, and interests. Some children love school and learning simply for the sake of learning. Others always want to know: “Why am I learning

this? Where will I ever use what you are teaching me today.” Still others have a strong interest in a specialized area, such as one of the arts or a technical program; they will become excited and motivated about academics only if they see how the acquisition of those proficiencies extends their knowledge in the area of interest. Schools need to offer many pathways for students to achieve the mandated and required academic proficiency levels.

Unfortunately, *No Child Left Behind*, and specifically its AYP provision, will lead some people to believe that the core academic courses in math, science, and English language arts should be given more time in the curriculum and that specialized programs, such as career and technical education, the arts, and foreign language, should be given less. *The opposite is actually true.*

Specialized programs should be enriched and viewed as alternative pathways to AYP and academic improvement for many students — as long as educators in those programs make curricular modifications to teach and be held accountable for the delivery of academics. These specialized programs play to students’ interests, learning styles, and aptitudes, which is critical to consider if schools are to achieve a rigorous and relevant curriculum for all students, especially those who are most difficult to serve and those who will be brought increasingly under the AYP microscope as one of the nine subgroups.

### **Too Much Accountability? High Enough Standards?**

Despite what many educators know about how best to deal with the implementation of *No Child Left Behind* and how to advance the laudable goals it supports in principle – increased proficiency for all students, continuous academic progress, highest possible teacher quality, and ongoing professional support for educators –debate continues concerning implementation of the legislation, the emphasis (some would say overemphasis) on state standards and testing, and other provisions of the new law.

One debate that has been stoked by *No Child Left Behind* involves the state tests, which have pervaded our education system. Some argue that these exams are unfair and counterproductive. Clearly, the state tests *do* have flaws and are less precise than many state departments of education and assessment advocates would like to admit. But, on the other hand, the tests are more valid and more effective in pushing schools toward higher standards than the people who would do away with the assessments would like us to believe.

The reality is this: We live in an era of increasing accountability and, in that kind of political climate, state testing is here to stay. If educators are opposed to this increased accountability through state testing, I recommend that they either “get over it” or leave the profession. There are certain things that educators can control and other things that they cannot control. The public’s demand for higher academic standards and the belief that we can measure achievement of those higher standards by tests are part of the culture of this country.

While the pendulum will probably eventually swing away from the pervasive culture of testing and accountability that exists today, I predict that schools will *never* return to a time when there were few, if any, state tests. The state assessments *do* measure many skills and knowledge that are important for success in life, and many *are* indicators of academic preparedness, as narrowly defined. The problem lies in the assessments’ *inability to indicate preparation for successful post-school experience.* Perhaps, therefore, our peaceful coexistence with the culture of testing depends on being able to view standards and assessments as essential, but not adequate for a complete education.

A second debate concerns whether the state standards are set too high or too low. Many educators who work with special education students, students with limited English proficiency, underachieving students,

and even some career/technical education students argue that the academic standards are too challenging or take too long to reach for the students they serve. They maintain that the standards are either unachievable or prevent students from taking other worthy but less standards-focused courses. Other educators point out that by international standards and by the requirements of today's workplace, the standards are not high enough.

Who is right? They all are. That means educators must find out-of-the-box solutions to prepare all students with the skills they must have in our technological, information-based society. Schools need new models.

### **Time to Move Forward**

For the good of students and the public education system in America, I encourage educators and the public to agree on what they can accept about the intent of *No Child Left Behind* and not spend excessive time debating areas of disagreement with the legislation. *No Child Left Behind* is here to stay, certainly for the time being. Moreover, nearly everyone concurs that the American education system should give all students as rigorous and relevant an educational experience as possible. Let's move forward with positive actions in the areas of agreement.

The International Center's work with model schools across the country has revealed that a school or district needs to go through three stages if it is to achieve high academic standards for all students. These three stages involve:

1. Convincing teachers and parents as to **why** we need to change our schools.
2. Using good data to determine **what** needs to change once people understand why schools must change.
3. Determining **how** to change the schools once people understand the *why* and the *what*.

Regrettably, many schools begin their improvement efforts in the reverse order by deciding, "Here is a way we can do things differently." That is, they find a "solution" without first identifying the need or problem. But if staff and stakeholders do not believe the school must change or understand what needs to change, the suggestions on *how* to change are likely to be ineffective or rejected, because they are, in effect, solutions to a problem that has not been acknowledged.

The International Center has a great deal of experience in helping schools across the country move to a more rigorous and relevant curriculum for all students, as called for in *No Child Left Behind*. Many of the International Center's resources are designed to help education leaders and their teams deal more effectively with the requirements and spirit of *No Child Left Behind* in the context of continuous improvement and from the perspective of caring educators who want to see *all* children succeed in school and be prepared for their future roles as adults. Please contact us if we can assist you.

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