



Accountability in Education as a Civil Rights Cause

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Many politicians refer derisively to “No Child Left Behind” – the title of the landmark education reform law passed with bipartisan support in 2002. The phrase has become almost a dirty word in American politics, because so many states and local groups resent the testing and accountability the law has imposed on all U.S. public schools. But civil rights groups are one important source of avid support for No Child Left Behind and other policies that promote standards, testing, and accountability in education.

Why is that? Public schools have fallen short for so many poor and minority children that civil rights leaders are glad to have federal policies that put the spotlight on vulnerable students – racial minorities, children of poverty, first-time English-language learners, and immigrants. By highlighting the educational challenges facing such disadvantaged students, federally enforced standards help create political pressure to improve schools serving such students. From the perspective of civil rights activists, No Child Left Behind should be amended and improved to make it increasingly fair and effective, but policymakers should make certain to retain policies that monitor the progress of schools serving disadvantaged students and support them as needed.

An Enhanced Federal Role

Standards, testing, and accountability policies have been around since the late 1980s. But the No Child Left Behind Act represented a major expansion of federal efforts, because it requires states seeking federal aid to commit to raising education standards and regularly testing and monitoring student progress. Schools that fall behind are supposed to get extra help to do better. Importantly, the law requires schools to track progress not just by all students lumped together, but also by sub-groups such as African-Americans and Latinos, English-language learners, poor children, and migrant children. Reforms targeted at such disadvantaged groups are mandated when they fail to meet rising achievement goals.

Civil Rights Groups in the Lead

Civil rights groups began to advocate for federal policies to hold schools accountable for the academic achievement of disadvantaged students in the late 1980s, just as Republicans were seeking to strip the federal government of its historic role in education and devolve power to state and local governments. Realizing that local and state authorities have a poor track record of helping vulnerable and minority students, civil rights groups worked closely with Democratic President Bill Clinton to reform the federal role in education to emphasize higher standards and accountability for results. When Republican President George W. Bush took office in 2001, civil rights groups worked with him as well as Congressional Democratic leaders George Miller and Edward Kennedy to pass the No Child Left Behind Act, despite conservative opposition. Civil rights groups have also worked closely with the Obama administration on its Race to the Top Initiative to improve the content of school programs and ensure that vulnerable students are taught by effective teachers.

Why Standards, Testing, and Accountability Matter

Policies imposing standards and accountability are far from perfect, but there are many reasons to think that such measures hold promise for the nation's most vulnerable children. Due to legacies of discrimination and lack of economic opportunity, many disadvantaged students lag advantaged peers in academic achievement; they are more likely to drop out of school and less likely to attend college. Unfortunately, school authorities don't always put the needs of poor and minority students first, and too often fail to take strong actions to improve learning and teacher performance. Standards, testing, and accountability can change the dynamics:

- **Clear standards** universally applied make it more likely that disadvantaged students will get higher quality instruction. Vulnerable children have often received watered down instruction, but if the federal government requires all students in a state to meet the same standards, everyone gains a stake in

having schools with disadvantaged students do better.

- **Regular testing** allows ongoing monitoring of student progress. Before regular testing, it was hard to know which students were struggling in particular subjects. And it was impossible to assess how students in one school were doing compared to students in similar schools nearby. With regular testing, parents, teachers, principals, and state officials can closely monitor how vulnerable students are doing in each school, and address problems in a concerted, focused, and timely way.
- **Accountability** policies obligate government to do something for particular schools where students are struggling academically. This is a major change; for much of our nation's history, schools could perform poorly for decades without anyone taking responsibility. How best to hold a school accountable is complex and controversial; but it's hard to argue against the principle that government must take action when problems become manifest.

Fix It, Don't End It

There are a lot of things that can be done to improve federal school reform policies such as No Child Left Behind. In particular, school accountability provisions should become less punitive and provide more assistance where student achievement is lagging. In addition, assessments of student performance can be improved. As the future of No Child Left Behind is debated, some want to end the federal government's role in measuring and spurring student progress. But simply devolving authority to states and localities will not improve education, especially not for disadvantaged students. As civil rights advocates say, federal policies must continue to require schools to raise standards and monitor student progress – and hold each school accountable for getting better results for all students. That is the only way the United States can ensure that every young citizen has the opportunity to realize his or her potential and contribute to the nation's future.

Read more in Jesse H. Rhodes, *An Education in Politics: The Origins and Evolution of No Child Left Behind* (Cornell University Press, 2012).