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This policy brief is part of the RAND Corporation research brief series. RAND policy briefs summarize published, peer-reviewed documents.

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Improving Accountability in Public Education

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 requires that all states hold districts and schools accountable for student performance based on test scores in reading and mathematics. The accountability system was designed to promote high achievement for all students and reduce the disparities in performance among different groups. Under NCLB, states must set standards for proficiency in reading and mathematics, collect and disseminate information about student achievement in these subjects, and implement strong corrective actions for schools and districts that do not meet the program's overall goal of moving all students toward proficiency by 2014. However, both critics and supporters agree that NCLB accountability has not led to enough improvement in student achievement to achieve this goal.

In 2006–2007, more than 10,000 Title I schools were identified as needing improvement after two years of low performance; more than 2,500 were subject to corrective action or restructuring because of poor performance for three or more years. However, many researchers question whether the test scores on which these judgments are based are inflated due to widespread teaching to the test. As NCLB reauthorization looms, some call for staying the course, some for major changes, and some for abandoning accountability all together. This research brief summarizes the key findings on accountability and the implications for policy changes in the future.

Research Reveals Benefits and Shortcomings of the Current Accountability System

Educators are focusing more attention on reading and mathematics. Schools have worked hard to improve student scores in reading and math by aligning their curricula with state content standards, focusing instruction on the standards, and using test results to help improve instruction. Teachers and principals report that these changes have been beneficial.

Abstract

This is one in a series of policy briefs on key education issues prepared by the RAND Corporation for the Obama administration. The accountability systems put in place by No Child Left Behind have not produced enough improvement to meet the goal of all students meeting proficiency standards by 2014. While the current accountability system has produced some positive effects, it has numerous flaws that policymakers should address. RAND recommends five policy actions to improve the system if accountability is to be retained when the law is reauthorized.

Test scores have improved. The percentage of students reaching proficiency has gradually increased in most states, and, in many states, the gaps between population subgroups have narrowed. However, the current rate of increase is not rapid enough to achieve NCLB's goal of full proficiency for all students within the next five years or to close the achievement gaps between population subgroups.

However, test-score gains may not be all they seem. Excessive practice on test-like exercises can increase performance on the test without increasing general mastery of the content, meaning students would not perform as well on a different assessment of the same skills. Consistent with this concern, scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress reading and math tests have not risen as much as scores on state tests, although the disparity between black and white students has decreased somewhat. It may also be that improvement in school performance comes from the reported focus on students near the proficiency cutoff point at the expense of those far from that threshold. Another concern is that students are mastering routine skills easily measured by multiple-choice tests at the expense of higher-order thinking skills that are not well represented on these tests.

Proficiency means different things in different states.

Because NCLB allows each state to set its own proficiency standards, it is far easier for students to succeed in some states than in others. One consequence of this is that we are unable to compare performance across states and identify the schools most in need of assistance or those that could serve as models for improvement on a national level.

Accountability requirements have drawn attention away from other subjects. Teachers report that they have increased instructional time in mathematics and reading, although they do not report commensurate reductions in time for other subjects. This incongruity raises questions about the effect of NCLB on the rest of the curriculum. Since few states monitor performance in other subjects, we do not know how students are performing in those areas.

Growing numbers of schools are failing to meet the annual targets for proficiency, and the required interventions are not helping these schools improve. After eight years of effort, many schools remain unable to meet NCLB's expectations for improvements in student performance. More importantly, fewer schools are improving, and the proportion slated for corrective action or restructuring is increasing. Existing interventions do not seem to be working at these schools, and more teachers and administrators report frustration with the law.

These Shortcomings Suggest Several Policy Improvements

The research suggests that states, districts, and schools have worked hard to implement NCLB, leading to some positive changes in school practices and student performance. However, the research also identifies limitations in the NCLB approach to accountability. If accountability is going to be retained when the law is reauthorized, then policymakers should consider several improvements, described below.

Adopt a broader set of accountability measures. The current system relies on multiple-choice tests because such tests are relatively inexpensive to administer. A more effective system would include other kinds of measures that provide richer representations of content—such as writing samples—and mathematics and reading questions that require written responses.

Institute accountability for a broader set of student outcomes. Now that the infrastructure of standards and assessments has been developed, it is feasible to hold schools accountable for other valued subjects. Most states have standards for history/social studies, science, music, art, health,

and physical education. A new policy could hold all schools accountable for these subjects as well, with weights to reflect public priorities. States would not necessarily have to test all subjects, but could use other methods, such as monitoring lessons or course enrollment.

Set more-consistent standards for proficiency. Most educators agree that the variation among state proficiency standards is problematic; however, they disagree about how to make them more consistent. Policymakers could consider a combination of voluntary and mandatory approaches to make standards more comparable across states.

Set more-appropriate improvement targets. The accountability system should set targets in terms of growth rather than requiring each student to reach an absolute level of performance. And regardless of whether accountability is based on growth or absolute level, targets should be informed by how rapidly students have improved under optimal conditions in the past.

Redesign the system of consequences so that it more effectively addresses the most serious problems. Under the current system, rigid and seemingly mechanical rules govern the number of schools receiving interventions and the nature of the consequences they receive. A more effective system would allow states to identify and prioritize the schools most in need and to design consequences to address their particular needs. A two-stage process might work better than the current set of automatic interventions. In the first stage, states would gather information about local deficiencies; in the second, they would craft interventions that responded to these shortcomings.

The Role of Accountability in Future Educational Improvement

The research on NCLB suggests that accountability per se will not result in success for all schools. Effective educational improvement requires more than just measures and incentives: It also requires access to effective curricula and instruction that engages and enlightens students as well as increased capacity to effect change within districts and schools. In addition to reforming the accountability system, policymakers should commit resources for experimentation to find better instructional methods, better strategies for allocating resources, and more-effective forms of governance. They should also support capacity-building in districts and schools. Accountability will be more effective when educators have larger repertoires of options to apply and greater capacity to apply them. ■

This policy brief describes work done for RAND Education. It is based on research by RAND and others. For further reading, see http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9426/index1.html#references. This policy brief was written by Brian Stecher and Jennifer Li. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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