



# Picking Up the Pieces of No Child Left Behind

*By Randi Weingarten*

*The past decade has proven that teaching to the test doesn't work. Here's a look at what does.*



AP IMAGES

Visit any school in any community in America, and educators will tell you that the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) simply hasn't lived up to its goal of leveling the playing field for all children.

And it's not just teachers who believe this. There is widespread agreement that the landmark education legislation is simply not helping our children succeed in a 21st-century knowledge economy.

Even President Obama recognizes the problems with NCLB. In the absence of congressional reauthorization, he granted waivers to some states that will provide temporary flexibility and relief. But waivers remain an imperfect solution.

NCLB's fixation on testing has sabotaged the law's noble intention. Schools have become focused on compliance rather than on innovation and achievement. We've become obsessed with hitting test-score targets and sanctioning schools and educators; instead, we should be focused on improving teaching and learning. We've narrowed the curriculum; instead we should be paving a path to critical thinking and problem solving -- the very kinds of knowledge and skills our children need to be well-educated and to compete in today's global economy.

An examination of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results by the Economic Policy Institute's Richard Rothstein found that while disadvantaged students made significant progress in the last generation, their progress has actually stalled since NCLB and its test-based accountability measures were enacted 10 years ago.

No Child Left Behind's original goal of leveling the playing field for all students is still critical. We have an obligation to provide all children with the best public education possible. And the stakes have never been higher. According to a recent Stanford University study, the achievement gap between rich and low-income students has increased by 40 percent since the 1960s. It is now double the gap between blacks and whites. We have 3 million more children living in poverty than at the start of this recession. At the same time, we've cut more than 300,000 education jobs.

So where do we go from here?

I'm not here to say it's easy -- it isn't. This is complicated work, and there are no silver bullets or quick fixes.

Proper accountability is vital. But current accountability mechanisms for public schools don't gauge good teaching or deep acquisition of knowledge. For example, the Common Core State Standards, and the assessments being developed as part of their implementation, can help bridge that divide by focusing on deeper understanding of core content, which students then can apply broadly.

Nations that outperform the United States have gotten this balance right -- emphasizing teaching and learning as opposed to testing and blaming. In Singapore, for example, where I spent time with teachers and students earlier this year, schools are focused intently on growth and achievement. However, as I observed numerous diverse groups of children deeply engaged in learning, I saw nothing that could be construed as teaching to the test.

The good news is that we don't have to travel all the way to Singapore to find schools and districts getting it right. There are districts here in America that embrace shared responsibility and collaboration among teachers, administrators, parents, and the community. They've implemented evaluation methods premised on continuous improvement, not on testing targets. They've



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implemented ongoing professional development programs and built in time for teachers to plan, engage, and learn from one another.

These districts are developing rich curricula grounding students in areas ranging from foreign languages to physical education, civics to the sciences, history to health, as well as literature, mathematics, and the arts. And they've focused on wraparound services to help mitigate out-of-school factors that impair the ability of children to learn.

*New York Times* columnist [Nicholas Kristof](#) recently called our collaborative efforts in New Haven, Connecticut "jaw-dropping" and said that "New Haven has arguably become ground zero for school reform in America because it is transforming the system with the full cooperation of the union."

Teachers and district officials in New Haven laid the groundwork for a breakout model of urban school reform by working together to radically change teacher development and evaluation and to turn around low-performing schools. The new agreement uses multiple measures to assess teacher performance and focuses on continuous improvement. After its first year in place, most of the 1,846 teachers were deemed effective. Of the teachers identified as needing improvement, 29 who received targeted assistance improved while 34 failed to show satisfactory improvement and either resigned or retired.

In the racially and economically diverse ABC Unified School District outside Los Angeles, the district and union partnered to implement changes in curriculum as well as to create intervention strategies to help struggling students, and created an innovative program to mentor new teachers. Over the last decade, the district's state student achievement scores have risen an average of almost 13 percent.

In Baltimore, the superintendent and teachers union collaborated to identify 10 low-performing schools and create a CEO District, marked by an extended day and school year and an intensive professional development program.

Teachers and district officials in Cincinnati established a Community Learning Center program in which schools offer students and their families an array of wraparound services that include a public health clinic, mental health services, academic tutoring and counseling, and after-school programs.

And in McDowell County, West Virginia, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) is the leading convener of an unprecedented public-private partnership with more than 40 partners from business, foundations, government, nonprofit agencies, and labor to enhance educational opportunity for children in the central Appalachian community while addressing the underlying problems caused by severe and chronic poverty and economic decline. The initiative, [Reconnecting McDowell](#), seeks solutions for all of the community's complex problems: poverty, underperforming schools, drug and alcohol abuse, housing shortages, limited medical services, and inadequate access to technology and transportation.

Our national responsibility is to educate every child to reach his or her fullest potential. This responsibility should be shared by teachers, students, parents, administrators, elected officials, and all

those concerned with having our next generation well-prepared for the future and engaged in our democracy.

Collaboration and shared responsibility might not seem like the sexiest solution. But it's one that we know works. And it's what our children, our teachers and our communities need.

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