

NCLB: The Myth of Failing Schools

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NCLB. They are the worst four letters for educators of public schools. They stand for No Child Left Behind. The implied idea of the law is that all children, regardless of background or ability, get what they need to be successful. No one is left behind. The fact is the opposite is the case. The law leaves is leaving just about everyone at nearly every public school behind. It is destroying the reputation of public schools and mandating that they divert funds away from themselves. It is requiring teachers of “failing” schools to go through mandatory training to become “effective” teachers. NCLB is a recipe to paint a picture of public schools as failing our children. The truth is that, like any profession, there is a mix of highly competent and less effective individuals. The truth is that many excellent teachers are teaching at “failing schools.” These teachers work as hard, or harder, than teachers in schools where students’ test scores are proficient. So what is the difference? Often these schools are not failing because of the quality of the teacher, but because they are dealing with a variety of variables that are beyond the school’s control. Research has shown that poverty is the number one factor influencing student achievement in school.

Let me explain. I work at a school where the majority of students come from low-income families. Many are second language learners, some with parents having little or no education themselves. *In addition, an alarming number of students have learning disabilities at this school.* As a teacher, I can affect what happens while students are with me, and I do my best to make a difference. However, there is only so much that I can do in the time that I have with them. And when compared to middle class students, these students fall far behind.

Imagine two master potters of equal ability are given the task to make a certain ceramic bowl. One is given clay that is in a state that is elastic and ready to be molded. The other is given a gritty mix of sand, rock, and sticks. The potter with the second mix has much more work to do in order to prepare the clay before he can begin to mold and shape it. The potter with the mix that is elastic and ready can start shaping his pot immediately. Yet both potters are measured by the same standard and are given the same amount of time to achieve the goal. If the potter with the mix requiring extra preparation does achieve the goal, is there any acknowledgement of how much more work he had to do to get there?

This is what we are doing to our schools. We are labeling them as “failing” based on the student progress, when so much of reaching the target depends on the child’s background and how prepared they are to achieve it. It is unfair to compare schools based on a fixed standard, when a student’s background makes such a difference.

This is only one way that NCLB is hurting our schools. Diane Ravitch, former Assistant Secretary of Education in the first Bush administration was a key proponent in forming NCLB. Seeing the way it is now hurting our students and schools, she has done a complete 180-degree turn, and now actively speaks out against it. In her book titled *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*, she writes that

“...accountability, as written into federal law, was not raising standards, but dumbing down the schools as states and schools strived to meet unrealistic targets.”

There will always be shining stars, both teachers and students, in every community, those who defy the odds. However, it is unfair to label schools as “failing” when so many have so much more work to do to accomplish the given goal. It is unfair to think that teachers at schools labeled “failing” work with any less dedication than those where students test scores are “proficient.”

For the teacher at a “failing” school, the easy solution is to move to another school, one where there are not the problems associated with poverty, English language acquisition, and family education. The harder solution is to change the law. As it is, NCLB is harming public education, the teaching professional, and our children.

We all need to speak up and make our voices heard. NCLB is up for renewal this fall and we need to call for revisions that make sense for everyone.