# No Child Left Behind: Transforming America's High Schools



The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* launched the most sweeping changes in federal education policy since the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* was enacted in 1965. As its name implies, *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* seeks to close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers and to change the culture of America's schools so that all students receive the support and high-quality instruction they need to meet higher expectations.

Though public attention often focuses on the law's implications for elementary and middle schools, *NCLB* also provides an important framework and needed resources for *improving* all high schools and *transforming* those high schools with acute needs. As states and communities implement *NCLB* and achievement gaps are eradicated in the early grades, we can expect that many more young people will enter high school well prepared to master a rigorous curriculum. But our nation cannot afford to wait. True to its name, *NCLB* recognizes that change also is needed to help today's high school students catch up quickly and master both basic and advanced academic skills.

## Holding All High Schools Accountable for Student Success

*NCLB* builds on the accountability and assessment requirements Congress put in place in 1994 with the *Improving America's Schools Act*. As required by that law, all states have established standards in mathematics and reading or language arts for high school students, except Iowa, which has district-level standards. The 1994 law also required states to assess student mastery of these standards at least once between grades 10 through 12. *NCLB* turns this framework into a powerful lever for improving the academic achievement of high school students.

*NCLB* requires states to:

- **Establish annual achievement objectives for all high schools**. States set out specific "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) objectives for every high school (regardless of whether it receives federal funds) that move the school steadily toward the goal of ensuring that all of its students are proficient in reading and mathematics by the end of the 2013-14 school year.
- **Measure the progress of all students**. In defining each high school's AYP objectives, states include separate, annual achievement goals for students from low-income families, racial and ethnic minority students, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency so that these students progress toward the law's goal of 100 percent proficiency. The needs of struggling students cannot be obscured in schools with high overall levels of achievement.
- **Hold high schools accountable for graduation rates**. States incorporate graduation rates in defining AYP objectives for their high schools. Graduation rate is defined by the law as the percentage of students who graduate from high school with a regular diploma in the standard number of years. This is a clearer and more reliable approach to measuring how well a high school succeeds in retaining its students and helping them to advance than more traditional dropout measures. Most importantly, including the graduation rate in a high school's AYP objectives focuses attention on the needs of students who are at the greatest risk of dropping out.



These papers were produced under U.S. Department of Education Contract No. ED-99-CO-0163 with DTI Associates, Inc. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any product, commodity, service or enterprise mentioned in these papers is intended or should be inferred.

- **Give parents and community leaders the information they need to hold high schools accountable and support improvement.** States ensure that every school district publishes report cards for each of its high schools that include information on how students performed on state academic assessments. Achievement data must be disaggregated, or broken out, by student subgroups according to race, ethnicity, gender, English language proficiency, migrant status, disability status and low-income status. The school's graduation rate and the qualifications of its teachers are also reported. Most states and school districts include other indicators of school performance that they consider important for parents and the community to know.

## Improving High-Poverty High Schools

Too many high schools with large numbers or proportions of low-income students are in crisis. They have been overlooked too often in the past because the needs of their students are great and the challenge of turning them around seems so daunting. But *NCLB* puts these schools in the spotlight, not the dark corner so that every young person will receive the support and quality instruction he or she needs to master a rigorous academic curriculum and enter adulthood prepared for the future.

For the 29 percent of American high schools that receive assistance under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act[1]—schools with a large number or proportion of students from low-income families—*NCLB* lays out the following action plan to spur improvement when student achievement falls short:

- If a high school does not meet its AYP objectives for two consecutive years, it is identified as needing improvement. School officials develop a two-year plan to turn around the school. The school district provides technical assistance to the school as it develops and implements its improvement plan. Students must be offered the option of transferring to another public school in the district—which may include a public charter school—that has met its AYP objectives.
- If the high school does not meet its AYP objectives for three consecutive years, the school remains in school improvement status, and the district must continue to offer public school choice to all of its students. In addition, students from low-income families are eligible to receive supplemental educational services, such as tutoring or remedial classes, from a state-approved provider.
- If the high school fails to meet its AYP objectives for four consecutive years, the district must implement corrective actions to improve the school, such as replacing staff or implementing a new curriculum, while continuing to offer public school choice and supplemental educational services for low-income students.
- If the high school fails to meet its AYP objectives for a fifth year, the school district must initiate plans for restructuring the school. This may include reopening the school as a charter school, replacing all or most of the school staff or turning over school operations either to the state or to a private company with a demonstrated record of effectiveness.

## Putting a Qualified Teacher in Every Classroom

There is an emerging consensus among researchers, policymakers and the public that one key to boosting student achievement is to ensure that a committed and highly skilled teacher is in every classroom. Though we still have much to learn about the specific attributes, experiences, and training that make a teacher an effective instructor, there is evidence that subject matter expertise is linked to gains in student achievement.[2] *NCLB* makes improving the expertise of America's teachers in the subjects they teach a central priority. Specifically, *NCLB* requires that:

- **Beginning with the 2002-03 school year, high schools that receive Title I funds may only hire "highly qualified teachers" to teach core academic subjects in their Title I programs.** In general, a "highly qualified teacher" is one with full certification, a bachelor's degree and demonstrated competence in subject knowledge and teaching. The law defines core academic subjects as English, reading or language arts, mathematics, science, foreign language, civics and government, economics, arts, history and geography.

- **By the end of the 2005-06 school year, all teachers in all high schools who teach core academics must be highly qualified.**

The findings of a special analysis of the Schools and Staffing Survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education suggest that improving teacher quality could make a powerful difference in raising achievement in our high schools. Using an approximation of the *NCLB* definition, the analysis found that only 54 percent of our nation's secondary school teachers were highly qualified during the 1999-2000 school year. The percentage of highly qualified teachers ranged from 47 percent of mathematics teachers to 55 percent of science and social science teachers.[3] These data reveal that the goal of ensuring that high school teachers in core academics are highly qualified will be a challenge; however, doing so could pay big dividends in boosting student achievement.

*NCLB* provides important resources to help meet this challenge:

- The $2.9 billion **Improving Teacher Quality State Grants** program provides funding to states and districts for activities that will strengthen teacher quality in all schools, especially those with a high proportion of children in poverty. Funding for the program has increased 39 percent since President Bush took office.

- The **Transition to Teaching** program allocates funds to states, school districts and nonprofit groups to help thousands of outstanding candidates enter teaching through alternate routes to traditional teacher preparation programs.

- Similarly, **Troops to Teachers** helps states and school districts streamline the entry of former military personnel into schools as teachers.

- The **Mathematics and Science Partnership** program supports partnerships between high-need school districts and the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics faculty in institutions of higher education. Partnerships carry out a range of professional development and other activities that are designed to improve the subject matter knowledge and instructional skills of mathematics and science teachers.

- The **Teaching of Traditional American History** program provides funds to states, school districts and education groups to help improve, through teacher professional development, the quality and rigor of American history instruction in the nation's schools.

- *NCLB* also requires school districts that receive Title I funds to use at least five percent of their grants to improve teacher quality.

## Expanding Options for Parents and Students

The comprehensive, factory-model high school in which students are sorted among various tracks according to their perceived abilities was devised for an earlier era in which expectations were high for a few and low for most. Helping all young people rise to the challenge of higher expectations requires moving beyond this outmoded model to give high school students more choices.

Expanding options for parents and students is one of the pillars of *NCLB*. The law gives students attending chronically low-performing Title I schools the option to transfer to more successful public schools. The **Voluntary Public School Choice** program helps states and school districts design and implement public school choice initiatives. The **Magnet Schools Assistance** program provides grants to school districts to establish and operate magnet schools that are operated under a court-ordered or federally-approved voluntary desegregation plan. The **Public Charter Schools** program provides grants to states and school districts to support the planning, development, and initial implementation of charter schools, while the **Credit Enhancement for Charter School Facilities** program provides assistance to help charter schools leverage private sector funds to meet their school facility needs.

## Raising the Rigor of the High School Curriculum

The Advanced Placement (AP) program allows students to take college-level courses while in high school, offering an opportunity for students to reduce the time and cost required to complete a postsecondary degree. The College Board, which administers the program, provides general course guidelines and national exams for 35 college-level AP courses in 19 different subject areas. High school instructors teach the courses using curricular materials provided by the College Board. Each May, AP course-takers have the opportunity to take the national AP exams. Many colleges and universities waive prerequisites or award college credit to students who perform well on the exams.[4] Regardless of whether or not a student earns college credit through an AP exam, many believe that participating in these academically rigorous courses is still valuable preparation for college.[5] Some also maintain that the availability of AP courses in a school tends to raise expectations for all students.[6]

*NCLB* makes AP courses and opportunities to earn college credit through AP exams more accessible to low-income students. The **Advanced Placement Incentive** program supports efforts by states, school districts, and others to give more low-income students the opportunity to take AP classes and participate in other challenging programs, such as the International Baccalaureate. The **Advanced Placement Test Fee** program provides funds to states to pay AP test fees on behalf of eligible low-income students.

## Focusing on What Works

For too many years, too many schools have experimented with lessons and materials that have proven to be ineffective—at the expense of their students. Under *NCLB,* federal support is targeted to those educational programs that have been demonstrated to be effective through rigorous scientific research. Educators are expected to consider the results of relevant scientifically based research—whenever such information is available—before making instructional decisions.

In 2002, the Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES) established the **What Works Clearinghouse** to provide a central, independent and trusted source of scientific evidence on what works in education for parents, educators, policymakers and interested members of the public. In its first year of operation, the Clearinghouse selected several topics for systematic review that are vital to improving America's high schools, including curriculum-based interventions for increasing math achievement, high school dropout prevention, and interventions that reduce delinquent, disorderly and violent behavior, in and out of school.

## Preparing America's Future

*No Child Left Behind* provides the framework, the tools, and the resources for improving America's high schools and preparing every young person for the future. What we must provide is the will. There is now a remarkable convergence of opinion among educators, parents, members of the business community, thought leaders and policymakers across the political spectrum about what must be done to improve our high schools. Now is the time to act.

In his 2003 Back-to-School Address to the National Press Club, U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige reminded us of the consequences for our children if we hesitate:

> "Those who are unprepared will sit on the sidelines, confronting poverty, dead-end jobs, and hopelessness. They will find little choice and much despair. The well educated will live in a world of their own choosing; the poorly educated will wander in the shadows.
>
> We cannot deny the benefits of education through shortsighted indifference or lack of will. Nor can we capitulate to the guardians of the status quo. The achievement of all our children must improve, across the board. No child can be left behind."[7]

## Endnotes

[1] U.S. Department of Education, Planning and Evaluation Service. *Fact Sheet on Title I, Part A.* (August 2002). Downloaded from http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/disadv/title1-factsheet.pdf.
[2] U.S. Department of Education, Office of Policy Planning and Innovation. *Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge: The Secretary's Second Annual Report on Teacher Quality*. Washington, DC, 2003.
[3] Ibid.
[4] The College Board. *AP Fact Sheet*. (New York, NY: author, 2003).
[5] Martinez, M. and Klopott, S. *How is School Reform Tied to Increasing College Access and Success for Low-Income and Minority Youth?* (Washington, DC: Pathways to College Network Clearinghouse, 2002).
[6] Camara, W., et al. "Advanced Placement: Access Not Exclusion." *Education Policy Analysis Archives 40.* (August 1, 2000).
[7] U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige. "Education in America: The Complacency Must End." Back-to-School Address to the National Press Club (September 24, 2003).

This paper is one of a series produced in conjunction with the U.S. Secretary of Education's ***High School Leadership Summit***. For more information about the U.S. Department of Education's work on high schools, visit http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/hsinit/index.html.