

No Child Left Behind and the Reduction of the Achievement Gap

Sociological Perspectives on Federal Educational Policy

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*Sociological Perspectives on NCLB and
Federal Involvement in Education*¹

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FEDERAL AND STATE EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND NCLB

A decade ago, in an analysis of Goals 2000, the sociologists contributing to *Implementing Educational Reform: Sociological Perspectives on Educational Policy* (Borman, Cookson, Sadovnik and Spade, 1996) argued that there were limits and possibilities to school-based educational reforms aimed at reducing educational inequalities based on social class, race, ethnicity, and gender. Ten years later, the sociologists contributing to this book make the same cautionary claim. Unfortunately, politicians in Washington and policymakers continue to ignore the powerful sociological dictum that schools do not operate in a vacuum and are affected by larger social, political, and economic forces.

The purpose of this book is not to add to the often rhetorical and ideological critiques of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), nor to uncritically defend the law. There has been enough of this from both sides of the political and ideological spectrum. Rather, it is to draw upon the theoretical insights and empirical findings in the sociology of education to examine the law's potential and problems and to contribute to the ongoing policy debates about reauthorization.

The chapters in this book have provided important evidence on NCLB in particular and federal involvement in education, in general. Although we support fully the law's laudable goal of eliminating the achievement gaps among different groups, these chapters provide essential cautions about the likelihood of this happening as well as pointing out significant problems with the implementation

of the law. Based on the work of sociologists of education, there are a number of important conclusions:

1. A sociological analysis provides an important corrective to current policy discussions by insisting that school level policies and reforms required by NCLB must be understood in their larger societal context and in relation to external social, economic, and political factors.
2. This type of sociological analysis does not, as the Education Trust often argues, provide an excuse for failing to reduce the achievement gap (Education Trust 2005). Rather, it acknowledges 40 years of sociological research on the causes of the achievement gap demonstrating that educational inequalities are a result of both school-based and nonschool factors.
3. To ignore societal factors in policies aimed at reducing the achievement gap will inevitably limit the effectiveness of educational policies aimed primarily at the school level, as NCLB is, to adequately reduce the achievement gap.
4. Having said this, sociological research provides important evidence that school-based policies can improve schools and help reduce the achievement gap in all of the areas covered by the law under which NCLB operates. In addition, the sociological discipline provides research-based evidence for improving the implementation of NCLB and correcting some of the unintended consequences of the law.
5. Sociologists of education should continue to engage in research aimed at analyzing the various components of NCLB and that research should be used in the larger policy debates about NCLB, especially with respect to its reauthorization.

The remainder of this chapter examines the reasons for these conclusions, based both on the chapters in this book, as well as on years of sociological research.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND ASSESSMENT

From the Coleman Report (1966) to recent research by Jean Anyon (2005a, 2005b) and David Armor (chapter 16 this volume), sociologists and others (e.g., Berliner 2006; Rothstein 2004; see also Riordan, 2003; Sadovnik, Cookson and Semel, 2006), have pointed to the limited effects of schools in reducing inequality. As all these researchers point out, to ignore factors external to schools is to deny reality. Berliner calls poverty “the 600-pound gorilla” on the back of school reform. Rothstein documents the powerful effects of poverty on the learning of poor children and the positive effects that could be garnered by improvements in health care, including dental and eye care, housing and environmental re-

forms, including increases in affordable housing and removal of lead paint from apartments in cities. Anyon analyzes the deleterious effects of federal and state housing and wage policies, as well as the negative effects of the free market on the poor. Armor reminds us that cognitive inequality among children is evident even before they begin school, and that it is tied to family risk factors such as income, cognitive stimulation, and health. To ignore what Berliner and Biddle (1996) concluded 10 years ago—that when U.S. achievement scores are disaggregated by socioeconomic factors the major crisis in achievement is a crisis for low-income children, children of color, and children whose first language is not English, not of all children—is to ignore these data. Although NCLB recognizes these achievement gaps as the central policy problem, NCLB in large measure ignores the important conclusions of sociologists of education that to reduce these gaps requires reducing poverty, as well as improving the schools that poor children attend. Neither is sufficient on its own, but both are necessary if all students are to meet the high performance demands of modern society. Importantly, the federal government is in a unique role to help on both fronts through policies on reducing poverty as well as education reform.

In light of the importance of family conditions to children’s school success, enhancing parent involvement in schooling is an important policy issue. Yet as Epstein and Sheldon (chapters 13 and 14 this volume) argue, NCLB provisions on connecting school districts, schools, and families must be more effectively implemented. Other sociologists of education, especially Annette Lareau (1989, 2002, 2003) have provided compelling evidence that social class differences in the relationship between families and schools must be understood in order to develop meaningful policies.

Since the work of Ronald Edmonds (1979, 1982) on effective schools for low-income children, effective school researchers have analyzed the characteristics of such schools in hopes of replicating them. In addition, research on the effects of comprehensive school reform, urban systemic reform, and other school based policies have demonstrated that schools and teachers do make a difference in the lives of poor children and children of color (G. Borman et al. 2003; K. M. Borman et al. 2004; Darling-Hammond 1996a, 1996b, 1997; O’Day 2002). NCLB’s curriculum and teaching components are based on the belief that successful programs can be replicated and that there are no excuses for failing to do so (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003). However, as Brint and Teele (chapter 7, this volume), Talbert and McLaughlin (chapter 9, this volume), and Ingersoll (chapter 8, this volume) point out, there are significant problems with current policy and the need to learn from the lessons of sociological research to replicate successes. For example, putting a qualified teacher in every classroom takes more than the law provides; it takes fundamental changes in school climate and culture in order to ensure that qualified teachers stay, especially in schools with low-income children. Helping teachers effectively teach low-income children will

require sustained professional development and the development of profession communities of teachers within schools as argued by Talbert and McLaughlin (chapter 9, this volume).

The most controversial aspect of NCLB has been its testing and accountability requirements. Researchers have pointed out how these requirements negatively affect schools with large concentrations of low-income children and children of color and how overreliance on standardized tests often results in the narrowing of curriculum and teaching to the test (Firestone, Schorr, and Monfils 2004; Kim and Sunderman 2005). Swanson (chapter 3, this volume), Booher-Jennings and Beveridge (chapter 4, this volume), Weitz White and Rosenbaum (chapter 5, this volume), and Dworkin and Lorence (chapter 12, this volume), make valuable contributions to understanding the problems with current implementation and the need for changes in the reauthorization. Among these, including growth and value-added models and expanding the types of assessments included should be examined for reauthorization. Educational historian Diane Ravitch (2000), who has called for a federal, rather than state assessment and accountability regime, points to the problems with "state rights" based accountability systems, including the large differences in curriculum and testing systems that make national comparisons impossible, except through NAEP (which is not used for NCLB accountability). Although there may be sound reasons for such a national system, similar to the ones used in most other countries, they are not without problems—see Walford (1999) for a discussion of the United Kingdom. In addition, given the historical commitment to local control of public schools in the United States, the lack of a federal constitutional provision, and the likely large scale political opposition to a national curriculum and testing system, it is unlikely that this could be enacted in the reauthorization.

The school choice component of NCLB is likely to emerge as a controversial aspect of the reauthorization. It is well established that President Bush wanted a voucher component similar to the Florida voucher system in the 2001 law, one where low-income children in schools in need of improvement would have the option of transferring to private schools by means of federal tuition vouchers. Although the Democrats, with the assistance of the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) blocked this provision, the emergence of the District of Columbia voucher policy and the recent U.S. Department of Education proposal to Congress for a national voucher program, suggest that the Bush administration may try to include a private school voucher option as part of its reauthorization proposal. Lauen (chapter 10, this volume) and Useem (chapter 15, this volume) provide important evidence for this upcoming debate. Although many critics of NCLB have argued that the law's real intent has been the destruction of public education and the privatization of schooling (e.g., Metz, chapter 17, this volume), this book suggests that although some supporters of the law may have this intent,

others such as the Education Trust are strong supporters of public schools. The evidence on the effects of existing voucher programs in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida (Van Dunk and Dickman 2003; Witte 2000) and recent research on the differences between public, private, and charter schools (Lubienski and Lubienski 2006) suggests that private school vouchers are not magic bullets for low-income students. However, given the lack of student level longitudinal data on achievement differences among public, charter, and private schools, better research is needed before a private school voucher policy is considered. Rather, given the research evidence in this volume and elsewhere on effective practices for low-income students and students of color, it makes sense to find ways in the reauthorization to ensure such practices are replicated in public schools, including charter schools, and that federal funds are available for research and implementation of best practices.

With respect to interdistrict public school choice programs, Lauen points out that such programs have not been adequately utilized to provide transfer options for children in schools in need of improvement. Given the lack of capacity within low-income rural and urban districts, interdistrict choice options might be strengthened, perhaps through innovative funding and assessment mechanisms to make it attractive for districts to accept low-income students from neighboring districts without being punished by AYP requirements. That is, districts that accept low-income students from neighboring districts must be given adequate time to help them improve without these students threatening their own AYP status. However, given the unintended consequences of the Michigan interdistrict choice program (Arsen, Plank, and Sykes 1999), we need better evidence on the type of programs that will work. It would make sense to encourage states to implement trial programs with a strong evaluation component built in to assess success.

The chapters in this book provide an important tool for policymakers as they think about the reauthorization of NCLB. The Forum on Educational Accountability, a group of 80 national education and civic associations, issued a joint statement on changes needed in the act to make it fair and effective (2006, 1). They state:

... Among these concerns are: over-emphasizing standardized testing, narrowing curriculum and instruction to focus on test preparation rather than richer academic learning; over-identifying schools in need of improvement; using sanctions that do not help improve schools; inappropriately excluding low-scoring children to boost test results; and inadequate funding.

The statement goes on to support a number of changes in the areas of progress measurement, assessments, building capacity, sanctions, and funding that they argue would make the law fairer and more realistic to implement. Included

in their list are more realistic proficiency targets, the use of growth and value-added models, the use of more comprehensive assessment systems that do not rely exclusively on standardized tests, the building of local capacity to improve schools, the development of more realistic time lines before sanctions are used, the need to fund a significant portion of state and districts costs of implementation, and the need to fully fund Title I to ensure that all poor children are served (2006, 2–3). Many of the authors in this book have recommended similar changes. In addition, based on the research of O'Day (chapter 2, this volume), Ingersoll (chapter 8, this volume), and Talbert and McLaughlin (chapter 9, this volume), the government should provide incentives for the further development of teaching as a profession.

More specifically, the authors raise a number of questions about current NCLB policies and make specific recommendations for reauthorization.

Accountability and Assessment

- Testing of students should be only part of the assessment process, given that the more indicators, including portfolios, that schools have about a student's performance the greater the likelihood that a true estimate of the student's knowledge will be assessed.
- The development of fair, reliable, and valid tests takes considerable time. Under pressure from NCLB many states that have not previously relied on a standardized test have been forced either to adopt an off-the-shelf, norm-referenced test or quickly to construct a criterion-referenced one.
- Establish more realistic standards for campus standardized test passage rates that account for the array of disabilities students may bring to school. Recognize that 100 percent passage rates, even with consideration of 95 percent testing rates may be unreasonable for some school populations and that the goal may not be attainable in the short period allowed under the law.
- Since the United States is a mobile society in which citizens can become actors in communities other than the ones in which they were born and educated as children, it is reasonable to develop a national curriculum and appropriate tests of that curriculum. Of course, the curricula can be augmented by local issues, but the goal will be to have a common core of knowledge shared by all students.
- Reliance on value-added models to assess schools that consider school, student, and neighborhood effects on student achievement so that children with disparate achievement levels can be compared and schools with greater numbers of disadvantaged students will be assessed more equitably.
- NCLB is too quick to punish low-performing schools by taking away some

of their Title I funding, notifying parents that they have the opportunity to transfer their children to another school, and by threats of closure. Struggling schools should receive more resources to improve student achievement.

- Support schools and school districts in the collection and maintenance of accurate student records so that graduation, completion, and dropout data have a more reasonable chance of being accurate. Reward schools for verifiably improved "stay-in-school" programs, rather than punishing schools for their dropout rates.
- Some states encourage their schools to use the results from individual test item objectives to locate student weakness and improve curricula to mitigate those weaknesses. This practice should be done more widely, but not to the exclusion of nontested curricula.
- Provide in-service training of school administrators and teachers to help them to understand that teaching a broad curriculum actually expands the student's knowledge base and improves test performance. Encourage scholars from many disciplines to aid in the development of curricula in science, social studies, art, music, even physical education that can benefit a student's breadth of perspective and facilitate overall achievement.
- Reward schools that engage in inclusive practices in which all children are provided with enrichment and educational services. Do not engage in educational triage activities that deny challenging curricula to students who are likely to pass the test and diminish the educational opportunities for course selections by students whose test performance is most problematic.
- Focus on developing an accountability system that relies on the professional development of school staff and encourages their input and buy-in, rather than one that only imposes rules externally.

TEACHING AND TEACHER QUALITY

Brint and Teele's analysis of teachers' attitudes toward NCLB and the behavioral changes they need to make to comply with the legislation reveals widespread dissatisfaction with several aspects of the law (chapter 7 this volume). Many teachers are concerned about pressure to teach to the test and about scripted teaching. They believe that these pedagogical strategies restrict the breadth of curricular instruction and limit teachers' educational goals. They also dislike the fact that the additional time they must devote to core subjects assessed by NCLB limits instruction in other subject areas. A majority of teachers are not convinced that NCLB teacher requirements improve the quality of instruction to any great extent.

Taking these concerns seriously should lead to a number of changes in NCLB. First, the legislation should broaden the assessment tools used to measure student

progress. Scores on standardized tests provide only a narrow window into student learning. Academic progress is measured more accurately by longitudinal data showing change in students' test scores over time and by tests that place more emphasis on higher order thinking skills as opposed to rote learning. A stronger emphasis on professional development would promote the enhancement of teacher quality by complimenting academic credentials with teaching skills.

A recent comprehensive national study of NCLB conducted by the Center for Education Policy (2006) reveals that 88 percent of the districts studied expect to meet the highly qualified teacher regulation by the end of 2006. One reason for this seemingly positive finding is that many states have made it easy for teachers to achieve highly qualified status. The NCLB HOUSSSE option gives the states authority to set standards for certification. Many states have set low standards for passing certification examinations and for ways to gain credit for professional development. A reauthorized NCLB should eliminate the HOUSSSE option, require states to set high standards for passing competency tests, and define more rigorously what professional activities count as professional development.

At the same time, NCLB needs to better address the problem of out-of-field teaching. Simply raising requirements to make the designation of highly qualified teachers more meaningful is not sufficient. As Ingersoll points out (chapter 8 this volume), one way of addressing the problem is by providing training programs that would show principals how they can reduce out-of-field training through organizational and administrative decisions. In addition, NCLB should set up mechanisms to recruit teachers to teach in underserved areas, such as math and science, as well as special education. Entry incentives, salary bonuses, and fast-track routes to advancement provide attractive benefits and enticements for teachers to remain in teaching.

In the present culture of NCLB, primary emphasis is placed on academic credentials and less attention is paid to teacher professional development. Yet, Title II of NCLB makes approximately \$3 billion available to improve student performance by raising teacher quality. Devoting these resources to the professional development of teachers should play a significant role in raising teacher quality and improving student achievement.

Borko (2004) claims in her AERA presidential address that the professional development of teachers is seriously inadequate. Talbert and McLaughlin (chapter 9 this volume) join her in forcefully arguing for better professional training for teachers. They recommend teacher learning communities as an effective and powerful method of helping teachers work together to promote student learning. Yet, it is unclear whether NCLB would fund schools to establish teacher learning communities or other recognized models of professional development. At present, NCLB regulations indicate that states may receive funds for developing and utilizing proven, innovative strategies to deliver intensive professional development programs. A reauthorized NCLB should make clear the kinds of

professional development programs that are eligible for funding and whether programs like teacher learning communities qualify for support.

Moreover, considerable flexibility and scope are needed in endorsing professional development programs. Since teaching is situationally determined, some programs are better suited for one school setting than for another. NCLB should support strong, conceptually grounded professional development programs that are backed by rigorous research and that promise significant improvements in student learning.

In reauthorizing NCLB, lawmakers need to address the weaknesses and limitations in the present legislation. The first step in making NCLB more effective is to provide a strong conceptual framework to support its requirements. If the law were firmly grounded in social science theory and empirical research, its priorities would likely shift in a direction that is more consistent with teachers' insights and instructional experience. If lawmakers were to take into account the influence of the demographic characteristics of students, teachers, and schools on student achievement, the reauthorized legislation would be more equitable. If the unrealistic goals of the present law requiring full compliance in a short space of time were replaced by more reasonable ones, teachers would find compliance less stressful and alienating. A reauthorized NCLB that takes into account what has been learned since the inception of the law in 2001 would improve teacher attitudes toward the legislation, increase their willingness to comply, and ultimately lead to significant improvement in student achievement.

SCHOOL CHOICE AND PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

The authors imply a number of issues for the future implementation of the NCLB school choice and parental involvement provisions. First, they demonstrate the need for more mixed-method study where quantitative and qualitative methods can complement one another to paint a more complete picture. Mixed-method approaches would be especially helpful in ascertaining the number of school districts that have implemented parental involvement programs while also examining the nature and quality of the programs developed. This is an area in which the choice and involvement provisions intersect, and where more information is needed regarding the quality of information district leaders provide to parents about their school transfer options. Such study could also inform our understanding of how districts and schools not already inclined to parental involvement develop will and capacity. In the area of school achievement and school choice, mixed-method study could also pinpoint the bureaucratic, curricular, organizational, and institutional forms that help to support schools that are higher achieving. The findings from such research could help to inform policy debates about the role of suburban schools and the ways in which their boundaries facilitate the spatial isolation of many urban schools and districts. A question to be debated is whether these school systems might be opened up to

urban students instead of or in addition to privatized solutions such as vouchers or private management of public schools.

This leads to a second issue: the nature and quality of options available for parents. In 2006, the options were intradistrict public choice, supplemental educational services, charter schools, limited private school vouchers, and private management of public schools. Judging the success of these from an achievement metric alone, none of these have proved to be clear successes, and all the data on them are contested. While more research is needed, and while performance on standardized achievement tests is just one measure of student learning and school quality, under NCLB and state standards-based accountability reforms, a finding that cuts across nearly all the research is that market based choice reforms (vouchers, charters, privately managed schools); as a whole have failed to outperform public schools. In those cases where some choice forms do better than some public schools, more research is needed about what makes these schools remarkable—what resources, curriculum, and student populations are behind the schoolhouse doors? While just 2 percent of eligible students availed themselves of transfers under NCLB, 20 percent of those eligible utilized supplemental educational service tutors (Center on Education Policy 2006). More information about the quality of these providers as well as the effects they are having on student achievement is in order. Research that helps parents, school leaders, and teachers understand these issues can help facilitate meaningful choice, parental involvement, and a reduction of achievement gaps through better schooling for more students. The chapters in this section call for close attention to the conflicting reports of achievement data between private, charter, and traditional public schools, and suggest that a reliance on more radical choice and privatization measures beyond the current public school transfer options are premature solutions that should be delayed until there is more evidence to support their adoption.

Next, research on choice and family involvement can benefit from multiple paradigms. The authors provide original empirical study framed by sociological analysis. Such analysis helps to shift the dominant paradigm for examining choice policies. Especially since the mid-1980s, economists of education have largely defined and framed the parameters of school choice policy, research, and evaluation. The policy debates, research methods, analysis, and implementation recommendations have tended to emphasize rational choice models and randomized studies to determine whether school choice results in greater educational efficiency. Sociologists of education in comparison have tended to focus on issues of stratification and equity within and across institutions under existing and theoretical school choice programs. Also of interest are the ways in which school choice programs interact with varying levels of social privilege amongst parents who choose alternative educational settings and parents who stay in traditional public schools. The point is not to disparage one approach, but rather to encourage the ways in which multiple disciplinary frames can produce

a more complete picture and help us understand the choice process and choice outcomes more holistically.

Finally, the chapters suggest that NCLB policy needs to attend better to local context. Preexisting institutional, racial, social, political, economic conditions can lead to success or struggle. Districts with experience and support for developing family partnerships are implementing the family involvement requirements under NCLB. Yet data about the lack of transfers for eligible students indicate, in part, that parents are not as informed as they could or should be about their options. Districts need help meeting the school transfer requirements of NCLB; especially those serving racially isolated schools and students where the majority of schools are in need of AYP in any given year. Many are already financially strained, and do not have the organizational capacity to implement the choice provisions. NCLB holds that lack of space is not an excuse for implementing the transfer provisions, and that Local Education Authorities (LEAs) should establish partnerships with receiving ones or set up trailers on the facilities of higher performing schools. This places the onus on local districts, rather than state governments to equalize capacity across districts. It seems clear that for many overburdened districts, mandates will not simply make them know how to do better for their students. This is not to excuse LEAs that have willfully neglected their most needy schools and students, but rather to encourage a policy approach that will support local officials to provide better opportunities to their students.

The NCLB mandates for school districts and LEAs to develop school choice and the family involvement programs are likely here to stay. In order for the choice and family involvement NCLB provisions to meet the needs of parents and students who have been the least well served by public institutions, the legislation could be strengthened to provide more support to districts and schools to implement them. Though they engage slightly different aspects of choice and family involvement, the chapters in this section point to important indicators of successful implementation of the provisions. These include: existing expertise and capacity, local context, and historical precedent. Ultimately, each chapter calls for more and better data to gauge the implementation with more accuracy, a critical examination of local context, a renewed public debate about what the nation wants its public schools to look like, and the role of the state realizing the public will.

REDUCTION OF ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

We began this book with the overall question as to whether NCLB will significantly reduce, if not eliminate, the achievement gap by 2013–14. Based on the chapters, we conclude that it is possible to raise achievement and reduce gaps, and that standards-based reform can be part of the solution, but only if more time is allowed for new programs to take effect. One response to the timing

problem would be to simply slow down the rate of increase at which schools are required to bring increasing numbers of students to proficiency; in other words, to push the time frame beyond 2014. However, this approach would not avoid the problem that a school that contributes to student learning may nonetheless be judged ineffective because of a low starting point, whereas a school that contributes little may be judged effective because of a high starting point. A better approach, as noted by Armor (chapter 16, this volume), is to bring schools' "value added" into the accountability system; that is, to consider the extent to which schools contribute to growth in achievement for an individual student from one year to the next.

The value-added approach, however, has its own limitations. In particular, crediting schools with high value added when absolute achievement is low risks never reaching proficiency for the most disadvantaged students. Consequently, a more realistic NCLB would take into account both value added and absolute levels of achievement. The Milwaukee Public Schools has recently embarked on a reporting system that has these features (Borsuk 2006). In Milwaukee's approach, schools are sorted into four quadrants: those with high achievement and high value added, those that are low on both measures, and those that are high on one and low on the other. Adopting this system on a statewide basis would allow states to target sanctions against schools that are low on *both* measures, rather than those that are low only on absolute measures. Schools that are high on value added but low on absolute levels of achievement would be encouraged rather than stigmatized, and might be eligible for special resources, such as incentives to maintain a stable teaching force. By noting their low average scores, however, an approach that combines value added and absolute targets makes it clear that closing the proficiency gap is the ultimate goal.

A value-added approach would also respond to Metz's concern that NCLB is a weapon used to attack public schools, because it would allow the public to see that public schools *can* be effective, even those with highly disadvantaged populations. Instead of disparaging all schools with low-test scores, it would hold up for sanction only those schools that have both low scores *and* fail to contribute to student learning, relative to their starting points. Moreover, it would target resources more effectively than the current system. In particular, students would not be encouraged to transfer out of schools where test scores are low unless their schools also fail to raise achievement as much as other schools might.

Are the operators of NCLB conspiring to undermine public education? We have no doubt that some of its framers had exactly this goal in mind. Their aim would have been to establish a voucher system, as the followers of Milton Friedman (2002) have long advocated, so that all schools would compete with one another for students in a fully privatized system. But we are equally convinced that NCLB had strong supporters among its architects who intended nothing

of the sort. Indeed, many advocates of NCLB are firmly aligned with preserving public education; that was the basis for the extraordinary bipartisan coalition that made it possible to pass the NCLB law. Our sense is that public education interests in this country are strong enough that NCLB will collapse long before public education does.

Our expectation, however, is that neither public education nor NCLB-like requirements will meet their demise any time soon. On the contrary, we suspect that NCLB's emphasis on accountability through testing is here to stay. As currently written, long-term success in its stated mission is impossible, even if the latent aims of some of its advocates may not come to pass to the degree that Metz has warned. Yet if NCLB is respecified so that it focuses on growth as well as on absolute targets, it may be possible to raise achievement and reduce gaps in the long run.

A few years ago, Gamoran (2001) predicted that the black-white gaps in achievement and attainment would be nearly gone by the end of the 21st century. It is too soon to judge whether progress toward this goal is occurring, but new evidence is available that is worth considering. On the one hand, after a decade of regressing or, at best, no change, national achievement testing suggests that the gap may be slowly narrowing once again (Olson 2005). On the other hand, recent research has undercut the claim that a virtuous cycle of intergenerational transmission of gains will inevitably reduce the gaps (Long, Kelly, and Gamoran 2006). Although black-white gaps narrowed substantially in many areas, analysis of attainment trends across the 20th century suggests that the gains did not reflect improvements in family background of blacks. Consequently, the prospects for further narrowing the gap during the 21st century may depend more heavily on specific programs and policies than Gamoran had allowed. Whether standards-based reform will contribute positively to the closing of gaps depends on whether it is implemented realistically instead of outlandishly, whether resources are allocated strategically instead of perversely, and whether research provides better answers to questions about how to improve achievement for disadvantaged children.

CONCLUSION

We agree with the Forum's statement that,

... [we] are committed to the No Child Left Behind Act's objectives of strong academic achievement for all children and closing the achievement gap. We believe that the federal government has a critical role to play in attaining these goals. We endorse the use of an accountability system that helps ensure that all children, including children of color, from low-income

families, with disabilities, and of limited English proficiency, are prepared to be successful, participating members of our democracy.

Although we believe achievement gaps can be reduced, the chapters in this book caution us that the types of changes recommended by the Forum will nonetheless not be sufficient to reduce, let alone eliminate the achievement gap. Useem's analysis of educational reform in Philadelphia suggests that NCLB has provided the impetus for systemic changes in the school system that show promise. Although we believe that the school-based reforms related to NCLB have the potential to reduce the achievement gaps, we return to our first point above. Without simultaneous efforts to reduce the pernicious effects of poverty on low-income children, "the 600 pound gorilla" will continue to prevent school based reforms from fully eliminating these gaps. Just as educational inequalities are caused by both factors inside and outside of schools, their solutions must be aimed both inside and outside the schoolhouse door

Note

1. The recommendations sections of this chapter are written by Dworkin (accountability and assessment), Hallinan (teachers and teacher quality), Scott (parental involvement and school choice) and the reduction of the achievement gaps (Gamoran). The other sections are written by Sadovnik.

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