

No Child Left Behind: A Snapshot

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The *No Child Left Behind Act* signed into law January 8, 2002, begins with a statement of purpose: “to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice so that no child is left behind.” What is the law and how might it be strengthened during reauthorization?

Since the U.S. Constitution does not mention education, public school policy has historically been a matter for individual states with implementation by local authorities. With the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) the federal role increased dramatically. In 2002 with reauthorization of ESEA (*No Child Left Behind*), the federal emphasis shifted from educational opportunity (equal access and equal resources) to educational “excellence” (measured primarily by state test scores in math and reading).

Under *No Child Left Behind* increasing percentages of students, grades 3 - 8, must test at “proficient” levels on state standardized tests each year until 2014 when 100% of all students must achieve at that level. In addition, all subgroups must meet proficiency targets. In Illinois, sub groups have been defined as 40 or more: economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, English Language Learners, or members of major racial and ethnic groups. Thus, English Language Learners and students with disabilities, who by definition are not performing at levels consistent with their peers, are held, with limited exceptions, to the same standards.

If one sub group fails to reach proficiency on state standardized tests, the whole school fails to make “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) and is labeled SINI “school in need of improvement.” After two years, such schools must offer parents the option of sending their children to another school and provide supplemental tutoring services. After five years, school management can be turned over to a charter, private company, or the state.

Since early projections show that most schools in the U.S. will not make AYP under the law’s accountability system, why does Congress retain the 100% proficiency mandate? Some defend it as motivational. Some believe it affirms a commitment to further the educational needs of all, especially students in groups that have been neglected in the past. Some see it as an inspirational reminder of the dream of educational equality.

Many policy analysts agree that this legislation can and should be strengthened. Recommendations include establishing high but attainable targets for student achievement, tracking student and school progress using more appropriate assessments, and enhancing teacher effectiveness. The legislation could also be improved by requiring consistency in standards across states and integrating federal educational policies with health, economic, and social initiatives aimed at reducing the impact of poverty.