



COMMISSION ON
NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND
 THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
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Beyond NCLB: Fulfilling the Promise to Our Nation's Children

Over the past five years, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has changed the educational landscape in our nation by demanding improved achievement, enhancing our understanding of teacher quality and strengthening classroom practice. While these changes have benefited students, families, schools and our nation as a whole, they have not been enough. Unacceptable achievement gaps pervade our schools. Our children are not prepared academically to compete with their international peers. Many students do not even finish high school, and those who do are often left unprepared for life in an increasingly competitive global economy.

The Commission on No Child Left Behind, a bipartisan independent effort to improve NCLB, has spent the past year traveling across the country, listening to the stories and experiences of those affected daily by the law. We believe that we must do more to accelerate progress and close achievement gaps. It is time for a bold step, one that builds on the foundation of NCLB while addressing the shortcomings we have identified in the law and its implementation. Only with such a careful effort—to keep what works and improve what doesn't—can we fulfill the worthy promise of a high-quality education for every student, in every school.

Our report lays out a vision for a high-achieving system, the steps the nation should take to get there and the changes in the law necessary to accomplish this task. The following summary highlights the Commission's major recommendations for achieving this vision.

We recommend assessing the quality of our teachers and principals by their effectiveness in raising student achievement and ensuring they receive the support necessary to succeed. This includes establishing new standards of effectiveness for teachers and principals—Highly Qualified *Effective* Teachers (HQET) and Highly Effective Principals. We also recommend providing high-quality professional development to teachers at risk of not meeting HQET status, which is determined by both student achievement results and peer or principal review; requiring all schools to have similar expenditures for teacher salaries and comparable numbers of HQETs; and requiring districts with high turnover rates to develop recruitment and retention plans aimed at the causes of the turnover.

We recommend developing voluntary national model standards and assessments that will help ensure all students are properly prepared for college and the workplace. We must insist that all children—whether they are from Milwaukee, Memphis or Miami—have access to a high-quality education based on high standards that will prepare them well for life after high school. States could adopt the voluntary national model standards and assessments as their own; build their own assessments based on the national model frameworks; or continue to keep their existing or revamped standards and tests, so long as the results of their tests are compared to the voluntary national model standards. To keep the public informed about the level of every state's expectations, the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. DOE) would issue reports comparing each state's standards to the voluntary national model standards.

We recommend improving the quality of assessments to ensure all states have in place sound, high-quality assessments that provide valid and reliable information. We recommend maintaining existing federal support for assessment development and targeting those funds to several new assessment priorities, such as improving the quality of assessments, developing and strengthening alternate assessments for students with disabilities and English language learners, and improving test delivery and scoring technology. We also recommend that districts be permitted to use a portion of their Title I funds to develop or acquire and implement high-quality formative assessments and be required to use such assessments in schools that are identified for school improvement. These assessments would provide teachers and parents with meaningful information on student progress throughout the year. They would not be used for accountability purposes but rather as tools to improve instruction to better address individual student needs.

We recommend improving the accuracy and fairness of adequate yearly progress (AYP) calculations by allowing states to include student achievement growth in those calculations. While the accountability provisions of NCLB have yielded important benefits, the current system of rating schools based on whether they have made AYP is a fairly blunt instrument. It does not distinguish between schools that are moving significantly in the right direction but have not yet reached the bar and those that are seriously struggling and show little or no progress. Including growth as a factor in AYP will yield richer and more useful data on student performance—both for the classroom and for school accountability.

We recommend more aggressive and effective interventions for chronically struggling schools. Improving NCLB would fall short without a stronger focus on helping struggling schools turn around. First, we ensure that states and districts have the capacity to help struggling schools and are focusing on schools with the most significant achievement problems. Additionally, to ensure that schools in NCLB's corrective action status (or four years of not meeting academic standards) can be more effective in increasing student achievement, those schools will now implement a set of comprehensive interventions designed to have a systemwide impact, rather than the one option presently required. Third, schools in corrective action would now have a full school year to implement such interventions and measure their effectiveness before more sanctions are taken against the school. Lastly, we double the research budget devoted to NCLB to ensure schools, teachers and principals are equipped with research-proven methods to raise achievement.

We recommend providing better access to high-quality public school choice and supplemental educational services (SES or free tutoring) for students. Help for struggling schools is only part of NCLB's focus—we also have to ensure there are options and supports for students in these struggling schools. We offer a comprehensive approach to improving the access to and quality of NCLB's student options by requiring:

- Schools that make AYP to make available more seats for public school choice
- Districts to annually audit space available for choice transfers
- Districts to identify and publicize a person or office that would operate as a point of contact for parents interested in student options
- Multiple enrollment periods for students eligible for SES
- Access to school facilities for SES providers
- States and the U.S. DOE to study the effects of SES on student achievement and, where necessary, to bar ineffective providers from offering SES

We recommend empowering parents and concerned citizens with the ability to enforce the law. The chief enforcement agent for NCLB has been the U.S. DOE and states. Unfortunately, many of NCLB's key provisions, especially those directly affecting parents and students, are not strongly implemented. We recommend that states and the U.S. DOE set up an administrative complaint process for parents and concerned citizens to seek better and more full implementation of the law. If this process fails to address the cause of the complaint, individuals would have the ability to take their case to state court. The only available remedy would be requiring implementation of the provision in question, not financial damages.

We recommend strengthening accountability for high schools. To help ensure high school graduates are prepared for college and the workplace and that they continue to achieve through high school, schools would be required to implement a 12th grade assessment. This assessment would be designed to measure 12th graders' mastery of content they will need to be college and workplace ready but would not be used as the sole determinant for graduation. Meanwhile, districts with large concentrations of struggling high schools would be required to develop and implement comprehensive, districtwide high school improvement plans.

We recommend that states, in partnership with the federal government, be required to develop data systems that provide information on student achievement and teacher and principal effectiveness over time. To implement our recommendations—in particular, the proposals to include student growth in AYP calculations and to determine teacher and principal effectiveness—the federal government and states must partner to create more sophisticated data systems that can track student achievement over time and provide critical information to parents, teachers and school administrators. Some states have begun to develop such systems, but all states need to pick up the pace to ensure that needed information will be available for all schools.