

NCLB REFORM AND EFFECTS ON SPECIAL EDUCATION

Lorenza Jara

ELEMENTARY GENERAL EDUCATION, SENIOR, INDIANA UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

The implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has many critics regarding its effects on both general and special education. This author will specifically address NCLB's effects in both of these fields. No Child Left Behind affects both by failing to justify the purpose of an Individualized Education Program (IEP), failing to adequately define a qualified teacher, placing unforeseen pressures on both general and special educators, and widening the gap of students' performance. On the surface it appears NCLB has great intentions in leveling out the playing field in education, but after deeper examination this author reveals flaws and makes suggestions on possible solutions.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, now commonly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), was reauthorized in 2001. The purpose of this act is to ensure that students get a quality education regardless of social or economic status, race or ethnicity, language, and/or cognitive ability. It was implemented, in essence, to leave no child behind. However, this recent reform has received criticism from many professionals regarding its business approach to education issues. No Child Left Behind affects both special education and general education by failing to justify the purpose of an Individualized Education Program (IEP), failing to adequately de-

fine a qualified teacher, placing unforeseen pressures on both general and special educators, and it also widens the gap of students performance.

The 2004 amendment of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) specifically addresses the importance of an IEP and mandates that every student in special education be provided with an IEP. Many agree that the IEP provides a developmental map for a student with disabilities. According to Hallahan and Kauffman (2003), the IEP should contain the student's current academic performance, future goals, objectives, assessment, transitional tools, and more. According to Ysseldyke et al. (2004), many

studies report that students with disabilities are now being exposed to the general curriculum that they were not exposed to prior to NCLB (2004). Although the argument made by Ysseldyke et al. seems legitimate, it appears that the individualized aspect is being lost when attempting to design IEPs that align the general education curriculum. Furthermore, it appears that IEP teams may shift their focus from the students' overall development to simply the general curriculum mandated by the state standards. Brigham, Gustashaw, and Wiley (2004) also believe that the purpose of the IEP is currently being overshadowed with the new standard based reform. Furthermore, Sharpe and Hawes (2003) assert that the IEP and standards need to better compliment each other in order to be purposeful. This illustrates that the original plan of IDEA, to individualize instruction, is being disregarded by state academic standards that seek to standardize instruction performance for all students. Students with disabilities deserve an IEP that serves their specific academic, social, or behavioral needs in order to make progress. Their needs should not be ignored by standards imposed by NCLB.

Along with the federal mandate of NCLB taking control over school reform and standards, it also took the liberty of defining a "highly qualified teacher" which consists of an individual who receives a degree in any field, passes the state certification test, and receives a state certification due to the emergency provision in NCLB (Mooney & Gunter, 2004). Many professional teachers feel that this stipulation devalues "the benefits of traditional teacher training" (Simpson, LaCava, & Graner, 2004). Some teachers may not understand the pedagogy that goes into educating. Individuals who simply pass a state certification test and are not educated on educational pedagogy will not be

able to effectively educate. Mooney also states that investigations show that first year teachers who go through pedagogy training notably outperform individuals who were licensed under emergency provisions (Mooney & Gunter, 2004). This raises many concerns in education because NCLB's purpose is to guarantee each student a quality education. Analysis conducted by Darling-Hammond and Youngs in 2002 supports the idea that teachers who go through proper training in education programs clearly outperform the alternative teachers brought in by the emergency provision (as cited in Simpson et al., 2004). The quality education that NCLB aims for may not be realistic because of the emergency provision which places poorer performing teachers in the classroom.

On the other hand, it has even become more difficult for an interested individual to become a special education teacher. Not only does the interested party have to receive a degree in special education, but they also must receive certification in the subject they plan to teach. With shortages already burdening the special education field, these requirements may prompt individuals who may be interested in the profession to change their mind (Simpson et al., 2004). Currently, 10% of the already struggling special education work force does not meet the highly qualified requirements under NCLB (Mooney & Gunter, 2004). With the apparent shortage of professionals in special education and increasing difficulty for individuals to become a special educator, the field of special education is bound to suffer.

These recent requirements within NCLB on schools have placed unseen pressure on administrators, teachers, and students. In addition, IDEA's original objectives to place individuals with disabilities in the least restrictive environment

(LRE) has led to a strong movement for inclusion in the general classroom. With the federal mandate of NCLB to make academic achievement and assessment the main focus of education, many teachers are already feeling pressure to teach to the standards. Moreover, both general educators and special educators do not currently feel adequately prepared on effective methods. Special educators may not be educated on methods of teaching to standard-based education, leaving many of them feeling unprepared. This type of stress in a career where teachers are overworked and underpaid may lead many qualified individuals away from the field of education.

With all the standards that must be addressed, the gap that was originally meant to be narrowed by NCLB will be expanding. Often teachers may lose sight of which students understand the material and which ones do not (Brigham et al., 2004). In classrooms this may already be the case, and this situation may specifically impair a disabled student who needs more explanation in order to fully understand the material. It is easy, as a teacher, to get caught up in what needs to be covered and fail to see which students may be struggling. This will eventually widen the gap between high performing students and lower performing students, ultimately defeating the purpose of NCLB.

When the largest reform ever in education is implemented, flaws in the policy are likely to surface. According to Brigham, however, one must take this opportunity to strengthen the education system (Brigham et al., 2004). Although NCLB's negative effects on education are unfortunate, one cannot simply take it as a defeat. Educators must learn from their mistakes and fix them. Educators must begin by redefining the purpose of the IEP and assuring it is properly implemented. Educators must also rede-

fine what it means to be a highly qualified teacher. Administrators must relieve pressures placed on general education and special education teachers by approaching teaching with new methods. Ultimately educators, administrators, and politicians must find alternative ways to truly narrow the gap in education.

Special education is directly affected by what is going on in the general classroom (Brigham et al., 2004). Within IDEA's policy, an IEP is mandated: this is the most crucial place to begin meeting a student's specific academic needs. No Child Left Behind manages to put such a focus on standards that many teachers forget about the individualized aspect of the IEP. Brigham suggests that teachers reevaluate the original purpose of the IEP by analyzing the actual ability of a student, figuring out how to make the IEP function, and individualizing the student's program (Brigham et al., 2004). IEPs need to refocus on the individualized aspect rather than only the curricular aspect. By doing this, educators will better aid their students in reaching their full potential.

A highly qualified teacher is not one who simply receives a degree, passes a test, and gets a state certification. A highly qualified teacher is one who is familiar with pedagogy, uses a variety of teaching techniques in the classroom, addresses all of his or her students' styles of learning, and most importantly makes every child feel good about their ability. With a shortage of both general and special education teachers, the government may want to entice more highly qualified individuals by increasing salaries and retain good teachers by offering rewards.

To relieve pressures in the classroom, educators must advocate for smaller class sizes. With inclusion on the rise and more students being crammed into classrooms, the profession of teaching has reached a high stress level. The current political and

educational environment for both general educators and special educators is difficult because of NCLB and other societal factors. However, if teachers strongly advocate for their needs, they may be able to change the current reform to be more realistic and beneficial for the students.

Whether students have disabilities or not, they still want to make progress. With standardized reform and its effects on schools, many teachers are focused on simply reaching the requirements mandated by the standards. This trend is also occurring with IEPs and there is less emphasis on individualizing for the needs of the student. This standards-based approach is implying a shift to teach rote procedure and forget about narrowing the gap. The gap is not simply going to be filled by having each student reach a mandated level. The gap may decrease when teachers stop conforming to what they do not believe in and take a stand as a united profession that sets their own standards that respect every student regardless of race, creed, socioeconomic status, physical capabilities, or mental capabilities and say that they deserve the right to an education, an education that truly refuses to fail them.

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