

# **If the Underlying Premise For No Child Left Behind Is False, How Can that Act Solve Our Problems?**

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(at the invitation of the Iowa Academy of Education)

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## Abstract

The premise underlying the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002 is that America's schools are failing. This premise is examined by looking at several trustworthy indicators. First, results of the Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) for the past 20 years show improved verbal scores for every subgroup for whom there are data. Student scores on the mathematics section of the SAT show even more remarkable gains. Next, data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress indicate that remarkable gains in reading, mathematics, and science have been shown by our nation's white, Black, and Hispanic students in all three age groups, 9-, 13-, and 17-year-olds, from the 1970s to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On average, America's schools have been improving steadily for at least 30 years.

Reading seems to be the particular concern of President George W. Bush and Secretary of Education Rod Paige. Each has said our students are deficient. But when international data concerning literacy from 35 countries were examined, US 9-year-olds ranked 9<sup>th</sup> in the world and were statistically outscored by only three other nations. US white children outscored the highest scoring nation in the world, and US middle and upper middle class children from public schools scored even higher than that! Poor children in the US, however, scored about the same as some of the world's lowest scoring nations. Apparently reading instruction is excellent if you are wealthy but not if you are poor. This conclusion was replicated in still another international study testing our 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics, and science. In all three subject areas, US white students were among the highest scoring in the world while US Black and Hispanic students, on average, performed as low as students from underdeveloped countries. Finally, in another international study of mathematics and science in the fourth and eighth grades, these same huge differences in the performance of America's rich and poor students were evident. The idea that NCLB will identify the students and schools who are failing is meaningless—we have been able to do that for decades and done nothing about it.

This paper also examines civics education. There we find that American youth are among the most knowledgeable in the world about democratic institutions and ideas. Safety in the schools is also examined. From an international perspective, the US is about average—with results indicating our schools are neither the most violent nor the safest in the world in which to work.

In conclusion, trustworthy data inform us that the American system of public education works extremely well for those living in middle class communities, attending middle class schools. On the other hand, our nation has failed for decades to provide that quality of education to our poor who are often children of color. Our failing schools are not filled with lazy students, uncaring parents, and incompetent teachers as suggested by NCLB. Instead, our failing schools are filled with children from families who are in economic and social crises; located in neighborhoods of great poverty, crime, and drug use; staffed by the least prepared and the newest teachers, and greatly under-funded compared to suburban schools. There is nothing in NCLB to deal with these issues, and our schools are not likely to improve until our government, in collaboration with our communities, is held accountable for providing sound educational policies and fiscal support to ameliorate current problems.

## **If the Underlying Premise for No Child Left Behind Is False, How Can that Act Solve Our Problems?**

The fundamental premise underlying the legislation known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is that the public schools of the United States are failing. But that is a half-truth, at best. When government legislation is built on a faulty premise, accepting half-truths and ideology as facts, the legislation can never solve the problem it is designed to address. Discussed below is the evidence about the faulty premise underlying NCLB, a description of the real educational problems that confront America's schools, and a suggestion about a school reform agenda that might work.

### **Are American Schools Failing?**

The answer to this deceptively simple question will always elude us because each individual's response is deeply rooted in his/her personal beliefs about what should be accomplished by our schools. Some want to look primarily at academic achievement, concentrating on what students know and are able to do in reading, science, and mathematics. Others want to emphasize the civic knowledge our youngsters acquire. Different individuals want students to learn an appreciation for cultures other than their own. Still others judge schools primarily on whether or not they can provide safety for their children. The list of outcomes that are valued by one group or another is lengthy.

Depending on the outcomes chosen to judge our schools and the weight we assign these various outcomes, different answers about the effectiveness of our schools are forthcoming. With that understanding, I examine a few of the trustworthy indicators available to help frame at least a partial response to the question about whether or not our schools are failing.

*Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) for college entrance.* For over sixty years the College Board has surveyed high school graduates and judged their potential for doing college-level work. The scores on their test, the SAT, were recalibrated almost a decade ago, and there exists a common scale for measuring achievement from 1981 to the present. Thus, we can look at high school verbal and mathematical learning over the past

two decades. When we do that, we learn how easy it is to convince someone that nothing much has happened in our schools, despite the best efforts of our politicians, teachers, and the investment of a good deal of money. This case is easily made because the average verbal score on the SAT achieved by high school seniors in 1981 was 504, and the average verbal score achieved in 2002 was exactly the same, 504. There appears to be no gain. On the surface there is nothing to indicate an improving public school system. But appearances are often deceiving, and digging beneath the surface is a recommended strategy.

Looking closer at these data, we find that American Indian high school test-takers, as well as students of Mexican descent, and the great majority of all the test-takers, white students, each gained an average of eight points over that time period. Puerto Rican test-takers gained 18 points. Black high school students gained 19 points. And Asian high school students gained 27 points. Every subgroup for which we have data shows gains, but the overall average score didn't move up at all.

How is this possible? The issue is a well-known one in statistics, called Simpson's paradox (Bracey, 2003), and not at all difficult to understand (see Table 1). White students in America, in general, are of a higher social class than minorities and ordinarily have access to better educational systems. Those demographic characteristics bestow advantages to white students such that they usually score higher than minorities on the SAT. Over the time period we are looking at, America became home to more immigrants, and many more minority students sought higher education. Thus, eventually, the higher scoring and continuously improving white students became a smaller percent of the SAT test-taking population. The percent of all SAT test-takers who were white shrunk from around 85% in 1981, to around 65% in 2001. Since more minority students and more students with lower social-class backgrounds sought a college education, we can consider this a triumph for American public education. But this triumph brought into the pool of test-takers many more people with poorer educational histories, and so the average scores on the SAT remained constant while evidence abounds that every subgroup in America improved its performance on the test.

Table 1		
Hypothetical Example of Simpson's Paradox with SAT Scores Demonstrating How Subgroup Scores Go Up While Average Scores Do Not Change At All		
	Year = 1981	Year = 2002
Average score of white students on the test.	<b>519</b>	<b>527</b>
% of test-takers who are white.	<b>85%</b>	<b>65%</b>
Average score of minority students on the test.	<b>420</b>	<b>460</b>
% of test-takers who are minority.	<b>15%</b>	<b>35%</b>
Determining the average score for all students taking the test.	$519(.85) + 420(.15) =$ <b>504</b>	$527(.65) + 460(.35) =$ <b>504</b>

The gains made by urban Black and Puerto Rican students were particularly large and these large gains showed up on the mathematics portion of the SAT test as well. On that test, over these two decades, Black students' scores went up 36 points, while Puerto Ricans gained 23 points. American Indians also gained 20 points, and white students gained 24 points. So the critics of our schools are accurate when they say that overall scores in verbal skills are not rising. But they are not telling the whole truth about the scores on that test. And they are simply ignoring the real and dramatic gains made by all students in mathematics, where even the average scores were up approximately one point a year for the last 20 years! Data such as these make me question the basic premise of NCLB, namely, that our public schools are failing.

*National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)*. The NAEP tests are considered by many to be the best assessments we have of our students' performance over time. How have we done on the reading, mathematics, and science assessments? From approximately 1971 to the present, these tests have shown steadiness or growth and a reduction of the gap between white students and non-Asian minority students (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). Steadiness or growth in NAEP scores and a reduction in the achievement gap have occurred despite the facts that over the past thirty years the poorest

40% of all US families have lost real income; all families have had to work more hours simply to hold their place in the economic system; special education and language minority children exist in our nation's largest school systems at much higher rates than they used to; immigration has risen to rates un-experienced since the turn of the 20th century; medical insurance is missing for a large share of poor families, and so forth. It would not be illogical to regard holding even or showing only slight growth in achievement in the face of so many social problems as a sign of success for the public schools.

Nevertheless, because the gains have been quite modest (averaging only a few points on the NAEP scales for 9-, 13- and 17-year-olds) and the gap between white and non-Asian minority students has remained too wide, critics appear to have grounds for concern. But as Bracey (2003) documents, Simpson's paradox is operating here as well. Let us look just at NAEP reading scores. From the 1970s until 1999, white 9-, 13-, and 17-year-olds gained four, six, and nine points, respectively. If we look at the gains for Hispanics across the three age groups, we see gains of 19, 12, and 10 points. And if we look at the gains made by Black students across the three age groups, we see scores rising by 28, 16, and 16 points respectively.

In science the situation is the same. From 1977 to 1999 total scores increased only an average of about eight points for our 9-, 13-, and 17- year-olds. But across the three age groups, the scores for whites were up an average of about nine points; the scores of Hispanics went up an average of 14 points, and the scores of Black students went up an average of 16 points. In mathematics from 1978 to 1999 the same trend is evident. For all 9-, 13-, and 17-year-olds the scores went up an average of around 10 points. But over this time period white scores for the three age groups increased an average of 11 points Black scores increased 15 points, and Hispanic scores went up 16 points.

The case for failing schools cannot be made easily with NAEP data because that data show only improvement! Advocates for NCLB, such as President George W. Bush and Secretary Rod Paige, ignore the steady growth in NAEP scores and argue instead that the NAEP shows too low a level of performance for American youth, particularly in reading. But that charge can be examined by looking at two recent international comparisons with which we can benchmark US performance.

*Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)*. A few years back reading tests were given to 4<sup>th</sup> graders or 9-year-olds in 35 countries. Data from the PIRLS study have recently been analyzed by a federal agency, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2004). They are quite instructive. In this reading test, the United States ranked 9<sup>th</sup> out of 35 countries which is certainly a respectable showing. But it is more important to note that the US was beaten statistically by only three other nations that competed in this study. The performance of US students in this literacy study provides no evidence of a public school system that has problems teaching literacy! Furthermore, the PIRLS test and the NAEP tests share some common approaches to assessing reading. They both define “reading” similarly, as a constructive process. They both expect reading to be informed by what students bring to the test. They each expect students to develop interpretations, make connections across text, and evaluate what they have read. Each uses literary passages drawn from children’s storybooks and informational texts as the basis for the reading assessment. And both tests use multiple-choice and constructed response questions in about the same ratio. It does appear, however, that the PIRLS was designed for 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders while the NAEP is designed for the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders. Thus NAEP is the more difficult exam and may be assessing what fourth grades students do not know rather than what they do know.

The US 9-year-olds showed some remarkable achievements in reading compared to their international competitors. For example, scoring above the international 90<sup>th</sup> percentile were 19% of US students. Only one other country had a larger percent of students scoring in the top 10% on this international test of literacy. Similarly, above the international 75<sup>th</sup> percentile were 41% of the US students, a record exceeded by only one other nation, Sweden, which in this study also had the highest average literacy score in the world.

Sweden is a small, economically and ethnically homogenous white nation. Yet if the millions of white children of the US, both the rich and the poor combined, had competed as a separate nation, they would have had the highest average literacy score in the world. US white students would have beaten little Sweden by a considerable amount. Although scoring considerably below white children, Black and Hispanic children in the US were still at or above the average score for the international community. So even our



public schools' poorest minority children seem to be getting appropriate literacy education compared to the children in other nations.

The results of the PIRLS study resemble quite closely the results of another study of reading, about a decade earlier, where the performance of our 9- and 14-year-olds was assessed. Statistically, we either tied the highest scoring nation in the world (little, homogenous Finland), or we were tied for second place behind Finland (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). It is curious how President Bush, Secretary Paige, and others who criticize our nation's reading programs can reconcile these remarkable facts about our youngsters' world-class performance with their statements that US public schools fail at teaching reading.

Perhaps the most important issue that the PIRLS study revealed is that schools with under 10% of their children in poverty (that is, schools for advantaged children) had scores that were considerably above the average for US white students and thus dramatically above Sweden's scores, the highest achieving nation in the world. Money matters! On the other hand, but still illustrative of the point that money matters, is the fact that poor children in the US did not score well in this international comparison. For children in schools where poverty was a predominant characteristic (schools where over 75% of the children were eligible for free and reduced lunch), the average score on PIRLS was as low as in some of the lowest achieving countries in the world. Our poorest students economically are also our poorest students in international assessments of achievement. Money matters. This is a repetitive theme when we examine other achievements of America's students.

*Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)*. The second recent international survey of students was PISA, which assessed 15-year-olds in mathematics, science, and reading (Lemke, Calsyn, Lippman, Jocelyn, Kastberg, Liu, Roey, Williams, Kruger, & Bairu, 2001). The items on this test most resembled IQ or problem-solving tasks rather than items that dealt directly with the secondary school curriculum. PISA was designed to assess how students would cope with work and other complex environments as they reach the age when they might leave school. So how did our 15-year-olds do? The answer is, not bad, in aggregate, but not good if you care about equality of achievement in America. What was found was that on the tests of reading, mathematics, and science,

our nation was at the mean. We were at the overall international average, a cause for neither celebration nor despondency, though critics were quick to point out that average scores were not good enough for the United States. Forgotten, however, is that with data such as these, most countries will inevitably be bunched close to the average score. But apart from wanting to live in Lake Woebegone where all the children are above average, how did the various ethnic groups in America do? The answer to this question provides a clearer picture about the success and failure of American education.

Looking at mathematics we find that the US average score on PISA was near the international average, about the same score level obtained by Germany, the Czech Republic, Norway, and Hungary. I don't think those countries are such embarrassing company to be in for mathematics learning, but we were still way below the highest scoring nations. Yet if we pulled out from the US data only the scores for white 15-year-olds, those students would have ranked as about the seventh highest scoring nation in the world, beaten handily by only Japan and Korea. America's Black and Hispanic 15-year-olds, however, would have been beaten by all but two nations in this study. Our minorities exceeded the scores only of students in Mexico and Brazil, countries that are not thought of as fully developed. Apparently when we pool together America's white students of all social classes, they compete quite well with the students from industrialized nations. On the other hand, America's Black and Hispanic students compete quite well only with the students from underdeveloped nations. This is, or should be, an embarrassment.

The data in science are roughly the same. The US average score hides both the successes and the failures of our public education system. In science our students are approximately tied with those of Norway, France, Hungary, and Switzerland, and well above the students from Germany and Denmark. Once again this suggests to me that we are not in such terrible company. But as usual, the important information comes from disaggregating the US data. If they had competed as a separate nation, our white students would have ranked fourth in the world against students from other developed nations. Our Black and Hispanic students, however, would have beaten the students from only two underdeveloped nations, scoring near the bottom on this survey of science achievement.

The data on reading achievement in this international study of 15-year-olds show about the same thing. The US average places our students in the middle of the pack, approximately tied with Austria, Iceland, Norway, France, Denmark, Switzerland, and others we regard as developed nations. When we disaggregate these data, our white students rank second in the world, beaten only by the students from tiny, economically and culturally homogenous, Finland. Our Black and Hispanic students once again placed near the bottom on this international assessment.

*Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)*. In the middle of the 1990s and again about five years later, data from the TIMSS study and its replication (TIMSS-R) were made available (Gonzalez, Calsyn, Jocelyn, Mak, Katzberg, Arafeh, Williams, & Tsen, 2000).

The original TIMSS informed us that American 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders scored at about the same level as those in 41 other nations but well below some Asian nations in math and science. In TIMSS-R The United States once again came out about average among the 38 nations whose 8<sup>th</sup> graders competed, ranking only 19<sup>th</sup> in mathematics and 18<sup>th</sup> in science. Since average scores are always unacceptable in the United States, the alarm went out with the release of each of these reports.

Although newspapers were reporting the awful news that we were average, the TIMMS study also revealed that some of our schools were doing fine. The US average, as always, masks the scores of students from terrific public schools and hides the scores of students attending shamefully inadequate schools. Illinois is an example of this. Along Lake Michigan, North of Chicago, are 20 public school districts serving predominantly wealthy suburban families. They banded together calling themselves “The First in the World Consortium” and gained permission to compete in TIMSS as a separate nation. The results indicated that these advantaged public school students were, indeed, on a par with the top students in mathematics and science in the world. Statistically, The First in the World Consortium was beaten by only one nation in mathematics, and it was not beaten by any other nation in science! These spectacular achievements are ignored by those who claim our public schools are not working. But let us also focus on southern Illinois where East St. Louis is located. For decades this poor minority community has been served by awful schools that should have been, but were not, an embarrassment to a

nation as rich as ours. Yet any suitable random sample of US schools for an international assessment includes both kinds of districts, those similar to East St. Louis and those that resemble the North Shore of Chicago. Put them together, and you hide important distinctions between schools in different communities.

The same sorts of distinctions exist among states as well when you separate them out from the overall statistics. In TIMSS, at the eighth-grade level among the 41 nations, 32 of these nations statistically outscored Louisiana in mathematics. Worse, 36 nations outscored the District of Columbia, our nation's capital. On the other hand, only six nations in the world beat Iowa and Nebraska in mathematics. In science, 26 nations outperformed Mississippi, and 37 nations beat the District of Columbia. But only one nation, Singapore, scored above Colorado, Connecticut, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oregon, Utah, Vermont, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

So which American academic performance record should we talk about when we talk about the American schools? Are we talking about the performance of students in the District of Columbia or the performance of the 14 states that placed second in the world? This question makes an important point even clearer: Average scores mislead completely in a country as heterogeneous as ours. We have many excellent public schools, and many that are not. Those who want to undermine our public schools often condemn the whole system rather than face the inequities within it.

When the TIMSS-R data were released, the news media and also public school critics seemed to have missed something important. In science, the highest achieving nation in the world exceeded the United States – even when we are looking only at the average score for our nation – by getting exactly four more items out of 48 correct. This is not the kind of huge difference between nations that will make the sky fall on America!

In mathematics, we did not do as well. Students from Singapore, the leading nation, got an average of 40 of the 48 items right. Even though American students scored above the international average, they only got 30 items correct. But at least one reason for that was evident from the TIMSS-R report. In the United States, only 41% of mathematics teachers hold mathematics degrees. The average among other countries is 71%. Perhaps, instead of condemning public education on the basis of these average

scores, unhappy citizens should advocate paying teachers enough money so we can attract mathematicians and scientists to public school classrooms.

I understand that NCLB will identify schools that are failing. But we already know all we need to know about that. For example, in science, for the items common to both the TIMSS and the TIMSS-R, the scores of white students in the United States were exceeded by only three other nations in the world. But Black American school children were beaten by every single nation, and Hispanic kids were beaten by all but two nations. A similar pattern was true of mathematics scores. This was exactly the same pattern we saw when analyzing the results of the PIRLS and PISA studies. Together these independent assessments convincingly argue, from trustworthy data, that our American public schools, overall, are not failing. Equally clear from PIRLS, PISA, and TIMSS is that public educational systems are failing to provide quality education to most American children living in communities characterized by poverty. Poor children whose schools are embedded in the culture of poverty are not receiving a decent education.

It is worth asking if NCLB can ever improve the schools that serve our poorest children when the programs offered to fix schools identified as failing do not address the social and economic factors that affect those schools or the inadequate support they are getting. Rigorous standards, increased testing, withdrawing resources from failing schools, and other features of NCLB cannot solve the problems caused by devastating, community-destroying, family-stressing economic poverty.

*Civic education.* One of the goals we have for our students is that they be prepared for the responsibilities of citizenship in our democracy. As we all know, America's voting-age population does not participate in our democracy at the rates expected, or needed, for a democracy to thrive. It is easy to blame the schools for that. Critics often blame watered-down social studies courses and not enough rigorous history teaching for the failures of adults to register and vote. But we have trustworthy data that inform us this is not so.

In a recent international assessment of the civic knowledge of 14-year-olds, or 9<sup>th</sup> graders, US students actually did well (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001). Twenty-eight nations participated. On the measurement of civic content US students ranked 10<sup>th</sup> in the world, and on the measurement of civic skills US students

ranked first in the world. In total civic knowledge, no nation's students were statistically ahead of US students. Social studies is apparently taught better in the US than in other nations.

Our students also seem to understand a good deal about democratic values and the nature of an ethical society. For example, 92% of our students thought that the government had an obligation to insure that there are equal political opportunities for men and women; 91% of our students believed government was responsible for providing a free basic education to all citizens; about 90% of our youth said that everyone should have the right to speak out freely; 88% of our youth said that government must provide basic health care for everyone; 87% of our youth thought government must provide an adequate standard of living for old people, and so forth. Arguably, our youth are better prepared to run a humane democratic society than are those from either party who now run our government.

But all is not well. The scores indicating increased civic knowledge were nearly perfectly correlated with the number of books in a child's home. And civic knowledge was nearly perfectly correlated with the highest level of parental education. There were ethnic differences with white, Asian and multi-racial students scoring quite high, and Black and Latino students scoring much lower, although still above the international average. These differences in civic knowledge and skills are adequately explained by the educational differences that exist between various ethnic groups. Not only does a poor education for non-Asian minorities limit their economic and social well-being, it also stunts the development of their democratic values. That may be as serious an effect of providing an inadequate education for our poor students as the academic deficits from which they suffer. Nevertheless, the general conclusion from this study, when we use other countries to benchmark our own civic education, is that our ninth grade children are very well educated in civics.

*International survey of school violence.* Many Americans worry more about the safety of their children than almost any other school characteristic. The media's constant selling of violence and the actual occurrence of violence in our schools frighten us all. I join the school critics who say that violence of various kinds – verbal, physical, and that which occurs through exclusion and intolerance – should be of greater concern to

American school administrators than it is now. But we should put our concerns in perspective. We can compare our schools with those of other nations because like us, no society promotes school violence, and all societies condemn such violence.

When we make these comparisons, we don't look bad at all (Akiba, LeTendre, Baker, & Goesling, 2002). For example, students in 37 nations were asked if they were victims of school violence at least once during the previous month of the survey. Despite all our worries, the US seems to be at the international average. Students in the schools of Hungary, Romania, the Philippines, Cypress, and South Africa seem to be far above the international average. They seem to be nations in which it is unsafe for children to go to school. On the other hand, Denmark and Singapore, in particular, seem to be places that are safest for children to attend school.

What about unruly and disruptive students, the kind who are so unmanageable that teachers cannot teach well? Teachers in Korea, Spain, and Cypress were countries where this was reported to be a big problem. On the other hand this was hardly a problem at all for teachers in countries like Israel, the Netherlands, and Austria. As is so often the case, teachers' reports about the US showed us to be near the international average.

One of the most important questions asked of teachers in this survey was: Are you limited in your teaching by threats to you or your students' personal safety? In this survey, teaching appears to be hell in Romania, Kuwait, Iran, and Columbia. And such threats to one's person seem to be non-existent in the Netherlands and quite low in Scotland, Sweden, and the Czech Republic. The good news is that the US was below the international average in the percent of teachers who said their teaching was limited by personal threats of violence.

The conclusion to draw from this survey of students and teachers in 37 nations is that our schools are not the easiest in the world in which to learn or teach, but they are also a long way from being the most difficult to attend. Our students and teachers are victims of violence more often than we should ever tolerate, but when we use other nations as a benchmark, we see it is not a problem unique to the US. Given the media attention to incidents of violence in the schools and the poor public perception of youth and our schools, it is a reassuring to know that we are coping with school violence as well

as most other nations. This is a small achievement, to be sure, but an achievement nevertheless.

### **Conclusion**

I started by asking if our schools are failing. The answer now seems clear. American schools are not failing, overall, but they are failing some of our students. The students we fail are primarily the urban and rural poor, and in particular, the poor who are minorities. As a nation we have known this for decades. Thus the accountability practices in NCLB will yield nothing new about the problems of education, or their location.

More important to me, however, is that NCLB focuses almost exclusively on the deficits of students, teachers, and administrators and dismisses the everyday problems that communities of poor people face. Many of these problems can be addressed by our government if we demand that it do so.

I suggest that the accountability system we push for be two-way rather than just one-way. The obligation of our schools to be accountable to the communities they serve is matched in equal part by the obligations that the governments of those communities be accountable to their schools. Governments must be held accountable for providing the fiscal and social opportunities for families to raise healthy, high-achieving children in safe, high performing schools.

In the case of poor communities, government accountability is lacking if it fails to provide high-quality preschools so that advantaged and disadvantaged children can start school more evenly matched. Data inform us this could help.

Government support is needed for full-day kindergartens of small class size rather than half-day or no kindergartens for our poorest children. Data inform us this could help.

Government should see to it that poor children have classes that are small in size for the first three years of schooling. Data inform us this could help.

Government must provide pay scales and mentoring programs to attract the best of the newly certified teachers to the schools that serve the poor rather than allowing uncertified teachers or those from alternative teaching training programs begin their careers at those schools, learning to teach at the expense of the poor. Data inform us this could help.



Government needs to provide incentives and better working conditions to attract Nationally Board Certified Teachers and well-regarded experienced teachers to our poorest schools. Data informs us this could help.

Policies need to be in place to find teachers that regard color, ethnicity, and language variations among children as strengths to be drawn upon instead of deficits to be overcome. Data inform us this will help.

Government support is needed to support community-based youth programs serving those who are in middle schools or their teen years. Data inform us these programs are unusually successful and very cost effective.

The list of evidence-based interventions to help schools that serve the poor to do better is much longer. But it is clear to me that any of these potential ways to improve schools that serve the poor are not likely to be initiated as a function of the NCLB legislation, because the accountability system is only one-way. NCLB seems designed primarily to identify schools that we already know are achieving well or poorly and zip codes can provide that information at much less cost.

Actually, zip codes, or percent of those in a school receiving free and reduced lunch or the percent of children who are English language learners does predict academic achievement remarkably well. Thus, any reasonable plan to improve the schools of the poor must be concerned for the communities in which the schools of the poor are embedded. Otherwise, as Jean Anyon (1997) reminds us, reforming the schools is like trying to clean the air on one side of a screen door.

To make any serious attempt to improve the schools of the poor might require job training programs for adults in the community along with medical clinics and language learning programs for the parents of recent immigrants. We may need to insure that transportation is dependable enough in the neighborhoods of the poor so that people can get to work, and when they do work, that they earn livable wages instead of poverty wages.

Other suggestions that might break the cycle of poverty in neighborhoods abound. But what we are offered in NCLB is one-way accountability, a reliance on the mistaken assumption that the problems in schools that serve the poor are caused solely by those who inhabit the schools. If NCLB focused more on two-way accountability, it would

address the fact that the problems of our schools are also in our tax and housing codes, wage structures, the medical coverage provided to families, the location of and subsidies for public transportation, and so forth.

We need to urge our representatives to our government to recognize the strengths of many of our public schools and acknowledge the existence of many dedicated teachers and high performing students. Evidence informs us that many such schools exist, and that refutes the major premise underlying NCLB. This is legislation we can probably do without. But with or without NCLB, our representatives need to be reminded that many schools that are not now successful are that way because of the social conditions in which they exist. We must stop attributing all the blame for failing schools to their deficient students, incompetent teachers, lazy administrators, and uncaring parents. Responsibility for those failing schools lies also in our communal failure to demand that our state and local governments be as accountable to their communities as we expect our schools to be accountable to our local and state governments. This may be the most important school reform agenda to promote.

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## What Iowa Educators Are Saying about David Berliner's Paper

*Dr. Berliner makes compelling arguments in his research about the fallacies and shortcomings of the belief system that underlies NCLB. By identifying the systemic factors that surround the negative impacts of poverty on children's ability to learn, he challenges all of us to develop social policy that makes accountability a two-way street.*

*It is not accurate to make a blanket statement that schools in Iowa and the US are not successful. It is accurate to state that schools with high populations of children living in poverty are failing to help those young people achieve at high levels.*

*As Dr. Berliner points out, what schools need are highly qualified teachers who are appropriately compensated and rewarded for working in high-risk schools and who are provided with quality professional development that will support their ability to apply new strategies that address the unique needs of these learners. All educators must have access to a host of systems supports that protect the children in their charge from the deleterious effects of abject poverty.*

*The educational community is determined to do everything in its power to eliminate this totally unacceptable achievement gap. It cannot be done through the use of sanctions, watch lists, and vouchers as this bi-partisan legislation has dictated. The School Administrators of Iowa believes that Dr. Berliner's statistics and data inform the national debate in a critical way.*

**Dr. Troyce Fisher, Executive Director  
School Administrators of Iowa**

*As Iowa ASCD Executive Director, I support Berliner's thesis because it invites dialogue rather than assigning blame and emphasizing deficits. Berliner recognizes that there is a difference between learning and achievement. Are schools failing? It all depends on how we look at the question and how much we are willing to work together to find the answers that will make a difference. By emphasizing the essential grayness of the problem, Berliner has put in proper focus the mistaken pronouncement by many that we are dealing with a clear-cut, simple issue of a failing educational system that has a "correct" solution.*

**Dr. Richard L. Hanzelka, Executive Director  
Iowa Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development**

*Dr. David Berliner is right on target. His paper should be read by all who are interested in improving the quality of our public education system. He uses data from some of the same sources as the critics to show clearly that our schools are improving and that they compare favorably internationally. The greatest value in Berliner's paper comes from focusing on the real issues of the changing demographics of our school populations and the societal gap that generates an achievement gap in schools. It is encouraging to have suggestions that focus on how government can truly improve education for the poor instead of pointing fingers and providing little real assistance.*

**John Hieronymus, President  
Iowa State Education Association**