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Interview Paper

No Child Left Behind: Placing Restrictions on Teachers

Since the No Child Left Behind Act was passed in 2001 by President Bush during his first year in office, there have been many arguments among the various groups this act affects. Robert Schaeffer, one of the many people who are in opposition to the No Child Left Behind Act makes a great point, “believing we can improve schooling with more tests is like believing you can make yourself grow by measuring your height”. However, the main objective of this act is to make sure children are receiving the proper education they deserve. There are many different pros and cons in the dispute and it has become widely controversial. During my interview with first grade teacher, Francine Helms, the topic of the Standards of Learning tests in Virginia seemed to keep resurfacing. Even for a teacher who does not directly deal with the pressure of the SOLs, they were still a key factor in her teaching strategy. I wanted to get a wider perspective on this testing in order to understand the pressures these teachers are going through. Through my research, I have come to the conclusion that the No Child Left Behind Act is absolutely necessary to be enforced. However, I do think there are some key points that need to be revised and I will make suggestions for those points.

No Child Left Behind was proposed with great intentions. It had the sole purpose of giving each child an opportunity for higher education no matter what their family’s economic status is. It requires each public school to meet certain standards so parents did not feel compelled to send their child to a private school just so they can get proper education. To monitor if these standards have been met, the children are tested in grades three through eight on any of the subjects from reading, writing, science, mathematics, and technology to ensure that the public school’s standards of learning are reaching high levels. This testing is especially demanding in the reading and mathematics areas. Schools who receive funding from Title One must show Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). If the school does not meet the required standards, they must be put on a “failing” list so that way to parents are notified and may opt to send their child to a different school. If the school fails to meet the yearly progress for a second consecutive year, they are required to provide tutoring for the challenged students.

While some records show that there have been major improvements over the last nine years since NCLB was passed, others seem to disagree. However the reports cannot lie, and in 2005 the Nation's Report Card shows that more progress was made in reading and math in the past five years than in the previous twenty-eight years combined. Hispanic and African American students reached the highest achievements ever recorded and in forty-three of the fifty states, improvement was either shown or stability was maintained. The urban school districts seemed to show the most dramatic improvements and seemed to make above nation average progress.

One of the other intentions of passing the No Child Left Behind Act was to improve teaching quality by using "scientifically based" teaching methods. However many teachers do not feel they are seeing improvement in the quality of teaching. In fact they feel the opposite. Many feel they are being restricted from the number of creative learning activities they are used to conducting and resorting to a more generic form of instruction. In fact, schools are now buying into commercial reading programs in order to meet the standards of NCLB. These scripted reading programs are intended to maintain stability in the teaching curriculum and help inexperienced teachers gain the skills of a veteran. There are definite arguments in favor of the scripted programs which maintain consistency in the teacher's lesson and make the lessons easier to plan and supervise. These programs make it easier for the educators to meet the guidelines they are required to abide by, and they also provide a starting point for new teachers.

One valid point that Deborah Duncan-Owens makes when advising principals whether these programs are suitable that needs to be considered is that "just as giving a man a fish solves the immediate problem of hunger, providing teachers with a scripted reading program may solve the immediate problems associated with new, inexperienced, or ineffective teachers." There is a need to point out that this is only a temporary fix , and as Mrs. Helms stressed in my interview with her, there is a definite need to keep things continually changing in the teaching profession. She pointed out that different activities from year-to-year are important to incorporate so siblings do not do the same things that their brother or sister did the year before. Of course it is essential to make sure the goals are met each year, but with the scripted programs, the teachers are less motivated to change things up and look at new approaches.

Scripted reading programs are just one of the ways that teachers becoming more standardized due to the No Child Left Behind Act. Educators all over the nation are feeling pressured to meet with the act's

standards that they are becoming more marginalized and restricted with the ways that they conduct their lessons. Another complaint is that they also feel that they are becoming too focused on test-preparation that they have little time to do the actual teaching. The teachers feel rushed to make it through the material that they must cover by the end of the year so that they have enough time to practice for the standardized tests. In a survey conducted in 2003, twenty-six percent of the teachers said that their student's learning was affected by the amount of time they were dedicating to testing. While twenty-six may not seem like a large number, it is a considerable number of people that feel they are being crippled as a result of this act.

Many teachers also do not like the fact that the major focuses of the standardized tests are reading and mathematics. They feel this takes away from the other subjects such as science, social studies, and creative art activities. A research conducted in 2006 argues the percentage of time focused on each individual area of learning has not changed much. The main focus even before NCLB has always been on English/Language Arts and Mathematics. If this is the case, this uneven balance needs to be changed. Granted, reading and writing are unconditional necessities when it comes to learning other subjects such as science and social studies and to decipher "word problems" in mathematics. Francine Helms also described the importance to me in the interview, "I don't feel like I've done my job if my children aren't solid readers when they walk out my first-grade door. Because even math, there are word problems that you have to read. So it's our job to teach them reading if they don't already read when they come to first grade." Therefore, it is understandable for the key focus to be on that area, especially in primary grades such as first grade. However, the other main spotlight being held on mathematics needs to be evened out with the other areas. While the basics of math are important for all children to learn at a young age, social studies and science get overshadowed and left out. These two areas of learning are also very important and should be granted more emphasis. I strongly believe that these areas of study should be stressed more in future years.

Another concern the teachers have with NCLB affecting their teaching habits is that they are spending almost ninety percent of their teaching time instructing the entire class and just a mere ten percent of their time doing group work or participating in academic games and contests. While this is an undeniably uneven amount, research has shown once again that this has been the case even before the No Child Left Behind Act. Author of "Upper Elementary Grades Bear the Brunt of Accountability", Lorin

Anderson argues that teachers place too much of the blame on accountability and not enough of the fact that they themselves are the ones to blame for their teaching habits. Anderson suggests that the most productive ways of learning are to have active engagement, teaching as a conversation, and to slow down the children's learning. While this seems like a simple task for teachers to do, I do think that Anderson is being some-what one sided when placing all of the blame on the teacher's shortcomings. It is much easier said than done when told to slow the lessons down. In my interview with Mrs. Helms it was very evident to me that the teachers spend a lot of time focusing on preparation for the SOLs. It is always in the back of their minds. She stressed the importance on her part that she adequately prepares the kids for the next year in order for them to be on track for the SOLs. When they are placed in a time constraint, the teachers do not have all the time in the world to cover the material that the children will be tested on.

In addition, the teachers are not the only ones feeling the pressure and being affected by it. Mrs. Helms claims she can undoubtedly see the effect the pressure has on the kids. They know the weight of the tests they are taking and they take it extremely serious. But is pressure on kids this young a healthy thing? Especially when they only have one shot at the test they are taking to account of the entire year's worth of learning. The fact that they could possibly be having a rough day, or are suffering from an illness and unable to concentrate never gets taking into consideration. I think to fix this problem it would be more affective to have a test after each unit is completely taught and while it's still fresh in the kids' minds. This way they are given more than one chance to prove their learning progression. This also would give a little more freedom to the teachers to finish the units at their own pace instead of having to leave room for the "big test" at the end of the year.

There are also different standards from state to state. Many states have confessed to decreasing the standard requirements so that it is easier for the schools to meet the obligations and get better funding; Missouri admittedly being one of these states. A great problem with the schools having different requirements is that if a child moves from one state to another, they may be expected to know more than the last school has taught them. Therefore, they are in danger of scoring lower on or even failing the standardized test when in the place they lived before, they could have been one of the high scorers. This puts the children at risk if their parents decide to move around a lot. In eight states children are required to

pass “high-stakes test” before they can move onto the next grade. Children have a much higher danger of being held back because of the different requirements from state to state.

In an analysis of the Pleasant Valley School District in Pennsylvania, studies show that there was a definite difference between the scores of transfer students into the district and native students to that district. If a student has been in the district for only a few months they are still required to take the test no matter how prepared or unprepared they are. I think it is both necessary and would be beneficial to require that a student must be in the same district for a full twelve months before taking the standardized test. Otherwise the child will not be able to fully represent the district’s education program.

I think it is clear from the evidence I have provided that the No Child Left Behind Act puts a great deal of pressure in the elementary schools. After these amendments are made to the act, it will make it much easier for the children to succeed. After all, that is the main goal of the No Child Left Behind Act. These modifications will give them more of an opportunity to do well, rather than just one chance to reflect the entire year. This alteration will satisfy the critics of the No Child Left Behind Act who think it places too much demand on one test.