

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-EAU CLAIRE

**NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND: A HISTORY, WITH A FOCUS ON THE EFFECTS
IN THE CHIPPEWA VALLEY OF WISCONSIN**

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Abstract—

“No Child Left Behind: A History, with a Focus on the Effects in the Chippewa Valley of Wisconsin”

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This paper is an overview of the history of the No Child Left Behind legislation. Special attention is given to the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), *A Nation at Risk*, and the current effects of No Child Left Behind. The 1965 ESEA legislation was designed to provide educational assistance to those in need through programs such as Title 1. In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* was published and started a new wave of federal government involvement in public education. The end result was the reauthorization of ESEA in the form of No Child Left Behind. The Findings of this paper are largely a result of NEA publications, U.S. government publications and data, other secondary historical works, and interviews conducted by the author.

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To my closest family: my mother and editor, Wendy; my father, Brian; my big brother, Seth; and my future wife, Tara.

INTRODUCTION

I remember when George W. Bush was elected president in 2000. I also remember when No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was going to improve America's schools and make sure all children received the education they deserved. During my first year of college four years later, and after many negative things had been said about NCLB, George W. Bush was reelected. Why had NCLB been criticized so strongly? Why had other presidential candidates stated that the only way to leave no child left behind would be to leave George W. Bush behind? As a future educator, I knew there was a great deal of opposition to this law, but proponents presented a strong case for how NCLB could drastically improve public education.

The purpose of my research and this paper is not to elegantly dismantle everything NCLB stands for, nor to put it on a pedestal. The purpose of this paper is to find out where NCLB came from and report on what has been said about this act since it was signed into law in 2002. There will be a special focus on the Chippewa Valley region of Wisconsin to represent the effects on students in an average Midwestern rural setting.

Some important questions to consider are: where did NCLB come from? Why is NCLB so controversial? Are the criticisms valid? Is there a way to satisfy the critics? These are legitimate questions regarding this 640 page law that radically reformed the federal government's role in public education.

It is also important to know how and why I researched the way I did so the reader can understand that this is not designed to be a biased publication. It is also important for the reader to have a brief review of what other NCLB literature is available and where it originates. Finally, the interested reader who desires to learn more about NCLB is warned that much of what is published is biased.

While researching, I discovered a massive amount of literature on educational history. Many publications on NCLB carry an agenda. Through my research I found direct cases of conflicting information about the effects of NCLB. Publications from the multiple educator unions and government organizations were scrutinized against each other, along with the primary sources from which their arguments stemmed in order to find the truth. In actuality, neither fully adhered to proper interpretation of their sources, and their ideals were skewed by fixated attempts to serve their own agendas.

The few neutral sources I used that addressed NCLB were the more broad political or educational texts often used in college courses. I cite sources such as *State and Local Government*, *Teachers and the Law* and *The American School*. These texts are designed to provide a historical background on NCLB or a factual description of the design or implications of the act. Another useful source was the *A Nation at Risk* report which started the education reform from which many parts of NCLB were inspired. By studying the primary source that had considerable impact in the design of NCLB, I was able to see and interpret for myself what this powerful report actually said. The interviews with professionals in the education field also provided useful primary information and professional opinions. The interviewees enlightened me on their

professional opinions about the ideals and implementations of NCLB. More importantly, these interviews provided information regarding the effects and perceptions of NCLB in the Chippewa Valley of Wisconsin.

PLANTING THE SEED OF NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

To understand the origins of No Child Left Behind, one only has to trace the federal government's role in education as far back as 1965. In 1965, Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). ESEA was passed in response to the issue of poverty as urged by Lyndon B. Johnson's administration.¹ The major component of the ESEA was Title 1, which provided programs for the "educationally deprived." The argument was that education was more important than military or economic issues. President Johnson reiterated this message to Congress when he said, "Nothing matters more to the future of our country; not our military preparedness, for armored might is worthless if we lack the brainpower to build a world of peace; not our productive economy, for we cannot sustain growth without trained manpower."²

The 1965 enactment of ESEA was not enough, however, to provide the trained manpower of which Johnson spoke. From 1963-1980, SAT scores consistently declined. During Ronald Reagan's presidency, on August 26, 1981, the National Commission on Excellence in Education was created by T.H. Bell, Secretary of Education, to address this crisis in education. On April 26, 1983, the commission presented its report, titled, *A Nation at Risk*. The purpose of the commission was to discover the major flaws and provide solutions to these problems in American

¹ Joel Spring, *The American School: From the Puritans to No Child Left Behind* (New York: McGraw Hill Companies, Inc, 1998), 404.

² *Ibid.*, 407-409.

education.³ The commission was ordered to focus their study on these specific areas: assessing teaching and learning, comparing U.S. schools with those of other developed countries, the relationship between college admission requirements and students' achievement in high school, successful college prep educational programs, how major social and educational changes since the 1950's have affected student achievement and defining the problems that need to be remedied to regain "excellence in education." In order to achieve the goals of the commission, five main sources were used. Among these sources were teachers, students, school administrative staff, representatives from professional and public groups, business leaders, and public officials. This diverse group gave evidence concerning education at eight meetings of the commission, six public hearings, two panel discussions, one symposium and various other meetings.

The other sources were:

papers commissioned from experts on a variety of educational issues; existing analyses of problems in education; letters from concerned citizens, teachers, and administrators who volunteered extensive comments on problems and possibilities in American education; and descriptions of notable programs and promising approaches in education.⁴

The findings of the commission's research were shocking to the American public. When the commission finished its report in 1983, it was made known that 23 million Americans were functionally illiterate, including 13 percent of all seventeen year olds and up to forty percent of minority youth. Standardized tests were lower than when Sputnik was launched in 1957, and between 1975 and 1980, high school math

³ The National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at risk* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983) Letter of transmittal. available at <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/index.html> (accessed 10 February 2008). Online version does not include page numbers; subject headers are used for reference.

⁴ *Ibid.*, introduction.

achievement dropped low enough to where remedial math courses in public four-year colleges rose an astonishing 72 percent.⁵

When addressing indicators of the risk, it is important to remember the time period our nation was entering. The commission stated, “Learning is the indispensable investment required for success in the ‘information age’ we are entering.”⁶ The demand for highly skilled labor was also expected to increase. The report referenced one estimate which suggested by the year 2000 A.D. millions of jobs would involve laser technology and robotics. In the year 1983, the Baby Boomers’ children ranged from the brink of starting school, to having children of their own. There was only one generation between where American education was in 1983 and the generation that built the atomic bomb and made the first flight across the Atlantic. Paul Copperman, an analyst used by the commission, stated, “For the first time in the history of our country, the education skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach, those of their parents.”⁷ The commission put this educational downfall into perspective when it wrote:

The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur - others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments.⁸

⁵ Ibid., Indicators of Risk.

⁶ Ibid., The Risk.

⁷ Ibid., Indicators of the Risk.

⁸ Ibid., A Nation at Risk.

The commission argued that if a foreign power tried to taint America with a mediocre education, it would have been seen as an act of war, but we allowed our education quality to dwindle without anyone else to blame.⁹

A Nation at Risk identified the specific weak components of the educational system. One component which assisted the decline in secondary education was the development of a cafeteria style curriculum, where the students replaced the main courses with desserts.¹⁰ There was also the concern over a balanced curriculum, and the commission stated that the humanities, math and science were needed.¹¹

Throughout and after the development of this report, it was clear that action needed to be taken, and that the public would voice their opinions. President Reagan said, “Certainly there are a few areas of American life as important to our society, to our people and to our families as our schools and colleges.”¹² A paradigm shift was starting. As I mentioned earlier, helping disadvantaged students through ESEA was thought to be all that was needed, but it appears it was not. Some more encompassing reforms had been proposed, but the public support was not present for these reforms to hold weight. *A Nation at Risk* provided the public support. Funding was still an issue, however. Both Democrats and Republicans saw the need for improvement, but had different opinions on how to accomplish that goal. Republicans, such as Reagan, still opposed federal funding and educational programs, while liberals saw the lack of funding as a

⁹ Ibid., *A Nation at Risk*.

¹⁰ Ibid., *Findings Regarding Content*.

¹¹ Ibid., *Indicators of Risk*.

¹² Ibid., *A Nation at Risk*.

key downfall.¹³ During the creation of the report, *A Nation at Risk*, the public became increasingly concerned with effective action from their political leaders in regards to education. According to a 1982 Gallup Poll, education was among the top twelve most important funding categories, above health care and military defense; 55 percent put education in their top three choices for funding.¹⁴

Political groups also had a voice in the federal government's role in education. The National Educator's Association (NEA) and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) held a large Democratic constituency and long opposed standards, testing and accountability. On the other side, conservative groups, such as the Christian Coalition, Heritage Foundation, and others fought to stop the federal role in education from advancing. In the 1980's and 1990's, some conservatives fought to eliminate the federal role all together.¹⁵ President Reagan was a huge advocate for disbanding the Department of Education during his presidency. In a report published by the NEA in 1983, two months after the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the NEA provided rationale for maintaining a cabinet department for education.

The report states:

State and local education officials would once again face a bewildering array of confused federal policies and practices. . . And no one in Washington would be accountable for the confusion. No one would be charged with the responsibility for preventing conflicting policies from developing or resolving such conflicts.¹⁶

¹³ Patrick J. McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind: and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy, 1965-2005* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 21-23.

¹⁴ *A Nation at Risk*, Hope and Frustration.

¹⁵ McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind*, 5.

¹⁶ NEA, *The Federal Role in Education, rev. ed.* (Washington, D.C.: NEA Government Relations, 1983) 15.

Reagan was not able to disband the Department of Education, but he was able to decrease government spending on education and underfund the proposed Department of Education budget.¹⁷ Reagan was followed by President George H.W. Bush.

George H.W. Bush proclaimed, “We must reward excellence and cut through bureaucracy. We must help schools that need help the most.” In reality, during his four years as president, he did not call for a big funding increase and did not call for national standards or tests. Like Reagan, he argued that increasing federal funding was not the answer, but he had a hard time convincing the public of his beliefs.¹⁸ In the 1990’s, education was a top voter concern and the voters didn’t fully support either party’s agenda. These public pressures forced each side to make concessions.¹⁹ George H.W. Bush proposed America 2000 in 1991. The plan was to raise standards for all students, implement tests to meet the standards, reduce federal government red tape, provide school choice and shift the control of schools from the producers, such as teachers, administrators and policy makers, to consumers, such as business leaders and community members.²⁰ America 2000 wasn’t overly effective in meeting its goals partly because it wasn’t actually an act.

The Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA) of 1994 moved toward content and performance standards and testing. Students were tested once in grades three through five, six through nine, and ten through twelve. IASA also gave states more

¹⁷ Ibid., 18.

¹⁸ Ibid, 58.

¹⁹ Ibid., 23.

²⁰ William H. Jeynes, *American Educational History: School, Society, and the Common Good* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007) 414.

flexibility to create and run their own federally funded programs. This movement of standards based testing started with *A Nation at Risk*.²¹ When Bill Clinton became president, he created Goals 2000, which essentially wrote George H.W. Bush's America 2000 plan into law. Goals 2000 was publicly approved by teachers, but implementing standards and testing at a national level was controversial. Clinton's critics said he was centralizing a well-liked decentralized system.²² Little did they know how centralized the public education system would become.

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

The previous history of the federal government's role in education led up to the revolutionary public education legislation known as No Child Left Behind. No Child Left Behind was passed in 2002 by a bipartisan majority as the twelve billion dollar reauthorization of the ESEA.²³ No Child Left Behind represents the consolidation of the reform movement started with *A Nation at Risk*. This new law broke Democratic and Republican stereotypes. The liberal focus was usually narrowly focused on giving funds and supplemental programs for disadvantaged students. This could be traced back to President Lyndon B. Johnson when he started the ESEA. Republicans on the other hand, were usually against strengthening the federal government's role, especially

²¹ Margaret A. Jorgensen, Ph.D. and Jenny Hoffman, "History of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)" *Assessment Report* (San Antonio: Harcourt Assessment, Inc) 2003. available from <http://harcourtassessment.com> (accessed 2 March 2008).

²² Jeynes, *American Educational History*, 419.

²³ Ann O'M. Bowman and Richard C. Kearney, *State and Local Government*, 7th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company) 2008.

in a domain where the state and local government has traditionally had power, as is the case with education.²⁴

It is argued that No Child Left Behind represents the evolution of the federal role in education. It is also argued that No Child Left Behind is an immense deviation from earlier reforms. Before exposing the workings of No Child Left Behind, it is important to review a few pieces from *A Nation at Risk*. The commission that created *A Nation at Risk* recommended that schools, colleges, and universities adopt more thorough standards and higher expectations. Also, the commission called for standardized achievement tests to be taken at major transition points from one level of schooling to another.²⁵ Under No Child Left Behind, schools were given mandates, such as a schedule, target population and reporting procedures. Also under the law, each year schools were required to comply with additional demands. By the 2002-2003 school year, annual report cards were required with a break down of performance results by district and school. By the 2005-2006 school year, states were required to meet math, reading and science standards for all public school students. Grades three and eight were also required to hold annual statewide reading and math tests. By the 2007-2008 school year, science tests were required once during elementary, middle, and high school.

The standardized tests are a very controversial feature of No Child Left Behind. The opposition challenging annual standardized tests worried about teachers teaching to the test. The overall time devoted to preparing and taking tests instead of instructing students, the incredible expense, random fluctuations and discrimination against

²⁴ McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind*, 1-3.

²⁵ *A Nation at Risk*, Recommendations.

socioeconomic or family background are also critiques of standardized tests.²⁶ Former Colorado Governor, Bill Owens, declared, “The premise of NCLB is clear and essential. All children can learn. Not just children from homes of privilege, children from suburbia or children from a certain ethnic background.”²⁷ Few people in this country would argue with Governor Owens, but a number of people would say that No Child Left Behind is not accurately measuring learning.

Teacher testing was also addressed in *A Nation at Risk*. The report said teachers should be able to demonstrate competence in their particular academic discipline. Under No Child Left Behind, before teachers can be licensed, they must pass a test in their content area.²⁸ The No Child Left Behind testing and teaching requirements conformed to the goal of producing workers to compete in the global economy which was first brought to attention by *A Nation at Risk*.²⁹

No Child Left Behind holds school districts accountable for meeting the adequate yearly progress (AYP) mandate. By 2014, the law requires that all students meet state proficiency standards.³⁰ The National Education Association (NEA) claims that No Child Left Behind will lead to one quarter of the public schools considered

²⁶ Bowman and Kearney, *State and Local Government*, 418.

²⁷ Secretary Margaret Spellings, *Building on Results: A Blueprint for Strengthening the No Child Left Behind Act* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2007).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 488. For a more detailed description of No Child Left Behind features see Public Law 107-110, 107th Congress, 2002, “No Child Left Behind Act of 2001,” (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002).

²⁹ Spring, *The American School*, 489.

³⁰ Louis Fischer, David Schimmel, and Leslie R. Stellman, *Teachers and the Law*, 7th ed. (Boston: Pearson Education, Inc) 442.

failing, even though they have shown signs of improvement.³¹ For some researchers, the idea of all students being proficient is bothersome. Richard Rothstein, Rebecca Jacobsen, and Tamara Wilder claim that not all students can be proficient regardless of their background. Many states have lowered the required skill levels in order to be labeled proficient. This conflicts with No Child Left Behind's requirement that the standards be challenging. Rothstein, Jacobsen and Wilder allege, ". . . the elimination of variation *within* socioeconomic groups is inconceivable. Closing the achievement gap, which implies elimination of variation *between* socioeconomic groups, is extraordinarily difficult, but worth striving for."³² Also, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has a proficiency level that is debatably too high to reach. In 1991, Taiwan was the world leader in mathematics. According to experimental data, if Taiwanese thirteen year olds had taken the NAEP exam, sixty percent would have scored below NAEP's proficiency level. This research argues that the U.S. could be first in the world in math and still not be proficient according to NAEP's definition. The U.S. would be considered a failing school.³³

High stakes testing and unachievable goals are not the only problems faced by No Child Left Behind. Underfunding of No Child Left Behind might be the most controversial issue of the whole act. In 2005, a lawsuit was filed in Michigan against the Department of Education by the NEA and nine school districts for underfunding

³¹ Bowman and Kearney, *State and Local Government*, 411.

³² Richard Rothstein, Rebecca Johnson and Tamara Wilder, *'Proficiency for All' – An Oxymoron* (New York: Prepared for Symposium, "Examining America's Commitment to Closing Achievement Gaps: NCLB and its Alternatives") 1, available at http://www.epi.org/content.cfm/webfeatures_viewpoints_nclb20061114 (accessed 18 March, 2008).

³³ *Ibid.*, 7.

NCLB. It claimed it was impossible to comply with the federal mandate, and it broke the unfunded mandate provisions of the law. The unfunded mandate provision says, “nothing in this Act shall be construed to mandate a State or any subdivision thereof to spend any funds or incur any costs not paid for under this Act.”³⁴

In this lawsuit, the plaintiffs requested the court prevent the enforcement of NCLB until the proper funds were provided.³⁵ After the school districts lost the law suit in Michigan, on January 8, 2008, the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit Court overturned the decision because it required states and school districts to spend their own money in order to comply with the law.³⁶ According to Margaret Spellings, the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education:

The Sixth Circuit noted that federal statutes must provide clear notice to states and school districts of their obligations if they decide to accept federal funds. The court concluded that NCLB does not provide clear notice that states and school districts must comply with all NCLB requirements if, to do so, they must incur additional costs not paid for by federal funds. In concluding that there was not clear notice to states and school districts, the court relied on its interpretation of the so-called "unfunded mandates provision" in section 9527(a) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as amended by NCLB. I strongly disagree with the Sixth Circuit's decision and am exploring all legal remedies to overturn the decision. NCLB is not an unfunded mandate but rather a compact between a state and the federal government that asks the state and its school districts, in exchange for receiving substantial federal dollars, to demonstrate results.³⁷

³⁴ “No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, section 9527(a).

³⁵ Fischer, Schimmel and Stellman, *Teachers and the Law*, 443.

³⁶ WEA, “Victory Announced on Eve of NCLB’s 6th Anniversary,” 2008.

³⁷ U.S Department of Education, “Key Policy Letters Signed by the Education Secretary or Deputy Secretary,” Margaret Spellings, 18 January 2008. available at <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/secletter/080118.html> (accessed 13 May 2008).

It is not surprising that Spellings disagreed with the lawsuit, but this quotation accurately supports the courts' decision.³⁸

Other states, such as Maine, Utah and Vermont, simply walked away from No Child Left Behind and the money attached.³⁹ Wisconsin senator Russ Feingold and Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy proposed the Improving Student Testing Act of 2007. This act also addressed the funding issue by proposing that the proficiency date be waived until Congress fully funds Title I formula grants, which are the largest source of No Child Left Behind Funding.⁴⁰ In the midst of this controversy, Margaret Spellings, the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, claimed that funding for NCLB rose 34 percent from the start of its enactment to 2006. It appeared that Spellings was citing proposed funding. The NEA reports that actual funding has only increased from 22.2 billion dollars to 23.5 billion dollars. Since 2002, the funding gap has reached a shortfall of 85.7 billion dollars.⁴¹

As previously mentioned *A Nation at Risk* brought forth the problems of education in the United States and inspired the public voice for action to be taken. Under the George W. Bush administration, a consolidation of the reform movement started by *A Nation at Risk* was made into NCLB. Why then were there so many issues with the No Child Left Behind legislation when it was inspired by *A Nation at Risk*?

³⁸For a full reference of the case see SCHOOL DISTRICT OF THE CITY OF PONTIAC v. SECRETARY OF THE UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, 05-2708. United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, 2008.

³⁹ Bowman and Kearney, *State and Local Government*, 411.

⁴⁰ "Feingold, Leahy Introduce Bill to Reform NCLB." available at http://feingold.senate.gov/issues_nclbtestingfact.html (accessed 18 February 2008).

⁴¹ NEA, *Funding Gap: No Child Left Behind*, 2008. available at <http://www.nea.org/lac/funding/images/fundinggap.pdf> (accessed 19 February 2008).

NEA president, Reg Weaver, claimed that adequate time was not permitted for extensive review or input from public school employees.⁴² The report addressed the same issue of teachers having too little power when it comes to professional decision making.⁴³ It may also be argued that Child Left Behind has also not lived up to the recommendation of *A Nation at Risk*. It was stated that state and local officials have the primary financial and governing responsibilities to their schools. The report also stated the federal government should provide resources to supplement state and local resources in order to achieve national educational goals; especially to meet the needs of students with special needs. The biggest variation between No Child Left Behind and what *A Nation at Risk* recommended is made clear from this statement in *A Nation at Risk*:

In addition, we believe the Federal Government's role includes several functions of national consequence that States and localities alone are unlikely to be able to meet: protecting constitutional and civil rights for students and school personnel; collecting data, statistics, and information about education generally; supporting curriculum improvement and research on teaching, learning, and the management of schools; supporting teacher training in areas of critical shortage or key national needs; and providing student financial assistance and research and graduate training. We believe the assistance of the Federal Government should be provided with a minimum of administrative burden and intrusiveness.⁴⁴

I include the entire quotation so the reader sees the statement as published in the report and sees that no contradicting evidence is hidden. It was very clear that the National Commission on Excellence in Education believed that the decision making aspect of

⁴² NEA, "Reject 'No Child' Draft language and do it Right, Weaver Says" available at <http://www.weac.org/News/2007-08/sept07/weaver.htm> (accessed 6 February 2008).

⁴³ *A Nation at Risk*, Recommendation D: Teaching.

⁴⁴ *A Nation at Risk*, Recommendation E: Leadership and Fiscal Support.

education should be in the hands of the state and local governments, not the federal government.

REAUTHORIZATION OF NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

In 2007, No Child Left Behind was up for its first reauthorization after five years. In the draft language presented, educators had major concerns. These concerns dealt with the continued focus on high stakes testing, punishments for failing schools, labeling of children and under funding. Reg Weaver recommended rejecting the reauthorization of the draft language until it become more meaningful, instead of making minor tweaks proposed in such a “dysfunctional law.”⁴⁵ Weaver stated:

The children of America deserve more than being the victims of a process allowing politicians to pad their score card for passing legislation, while the end result of that legislation is actually detrimental to teaching, learning, and providing great public schools as a basic right for every child.⁴⁶

In 2006 the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) posted a survey of school district superintendents and came up with the following findings: 93 percent believed that school success should be based on multiple measures instead of just test scores, 91 percent believe the NCLB law should be modified so that schools are credited for showing growth or maintaining high levels of achievement even if they don't meet AYP proficiency targets, 84 percent believe the effects of the law should be evaluated regularly by an impartial group of scholars.⁴⁷ None of these suggestions are

⁴⁵ NEA, “Reject ‘No Child’ Draft Language,”

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ WEAC, “Superintendents believe NCLB is Failing Wisconsin Schools,” 2006. Also, information on the reauthorization of NCLB is available at <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/overview/intro/reauth/index.html> (accessed 19 March 2008).

in the reauthorization draft. Discovering the apparent lack of educator input, it seemed appropriate to hear what professionals in the education field had to say about NCLB.

NCLB IN THE CHIPPEWA VALLEY: TEST RESULTS AND EFFECTS SEEN BY TEACHERS

In the Chippewa Valley region of Wisconsin, NCLB testing has raised little concern among most of the schools. In Eau Claire, Wisconsin, both high schools, Memorial and North, have stayed in the satisfactory range. South Middle School in Eau Claire has also stayed in the satisfactory range. There was only one year that Eau Claire's Delong Middle School was not satisfactory and that was because of a lack of test participation. Just north in the valley, Chippewa Falls High School has always been satisfactory, but this past year, Chippewa Falls Middle School fell below the satisfactory level in reading. The last district I looked at was Osseo-Fairchild. Both Osseo-Fairchild's middle and high schools have always stayed in the satisfactory range.⁴⁸

Also in the Chippewa Valley region of Wisconsin, I interviewed a range of professionals in the field of education. I asked the interviewees to answer one question, respectively, in their field of expertise. The question was, "Since 2002 and the enactment of the No Child Left Behind act, what have you seen change in public

⁴⁸ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Office of Educational Accountability, Adequate Yearly Progress Review Summary. available at http://www2.dpi.state.wi.us/sifi/Dist_pick.asp (accessed 10 May 2008).

education and how do you perceive those effects on schools and students?” A majority mentioned that NCLB ideals are a good vision. The ideas that all children can learn, accountability is important and standards are important is not what make NCLB controversial.

The controversy comes from NCLB’s approach to measuring learning and proficiency and enforcing standards and accountability. Dr. Kerry Jacobson, a superintendent with twenty-six years of experience and the current Osseo-Fairchild School District Superintendent, critiqued the narrowness of the curriculum that NCLB supports. The measuring of curriculum is constricted by the narrow focus the testing takes in subjects, which he believes isn’t always the most important. He said, “They [students] need a broader set of skills, attitudes and dispositions that will serve them well.” And, “If something we are holding our kids accountable to is not important to their future, we are not going to change our curriculum because it is on a test.”⁴⁹ Dr. Jacobsen talked more specifically about what he would like to see students held accountable for, which included bilingual education. He also disagrees with how the act presumes that the federal government cares more about kids and how well they do in school than the local community, teachers and parents.⁵⁰

The following interview with Jeff Stoik, an Osseo-Fairchild High School social studies teacher, reflected the beliefs of Dr. Jacobson. Mr. Stoik said, “In my classroom, in most of our classrooms, very little has changed because of No Child Left Behind.”⁵¹

⁴⁹ Dr. Kerry Jacobson, Interview by the author, 27 March 2008, written notes, Osseo, WI.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Jeff Stoik, Interview by the author, 27 March 2008, written notes, Osseo, WI.

This is strong evidence that Dr. Jacobson’s thoughts on NCLB are reflected in how the district is run. It is also important to note that Osseo-Fairchild has never been what NCLB considers a failing school. Mr. Stoik did mention some positives he has seen in their school from NCLB. He said that they take a closer look at test scores, find where they are weak and try to fix it. When talking about test anxiety, Mr. Stoik says there isn’t very much in their school. The teachers have to try and sell the students on how important these tests are to the fate of the school. Mr. Stoik believes this is partly due to the fact that administrators haven’t made a big deal about the testing. Teachers have little stress to pass down to the students because the administration’s focus is on teaching rather than test scores.⁵²

The ability, or lack thereof, of NCLB to measure student progress was also mentioned by Mr. Stoik. He believes a lot of the testing outcomes come down to reading comprehension. Even though the tests are not always an accurate measure of learning, Mr. Stoik said he doesn’t see a viable alternative that’s useful, and politicians like testing because it is easily measurable. He mentioned alternative ways to measure school progress, such as keeping school portfolios, but it is not practical for politicians to read thousands of portfolios.⁵³

Moving away from the perspective of Osseo-Fairchild school staff, Dr. Mickey Kolis, a University of Wisconsin Eau Claire College of Education and Human Sciences professor, gave a brutally honest opinion and overarching response based on what he has seen in public education. Dr. Kolis said it is a “dollar and cents issue.” Schools are

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

in huge debt because of the incredible expense of testing. He also blatantly stated his belief that, “Poor schools are going to suck on NCLB! They just are. They came in with fewer resources.” Dr. Kolis made the argument that less money means fewer teachers and bigger class sizes. This combination is one reason financially poor schools have less of a chance to do well. A related negative action seen by Dr. Kolis is that NCLB is trying to legislate with “. . . only a hammer and no rewards.”⁵⁴

The universal approach taken by NCLB to improve schools was also criticized by Dr. Kolis. He argued against the lack of provisions for different audiences. This is contrast with the current educational practices of constructivism and differentiation. I went through the teacher education program at UW-Eau Claire myself, and Dr. Kolis told me he would fail me if I didn’t make provisions for different audiences because all students learn differently.

The last issue Dr. Kolis discussed was the standardized testing, which I have previously mentioned as one of the most controversial aspects of NCLB. Dr. Kolis said the testing aspect of NCLB is a “catch 22” because “Content exams don’t want to know what students know, they want to know what students don’t know.”⁵⁵ Dr. Kolis identified the tests used by NCLB to measure proficiency as norm referenced tests. With these tests, if all the students get a question right or wrong, it is thrown out in order to create a bell shaped curve. With this style of test, Dr. Kolis said the

⁵⁴ Dr. Mickey Kolis, Interview by the author, 27 March 2008, written notes, Eau Claire, WI.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

comparison between students can't measure all the students as proficient because the test isn't designed that way.⁵⁶

The final two professionals I interviewed are in the special education field. Renee Chandler, a Special Education professor at UW-Eau Claire and former middle school teacher of students with Emotional and Behavior Disorders, agrees with NCLB's focus on holding kids with special needs to higher standards, which she said teachers should be doing anyway. While Ms. Chandler agreed that data is needed to support learning claims, she said the way NCLB measures the learning of students with special needs isn't effective.

Historically, students in special education do not test well. Ms. Chandler described a situation where NCLB testing is inaccurate. She said a sixth grader with a cognitive disability might function like a second grader, but that student still has to take the sixth grade test. Ms. Chandler said, "[The test] might as well be in Chinese for these kids."⁵⁷ She also talked about how these students struggle and stress to the point of tears over these tests. The rest of a school may look at students in special education and their teachers as a threat to test scores, and that pressure is a real negative to schools.⁵⁸

The second special education professional interviewed was Ruth Harris, Director of the Northwest Reading Clinic, Ltd. in Eau Claire, Wisconsin and Master of sciences in reading disabilities, learning disabilities and emotional disturbance. Ms.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Renee Chandler, Interview by the author, 28 March 2008, written notes, Eau Claire, WI.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Harris' view of NCLB's role in special education was, "Helping students and helping them do better on a test are two different things."⁵⁹ Ms. Harris said the administration stresses over the fate of schools being in the hands of test scores. This stress is then passed down to the teachers and then the students. Because of such strong focus on testing, Ms. Harris has been hired by schools to work on improving their test scores. She argued that schools' creativity and time are devoted to improving test scores. Ms. Harris also made the same argument as Ms. Chandler when she said even with the focus on improving test scores, some students' potential may not be close to grade level. Because of this, a negative feeling may arise towards kids who won't perform.

The Houston Chronicle also supports these two professionals' arguments.

Journalist Stephanie Banchemo said in regards to one measure for all students:

Suburban school officials have been especially [critical] because some of their schools are getting tagged as failing even though they have high overall test scores. In Illinois, for example, 150 schools were labeled underperforming last year, only because special education students did not make the grade.⁵⁶

Ms. Harris also addressed how the mandates affect schools. The mandate, she argued, does not measure improvement at the top. If a school is at the top, how is improvement measured by the testing? Also, Ms. Harris said NCLB did not do a good job helping fix schools that didn't comply with the mandates. One thing the federal government did do was introduce the Reading First program, the goal being that every child can read by the third grade. Ms. Harris explained that this program has been surrounded by a conflict of interest and financial scandal, and it was never supported by the International Reading Association (IRA), which is a membership group of literary professionals, nor was the IRA consulted. Ms. Harris said, "The Federal Government

⁵⁹ Ruth Harris, Interview by the author, 29 March 2008, written notes, Eau Claire, WI.

has taken on the role of policing, but not trying to target solutions unique to all students.”⁶⁰ Ms. Harris’ dedication to individualized learning and experience as the director of the Northwest Reading Clinic led to her critique of the lack of modifications. She argues for potential and IQ based accountability and alternative ways to measure learning. In her reading clinic, if her students can’t express what they know by writing, she has them show their learning verbally. Lastly, Ms. Harris’ experience in the educational field led her to believe that NCLB can’t be fixed. She said, “It failed school districts, failed children, and it failed the parents.”⁶¹

An assumption can be made by comparing the responses of the interviewees to previous references of the effects of NCLB in this paper. The Chippewa Valley of Wisconsin have felt the corrective actions of NCLB. This may change for the Chippewa Valley by the 2014 deadline for all students to be proficient, or maybe, NCLB will change.

THE FATE OF NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

In 2008, the NCLB act was up for reauthorization. Also, in 2008, a new United States president will be elected. Will NCLB continue in a similar manner? Be greatly reformed? Or will NCLB be dismantled? In the 1812 New York created the office of Superintendent of Education. This started the major education reform that gave the state substantial administrative influence in public education.⁶² NCLB could be that reform for the federal government to enter with substantial administrative influence in

⁶⁰ Stephanie Banchemo, “No Child rules to be eased for some states,”*Houston Chronicle* (Houston), 19 March 2008, sect. A, p. 26.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Spring, *The American School*, 80.

public education for decades or centuries to come. Another possibility is that NCLB will be a passing phase introduced by a presidential administration in attempt to put a reform into effect that has been toyed with for over two decades.

There are a few possible reforms meant to improve the NCLB act. According to Secretary Spellings, some of the future reforms include a greater focus on growth models, meaning that individual student's progress may be an acceptable way to show the achievement gap is closing. Also, a small group of students with disabilities may have the option to take alternative assessments and a greater emphasis on assisting ESL students would be implemented. However, proficiency by 2014 must still be met, and the attention on ESL students is focused on English language acquisition, instead of a possible alternative assessment to measure the content they know.⁶³ Another proposal mentioned by Spellings changes how schools are punished based on how greatly they missed the achievement targets. Less severe sanctions would be given to schools that missed only one achievement goal.⁶⁴

Other reforms, not stemmed from the Department of Education, have also been proposed. Expanding on the previous mention of Senators Feingold and Leahy's bill, Improving Student Testing Act of 2007, their reforms for NCLB are interesting. The act works against the cookie cutter approach and:

Provides grants to help promote stronger assessments of student learning. This funding will help encourage states to move away from accountability systems based primarily on standardized test scores in order to better take into account the diverse academic needs of all students.⁶⁵

⁶³ Spellings, *Building on Results*.

⁶⁴ Banchemo, "No Child rules to be eased for some states," sect. 6A.

⁶⁵ "Feingold, Leahy . . ."

In the 2008 election, Senator John McCain, the Republican candidate, plans to only make minor tweaks to the NCLB act. Senator Hillary Clinton, Democratic candidate hopeful, plans to completely do away with NCLB. Senator Barack Obama, another Democratic candidate hopeful, plans to keep NCLB, but make major reforms to the act.⁶⁶ Future work will be needed in order to complete the history of NCLB. It may possibly look very similar to today, be virtually unrecognizable or cease to exist all together. Only time will tell.

CONCLUSION

Where did No Child Left Behind come from? Why is NCLB so controversial? Are the criticisms valid and is there a way to appease the critics? These are not simple questions to answer, but throughout this paper I have given information and insight from which partial answers can be constructed.

No Child Left Behind is the direct descendent of the 1965 ESEA. However, after over three decades of reforms and the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the source of NCLB would be unrecognizable if not for key components such as Title 1. *A Nation at Risk* provided the fuel needed to create NCLB, yet NCLB ended up fairly distant from the ideals expressed by the committee that created *A Nation at Risk*.

To summarize what made NCLB so controversial it is important to remember what happened in public education policy from President Ronald Reagan's term through George W. Bush's presidency. Reagan's dislike for the centralized role and

⁶⁶ "What the Presidential Candidates Are Saying about NCLB," available at <http://www.fairtest.org/what-presidential-candidates-are-saying-about-nclb> (accessed 4 April, 2008).

federal government support for public education was a direct conflict with the findings of *A Nation at Risk*. As previously stated, the report was in favor of federal assistance and against federal interference. The report and public opinion also favored standards and accountability. Slowly, throughout the different presidential administrations, the country has gone more and more to standards and accountability at the federal level. This has also led to more federal control. No Child Left Behind is the amalgamation of support for national standards and accountability, which has taken the form of high stakes testing. However, NCLB has not overcome the historical resistance of the federal government to fund public education. This is strong evidence that it is the lack of funding, not the lack of a response to public opinion, that has contributed to the majority of conflict connected to NCLB.

All the policy makers agreed on standards, accountability, and the idea that all children can learn. These three factors are also agreed upon by educators, which were proved through the interviews. It is apparent that NCLB has also run into controversy, not because of these ideals, but because of the enforcement and application. Tests are measurable; they work for politicians who need learning data to make decisions. Educators also measure using tests, but not exclusively, and they don't agree with the idea of giving the same test to all students. Educators realize that students are different, learn in different ways and show learning in different ways. Understanding the view points of educators and other critics can give insight into unresolved issue that still need to be addressed.

What's the solution? That is a test question to which no one may ever know the answer.

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