The Complicated Mess of the Reading First Initiative
Patrick Shannon – Penn State University

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary School Education law (No Child Left Behind) is to be considered during the 2007 Congressional session. Within that law, reading education is considered through the Reading First Initiative. NCLB and Reading First position teacher educators as part of the problem and the solution to the economic challenges that face America and its citizens. If only teacher educators would do their jobs correctly, NCLB logic promises, then teachers will present lessons ensuring that all children learn to read and write proficiently, enabling graduates to reeducate themselves continuously in order to fulfill the mercurial nature of employment in a global economy. Of course, if the teacher educators don’t do their jobs correctly, then teachers will vary from scientifically sound methods and some students will not become proficient. As a result, American workers will not compete well against their literate counterparts in other parts of the world. As Gail Collins phrased it in a New York Times editorial, “the battle for teacher quality is just under way. The country can either win that battle or watch its fortunes fade as the national work force becomes less and less competitive.” (December 8, 2006, A 28).

In one sense, this positioning is flattering because it suggests, against any real evidence, that schooling is directly responsible for a country’s economic success or decline, and it places teacher educators at or near the top of the hierarchy of importance. In another sense, however, the positioning sets teacher educators up for a fall, if the assumptions of NCLB and Reading First (i.e., teachers and students aren’t working correctly or hard enough, curriculum is poor, and expectations are low) are unwarranted or inaccurate. I guess this is what is meant by being caught between a rock and a hard
place. Supporting reauthorization keeps teacher educators in this awkward position for better or worse until at least 2014 when every student is expected to be proficient in reading. Challenging the reauthorization gives the appearance that teacher educators are willing to leave children behind, to deny reading as the first priority of schooling, or worse, to neglect the American economy. Perhaps at this time, the best teacher educators can do is to educate themselves and voters (preservice and inservice teachers and administrators, their congressional representatives, and the general public) about NCLB and Reading First.

Cutting to the core of the law and its consequences is not an easy process. First, its framing has caught the attention of media and public. While both begin to question, tax cuts for the rich, wars in the Middle East, and the loss of civil liberties at home, all seem to accept the Bush administrations’ assumptions about schooling. The media are full of stories about individual schools that seem to be improving students’ performance against the stereotype of school failure built during the twenty years since the publication of the A Nation at Risk report. Second, the federal role in public schooling is mediated through states, presenting fifty different cases - fifty sets of standards, fifty testing systems, and fifty definitions of proficiency - to be developed, analyzed and compared in order to pass judgment of the impact of NCLB. Third, although the starting points of states and scores were clearly not equal, all are held to the same federal standard without accommodations for these early differences. Teacher educators must overcome this complicated mess to develop their understandings of NCLB and Reading First.

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2006), the Civil Rights Project’s *Tracking the Gaps* (June, 2006), David Berliner’s “An Impoverished of Education Reform” (2006), and the U. S. Department of Education’s *Inspector General Report on the Reading First Initiative* (September 2006). True to the complexities of the law and its implementation, these reports do not end in agreement about its reauthorization. The Education Trust and the Inspector General give guarded support for highly modified reauthorization, while the Civil Rights Project and Berliner accept its goals, but reject its assumptions and means. Together, the reports provide a complex analysis of the complicated mess of NCLB and the Reading First Initiative.

**It’s Working (sort of)**

The Education Trust began in 1990 as a committee of the American Association of Higher Education with the charge to encourage curricular reforms in K-12 schools. Since that time through the graces of private foundations (Carnegie, Gates, Hewlett, MetLife, State Farm, and Washington Mutual), it has become an autonomous body which advocates, testifies, and conducts research on efforts to promote academic achievement from preschool through college, particularly among low income and students of color. Its current Chairman of the Board is Donald Langenberg, who served that role for the National Reading Panel in the late 1990s. According to its website, the basic tenet of the Education Trust is “All children will learn at high levels when they are taught at high levels.” Although not without concerns, the Education Trust supports the basic thrust of NCLB and seeks to deepen NCLB’s commitment to accountability in school reform.

*Primary Progress, Secondary Challenge: A State by State Look at Student Achievement Patterns* (Hall and Kennedy, 2006) presents a progress report on school
achievement under NCLB. Student scores on state tests are aggregated for comparisons among states at elementary, middle and high school levels. Despite NCLB requirements to make test score data available to the public, The Education Trust could only analyze the scores between 2003 and 2005 for 30 states because 2002 data was incomplete for all states and approximately 20 states had insufficient data for all the years. Overall, the report concludes that academic progress is being made and that the gaps between white students and students of color are closing. (Data for income achievement gaps were too incomplete for analysis). However, the gains in reading have been modest overall and primarily at the elementary school level.

The Education Trust defined success as higher percentages of students scoring above the proficiency cutoff score on state exams. For elementary schools, 27 of 31 states showed this overall gain in reading with only three states marking a decline. Middle school achievement rose slightly in 20 of 31 states, with six states reporting declines. High schools reported roughly the same percentages in overall performance. When these scores were disaggregated by race, the overall trends held steady. Twenty-six of 30 states closed the elementary school achievement gaps between African Americans and white students, and 24 of 29 states narrowed those scores between whites and Latinos. Most of these gains on state tests were win/win situations in which both white and minority scores rose. Massachusetts and Connecticut, however, narrowed the gap through higher scores for African Americans, but lower scores for white students. Middle school and high school achievement gaps between races narrowed in just over half the 30 states reporting and widened within 6 states.
The Education Trust cautions scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (the nation’s report card) do not demonstrate the same gains as state data. Only six states (Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Missouri, South Carolina, and Wyoming) have roughly comparable rates of proficiency – all quite low. For the remaining states, state proficiency rates in reading are two, and sometimes, three times higher than the NAEP data. These ratios hold for states across the country. For example, Alabama reports 83 percent state proficiency in reading and NAEP scores at 22 percent; New Jersey reports 82 percent at the state level and 37 NAEP; and Oregon reports 81 percent proficiency at the state level and 29 at the national. NAEP scores disaggregated by race should also dampen the Education Trust’s optimism.

2005 NAEP Scores Reading at 4th Grade Level (percentages of student scores disaggregated by race with proficiency categorie)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>White</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Below</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>25%</td>
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Despite these discrepancies, the Education Trust remains optimistic about NCLB and the Reading First Initiative. They favor its reauthorization with important changes to the ways in which funds are allocated and teachers are assigned to schools. Stated bluntly, they identify a few schools serving minority and low income populations that demonstrate marked improvements and suggest that they are models for all programs. "If race and poverty mattered more than what happens in schools, the NAEP scores for low
income and students of color would be more consistent from state to state” (Hall, 2006). They recommend that all middle and high schools ensure that all students have access to rigorous courses, that literacy becomes a priority in all classes, and that students’ academic needs drive funding and teacher assignments within school districts.

**Same Data Different Conclusion**

Christopher Edley Jr. and Garry Orfield organized the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University in 1996 as a “multidisciplinary research and policy think tank and a consensus building clearinghouse.” Its mission is to “help renew the civil rights movement by bridging the worlds of ideas and actions and by becoming a preeminent source of intellectual capital and a forum for building consensus within the movement.” With support of philanthropic benefactors (some of the same as the Education Trust along with Fannie Mae, the Ford Foundation, McArthur, Spencer, and Rockefeller), CRP has become a leading advocacy group for poor and minority causes from housing to healthcare and from income and wealth to education through research, testimony, and conferences. The organization does not appear to be supportive of NCLB, but applauds its goals.

*Tracking Achievement Gaps and Assessing the Impact of NCLB on the Gaps: An Indepth Look into National and State Reading and Math Outcome Trends* (Lee, 2006) appears to cover the same information as the Education Trust report. In fact in the forward, Gary Orfield comments upon the government’s use of the Education Trust report to claim early success for NCLB. “Unfortunately, these claims rest on misleading interpretations of flawed data” (p. 7). First, Orfield explains that the Education Trust
accepted state definitions of “closing the gap” – a ratio of majority to minority achievement scores. Their study did not look at the gains within groups, only the numbers of majority and minority students who passed the proficiency threshold on state tests. This practice obscures the view of the relationship between groups because it does not permit an examination of the absolute scores, only the percentage of students who achieved proficiency - gaps in absolute achievement scores could remain the same while more minority students could score beyond the threshold. Second, Orfield suggests that the Education Trust conclusions are based on an a priori ideological commitment to test driven change, leading the Education Trust to exaggerated statements about gains within state data and modest attention to the differences between state and NAEP scores.

In order to avoid similar problems, CRP used trend analysis in which they projected rates of achievement based on a longer period of time and compared that projected line against the actual rates of change within NAEP data. This put the basic assumptions of NCLB to the test – does accountability alone produce greater achievement gains for all students and accelerate those gains for low income and minority students? Their short answer is that it does not – “neither a significant rise in achievement nor closure of the racial gap is being achieved” (p. 8), despite the attention to manipulation of state scores to demonstrate both. The report’s conclusions are direct and devastating:

1. NCLB has not had a significant general impact on reading achievement across the nation or states. The NAEP achievement line is flat. At the current rate of growth, only 24 to 34 percent of American students will be proficient by 2014 (not the 100 percent required by law).
2. NCLB is not closing the racial gaps, although slightly more minority students are reaching proficiency. The gaps between white and minority students on actual scores are not narrowing. By 2014, CRP projects that only 24 percent of poor and minority students will reach proficiency if the current rate continues.

3. NCLB has not succeeded in the first generation states (e.g., Florida, North Carolina, and Texas) that were the models for the educational policy reform. NAEP scores did not rise significantly before 2002 in those states, and they have not been aided by NCLB since 2002. Long-term trends under existing conditions do not project any greater success for NCLB practices.

4. NCLB state data are misleading, particularly for poor and minority students.

“Compared to the NAEP, state assessments tend to underestimate the racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps” (p. 50). For example, state scores for white students are likely to be twice their scores on the NAEP test. For African Americans, however, that ratio is over 4 to 1. State scores double the NAEP scores for white, but make Black students appear 4 times better than their scores on the national test.

Orfield does not mince words in his conclusion.

The goals of raising achievement and lowering the gaps are very good ones, and the data provided by NCLB is (sic) essential, but policy makers must be ready to critically examine why so little has been accomplished, why officials are making misleading and inaccurate claims, and what can be done to use the invaluable data and focus created by the Act to begin to actually accelerate progress toward those objectives. (p. 8)
Maybe the Assumptions are Wrong

David Berliner, a professor of educational psychology at Arizona State University, is the author of several reports on the impact of NCLB. He characterizes that work as depressing because the policy does not appear to be working toward its goals and has negative consequences for students, teachers, administrators and schools. He laments the fact that NCLB focuses only on the work of teachers and students’ experiences within the classroom because students spend five times as much time outside the classroom as they do in the classroom.

Our neighborhoods are highly segregated by social class and thus, segregated by race and ethnicity. So all educational efforts that focus on classrooms and schools, as does NCLB, could be reversed by family, could be negated by neighborhoods, and might well be subverted or minimized by what happens to children outside of school. (p. 951)

In Our Impoverished Look at Educational Reform (2006), Berliner fixes his gaze on the role of poverty in the academic achievement of American school children. Similar to advocates of NCLB, he begins with international comparisons. The United States has greater poverty for longer durations than any other industrialized country. Moreover, the numbers of desperately poor (those with incomes half the national poverty rate) are increasing dramatically because housing and medical care costs are increasing and incomes are not keeping pace. The U. S. is one of only two nations among the 192
members of the United Nations to refuse to sign the UNICEF International Declaration of Children's Rights in 2005. (Somalia is the other.) Article 26 of that Declaration supports a standard of living adequate for a child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development. Article 27 declares that parents are primarily responsible to secure that standard, but governments should be prepared to supplement that support when necessary. Berliner notes that in the United States such governmental support has been systematically reduced over the past generation.

By examining international studies of achievement, Berliner tracks the relationships between poverty and achievement. He notes that in all such studies there is a perfect negative correlation between poverty and achievement – as numbers of students receiving free and reduced lunch supplements rise, reading scores plummet. In the 2001 Progress for International Student Assessment study, American white students (Berliner's correlate for higher income) scored among the highest nations, while American minority students scored the absolute lowest. The 2003 Progress in International Reading Literacy confirmed this finding, using scores of 9 and 10 year olds among 35 nations. It should be noted that these data were collected before NCLB was enacted and that overall America students ranked third statistically, demonstrating that American teachers did indeed know how to teach reading before the implementation of the Reading First Initiative. When scores were disaggregated by income, students from American school serving the fewest number of poor students scored first among all nations – 24 points above the top country, Sweden. Yet, students from schools with a 75 percent poverty rate among students scored 100 points below their well-to-do American counterparts and last among nations.
Using smoking and cancer rates as a metaphor, Berliner wondered when correlation between poverty and achievement test scores could be considered causality.

Addressing conservatives head on, Berliner discusses research studies which conclude that poverty restricts the expression of genetic talents, making the influence of genes on variation in intelligence quite dependent on social class environments. Where Herrnstein and Murray (1994) argued that genetic endowments explained poverty and low achievement, Berliner explains how normal variation in genetic expression is muted by poor living conditions. For the poor, the environment and not genetic endowments account for most of the variation in measured IQ. As environmental factors change for low income students because of increasing income and its consequent comforts, variability does indeed become the result of genetic expression. The good news in this conclusion is that environmental interventions are likely to have effects on gene expression and variation among the poor. Unfortunately, effects of environments have not been directly specified through research. Instead of direct research findings, Berliner turns to his common sense. “The simplest way to get a healthier environment in which to raise children is to provide more resources for parent to make these changes for themselves” (p. 972). For Berliner, these resources translate into employment with a living wage, health benefits, and a pension system.

Health benefits or additional income to afford health care would have a dramatic impact on poor students’ achievement. With adequate health care, mothers would have more full-term pregnancies and deliver healthier babies. Again international statistics affirm this conclusion. Once born, children whose parents can afford health care have less ear infections, fewer unmet visual and dental problems. Children, whose parents can
afford better housing avoid environmental classism in which asthma, lead poisoning and mercury poisoning are statistically more evident in lower income neighborhoods. Each of these health problems is directly related to mental, physical or behavioral traits that inhibit poor students’ abilities to negotiate classroom activities associated with higher achievement. Berliner reports that the health care for the poor has deteriorated over the last twenty years.

Income is associated with school achievement as well. Residence zip code is still one of the best predictors of test scores. Berliner describes the results of the few studies that directly examine the impact of increased income on the poor and very poor. Although income variation seems to have little impact on students from families who were never classified as poor, even small income variations effect the school achievement of low-income children. The correlation is positive and almost perfect. For very poor families (half the official poverty level) as their incomes improve, their children, particularly the youngest children, increase dramatically their scores on measures of school readiness, vocabulary development, and expressive language. The children living at the poverty level increase their scores on these tests as well, but less dramatically.

Loss of income is devastating for the school achievement of either group. Berliner uses the data from these studies to suggest that raising the income of the poor by $13,000 per year would double the positive impact of Head Start and reach all children living in poverty (Head Start serves only 60 percent of those eligible). He wonders what the combination of $13,000 and Head Start programs for all eligible children would bring.

Berliner’s conclusion is direct. If the government intends to leave no children behind in America, then it must find ways to overcome poverty, enabling families to
prepare their children for school and life on a more equal footing with their financially better off peers. He urges educators to participate in social movements to build social support networks that will provide adequate income, health care, housing, food, and child care.

In my estimation, we will get better public schools by requiring of each other participation in building a more equitable society. This is of equal or greater value to our nation’s future well-being than a fight over whether phonics is scientifically based, whether standards are rigorous enough, or whether teachers have enough content knowledge. (p. 988)

Follow the Money

After several textbook venders complained to the Department of Education that federal officials were disrupting the free market for textbooks under NCLB, its office of the Inspector General began an investigation of the procedures followed in the origination of the Reading First Initiative. Despite the sincere commitment of many involved with NCLB, the Inspector General charged that Reading First leadership stacked the panels for the review of state proposals for reading programs, leading to advocacy of one particular approach through a limited set of commercial programs. The report, issued in September 2006, found that some panel members benefited financially from the enforced adoptions and objected because the bias in favor of one approach was not in the original legislation and conflict of interest is against the law. The Reading First leadership’s deliberate intention is clearly demonstrated in the email exchanges between panel members and
officials. For example, Director of Reading First, Chris Doherty, wrote about a company that was not favored at the department. “They are trying to crash our party and we need to beat the [expletive deleted] out of them in front of all the other would be party crashers who are standing on the front lawn waiting to see how we welcome these dirtbags” (p. 24).

The Inspector General’s report does not interpret its findings; rather it simply describes the serious problems and recommends that they be fixed according to federal law. The report can teach us more about NCLB and its mission to help the poor and minorities than the fact that rules (laws?) have been broken. The first lesson is that stacking the panel undermines the truth claims of science – the rhetorical backbone of NCLB and Reading First. Rather than a dispassionate commitment to evidence, science in Reading First became a discursive struggle over the definitions of science, reading and learning, enabling the winners to eliminate entire bodies of evidence despite their demonstrated utility. Think about the scientific vote over whether Pluto would remain a planet. Scientists agreed to change the definition of a planet and poof Pluto disappeared as a planet. With the stacked panels for Reading First, members met to determine a definition of scientifically based instruction and poof Shirley Brice Heath’s, Luis Moll’s Perry Gilmore’s, Arlette Willis’s and other research could not be considered in the design of reading programs for the poor and minorities because those researchers seek to identify strengths within poor communities rather that to pit one instructional method against another in order to determine which will raise test scores higher.

A second lesson is that conflict of interest among panel members demonstrates the role of business in NCLB. Commercial publishers hire experts to represent their
programs in order to increase their market share. When those panel members make
decisions about which materials can be used, it distorts the market. Note that the
investigation began with complaints of interference from publishers that were not invited
to Doherty’s “party.” They were correct. Yet, reading education as an open market is
still a market in which children’s literacy futures are bought and sold in order to
maximize profits for publishers and their non-publishing corporate owners. In woefully
under-funded schools that the Education Trust, CRP, and Berliner describe as serving the
poor, these forced choices of commercial programs become the curriculum because the
schools cannot afford other books to supplement the “required materials.” The poor,
then, suffer most under this market mentality.

The job of the Inspector General is to monitor the practices of government
agencies, ensuring that rules and regulations have been followed and the peoples’
interests are being served. The Reading First report demonstrates that those checks and
balances within government do not deter zealots. Several examples from the Report
describe Reading First officials who were willing to subvert oversight regulations in
order to jealously protect their beliefs that the gaps in achievement scores are markers of
a lack of individual effort and not historical artifacts of political, social, and economic
inequalities among classes and races in the United States as CRP and Berliner attest.
Acting on their ideological beliefs and not science, Reading First officials employed any
means necessary to ensure that states would offer scripted direct instruction materials and
tests as technological solutions to teachers’ and students’ individual inefficiencies. In
these officials’ minds, the ends justified the means (Kameenui, 2007). But as the
Education Trust and CRP demonstrate, scripted lessons have not achieved their aims
because reading scores have not improved significantly nor have the gaps narrowed when you look at NAEP data. Even a Machiavellian could not support the Reading First officials’ actions, and now federal auditors have found similar practices at the state level.

(See Manzo, 2007)

**What Can a Teacher Educator Do?**

In the 2007 State of the Union Address, President Bush called on Congress to reauthorize No Child Left Behind “because it is working.” In light of these four reports, teacher educators should ask: What does “working” mean? In what ways is NCLB working? And for whom? Not overlooking or diminishing the hard work of many professional educators, the best that can be reported about NCLB is that some schools in many states have had success in teaching to the state test in reading at the elementary level and the number of poor and minority students scoring above proficiency level as set by the individual state has increased as well. According to NCLB required data, can this be legitimately labeled working? Even the mild enthusiasm of the Education Trust report is tempered by statements that time and energy devoted to reading instruction at the elementary level has displaced other subjects (science, social studies and the arts) and handcuffed the best teachers to those less qualified through scripted commercial programs.

Moreover, these particular successes do not continue into middle and high school grades. State reading achievement scores are flat or declining at those levels of schooling. Only the Education Trust suggests that practices of the elementary NCLB program should be imported to upper grades. They are weak in their endorsement of
NCLB, calling for literacy to become a priority among teachers of different disciplines. Examination of NAEP scores eliminates any possible claims for success. Both Education Trust and CRP explain that most state departments of education have set their standards for proficiency in reading strategically low in order to continue to qualify for federal funds. At the current rates, however, CRP estimates that only about a third of American students will reach NAEP definition of proficiency at all levels. By the NCLB stated goals, the program is not working for students in general and for low income and minority students in particular.

The Education Trust reports state department of education claims that the gaps are closing between targeted groups and their white and middle class counterparts. The authors of that report admit that those results wash out on the national data. CRP argues that claims of state success can be explained by their definition of closing the gaps – as simply the percentage of group members who exceed the state proficiency line. Gaps in real scores could remain the same, but move higher on the state proficiency scale. These ambiguities leave open the question of whether or not NCLB and Reading First are working for poor and minority students. With NAEP proficiency levels of achievement hovering in the mid teens for Black and Latino students and at forty percent for white students, it does not appear that NCLB or Reading First is working for minority students. Berliner reports that the scores and gaps are similar for the poor.

NCLB has been successful in directing attention toward reading education and the differential treatment of groups within schools. Some of the attention is mistaken. American students in general, particularly those served by well-funded schools, rank high in international surveys, and they did so before the onset of NCLB. But as CRP and
Berliner clearly demonstrate, minority and low-income students do not. The differential treatment and outcomes are real and have a long history. Berliner argues that the federal response to this fact is ahistorical and incomplete. That is, it focuses completely on a school solution, assuming that one institution can correct centuries of bias. CRP reported that the achievement gaps between minorities and whites and poor and middle class were narrowing during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s when other social programs designed to support minority and poor families were still considered to be the government's responsibility. Berliner calls for an end to the two decades of federal retreat from such responsibility. Without a coordinated effort that supports school reform with social reforms to ensure adequate income, housing, and health care, then there is little hope that the achievement gaps will narrow.

Teacher educators should begin with what they do best – teaching. Bring these reports to the attention of others -- students, colleagues, teachers, the public and legislators. Don’t assume that everyone knows about them or that the reports speak for themselves. It’s not enough to make them available. The reports beg to be discussed. Recognize that the reports represent business as usual when the federal government becomes involved in reading education. These are political acts, not scientific ones, and therefore, you must question whose definitions and values become embedded in all education policies and laws at the federal and the state levels. Such questions open up spaces in which to dream about alternatives to NCLB – ones that will takes its goals seriously, but without the test driven model as the solution because that model does not work. What would it take to change the unequal outcomes of groups of students in classrooms and schools? Finally, teacher educators should consider Berliner’s challenge
to connect school reform with social, economic, and political reforms that will provide
the conditions for all children to enter schools fed, healthy, and optimistic about the
future. If teacher educators are to be helpful in preparing all American students as
citizens and workers in a global economy, then we will need to extend our influence
beyond our classrooms and colleges. The year when Congress will reconsider NCLB
seems to be the right time to take these steps.

References


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