



# Point-Counterpoint

*Should We Repair “No Child Left Behind”  
or Trade It In?*

A conversation between  
Robert Gordon and Richard Rothstein

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ROBERT GORDON (JULY 2005):

## *Class Struggle: What Democrats Need to Say About Education\**

In the only exchange on education during the 2004 presidential debates, John Kerry made one argument: “The president who talks about No Child Left Behind refused to fully fund [it] by 28 billion dollars ... he didn’t put in what he promised, and that makes a difference in the lives of our children.” George W. Bush responded acidly: “Only a liberal senator from Massachusetts would say that a 49 percent increase in funding for education was not enough. We’ve increased funds. But, more importantly, we’ve reformed the system.”

That sums up the education debate in the 2004 campaign. Bush championed reform and resources. Although Bob Dole had once wanted to shut down the Department of Education, in his first term, Bush supported standards-based accountability through the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). And, though he fell short of his promises on money, Bush did approve more than \$30 billion in new K-12 education funding.

While Bush and the Republicans moved to the middle, Kerry and the Democrats retreated from it. When Bush signed the NCLB in 2002, liberal lions like Ted Kennedy stood by his side. But, in 2004, Democrats regularly attacked the law as “punitive.” Howard Dean pilloried his opponents for supporting reform. John Edwards, though offering a detailed reform plan, said he regretted voting for NCLB because of how Bush administered it. Kerry, a longtime reformer, said the law “terrified” teachers. The party’s top three education demands were money, money, and money. “You cannot promise to leave no child behind and then leave the money behind,” Kerry often said.

While Democrats reinforced the old idea that they just want to spend, Bush appealed to a public that wants both accountability and funding. In 1996, two out of three registered voters thought Bill Clinton was the best candidate on education. By the end of the 2004 campaign, Bush enjoyed a small lead over Kerry on the issue.

These are vivid memories for me. I was one of Kerry’s education advisers during the general election. I previously worked for — and have since advised — Edwards. The views expressed here are my own, but I bear plenty of responsibility for the developments described. Yet the attitudes of the candidates reflected the attitudes of the party. Top congressional Democrats today say nothing different.

It’s stunning to see Democrats lose their edge on education. That’s because on education Democrats don’t need to explain why the United States needs vigorous government; Americans already want effective public schools. Through education, Democrats reach for their own deepest aspiration: a country where

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\* Source: Commentary from Robert Gordon in *New Republic*, June 6-13, 2005 edition.

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birth doesn't dictate destiny. Nothing offends Democratic ideals more than the fact that a typical poor or African American 12<sup>th</sup>-grader reads at the same level as a typical middle class or white eighth-grader. Nothing is a greater threat to middle-class prosperity than mediocre schools. If Democrats cannot speak powerfully to an issue that speaks so powerfully to them, they cannot expect to prevail on tougher ideological terrain.

Progressives need to act on a policy principle that Americans understand: Money ain't everything. The United States has tripled education funding per student since the 1960s, and we now outspend all but a few countries. But our students' reading and math scores have edged up only modestly, and our achievement remains in the middle of the developed world. Yes, money matters; the shortfall in NCLB funding has hurt the law's own cause. Democrats deserve credit for supporting more spending on schools. But they squander that credit when they make money their only focus.

In emphasizing resources, Democrats evade questions of culture and institutions. Those matter, too. It matters whether we set high expectations for schools and teachers or accept mediocrity and whether we impose consequences for failure or excuse it. That Republicans are fond of making these points — and unions and school officials are not fond of hearing them — does not make them less true.

Progressives are misled by the logic of their own Bush-hatred: Bush is for NCLB, so NCLB must be bad. Never mind that President Clinton embraced accountability before President Bush, Governor Ann Richards before Governor Bush. As the demands of NCLB mount, and as resistance to those demands spreads into conservative strongholds like Texas and Utah, many progressives are joining the fun. But opportunistic attacks are not an affirmative agenda.

At a time when Americans seek strength in their leaders, Democrats should find the strength to speak hard truths about our schools and support essential changes. At a time when Americans are unsure what Democrats stand for, Democrats should give some resounding answers: The achievement gap is a national disgrace, and equal opportunity is a national command. Democrats will require greater support for schools, and greater demands on them, than ever before. They will use federal power to pursue equal justice — even at the expense of states' rights, even in the face of their own constituencies. Democrats will put children first.

The first task is to stop the unprincipled attacks on NCLB. At its heart, this is the sort of law liberals once dreamed about. In the 1970s, liberal litigators fell one vote short of a Supreme Court decision requiring evenhanded education funding. NCLB doesn't guarantee funding, but it goes one step further by demanding educational results. It says that, when states accept federal funding, they must ensure that all children (except the most disabled) meet "challenging academic standards." This has made achievement a legal command, not just a gauzy aspiration. The law requires a form of affirmative action: States must show that minority and poor students are achieving proficiency like everyone else, or else provide remedies targeted to the schools those students attend. The law's unyielding demands have created a powerful tool to raise both expectations and money.

Studies of high-poverty, high-achieving schools (by Kentucky's Prichard Committee, the University of Texas, Ohio's Board of Education, and others) consistently show that high expectations are critical to good results. The Hoover Institution's Eric Hanushek has shown that states that had adopted accountability laws with consequences for failure before NCLB existed have seen greater increases in

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achievement than states that didn't. NCLB's requirement to disaggregate data based on race and income has cast a harsh but necessary light on the achievement gap. Recent surveys by two respected think tanks, the Center on Education Policy and the Education Trust, suggest scores are rising and gaps are slowly narrowing.

In President Bush's first term, Education Department officials fueled anger at NCLB through indifference and incompetence. They found the money to pay off Armstrong Williams, but not to pay for high-quality tests that accurately measure achievement. They drew a rebuke from the Government Accountability Office for failing to give states key guidance. They conflated reasonable concerns about inflexible regulations with unreasonable efforts to evade the law's core demands. The new education secretary, Margaret Spellings, has struck a better balance, but she is digging out of a hole. Bush continues to prioritize plutocratic tax cuts over an education bill that costs a fraction as much.

The law itself is too stringent in some ways and too lax in others. Schools may be labeled as "needing improvement" because of statistical anomalies. So many schools are subject to mandated remedies that state bureaucracies are being overwhelmed. Because NCLB requires 100 percent of students to demonstrate "proficiency" by 2014, but allows states to define proficiency as they please, states can create the illusion of progress by lowering their standards. Some states, like Texas, have done just that.

Instead of working to address these failures, too many progressives have focused on pleasing angry activists. The Democratic primaries brought tremendous pressure on candidates — partly because of unions' influence and partly because of a primary schedule frontloaded with states lacking any appetite for reform. When *Education Week* ranked all state accountability systems, New Hampshire and Iowa took the last two spots. Appealing to rural and suburban audiences contented with their schools, Howard Dean won cheers as he derided the "No School Board Left Standing" Act.

Resistance to federal power is now a progressive rallying cry in education. Democrats at the National Conference of State Legislatures recently helped draft a bipartisan report charging that NCLB infringes upon states' Tenth Amendment rights. Most Utah Democrats supported a new state law jeopardizing \$76 million in aid to poor students on the grounds that the state's own assessment system should have priority over NCLB. But that state system does not even exist today; the real question, as the law's lead sponsor asked, was, "At what price is our sovereignty for sale?" The National Education Association (NEA) is now suing the government for forcing states to spend more money on education. Connecticut's Democratic attorney general, Richard Blumenthal, has praised the suit and threatened to bring one of his own.

When Democrats become champions of states' rights in schools, it is no wonder voters think the party has no principles. The federal government has served progressive educational ends for decades: demanding desegregation for African American children, offering Head Start for poor pre-schoolers, providing Title I funding to disadvantaged school-aged students, and requiring individualized treatment for children with disabilities. Before NCLB, most states didn't even track the performance of poor students. Thanks to NCLB, many schools are now offering those students help they desperately need. If the NEA's suit prevails in court, it won't even yield more money; it will just yield precedents limiting federal power and enable states to ignore the law's demands. One of the NEA's plaintiffs told *The New York Times* that NCLB had forced her district to offer longer school days and Saturday classes for low-achieving students. Progressives should celebrate that fact, not complain about it.

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Schools that fall short under NCLB may indeed be required to offer tutoring after school, or to help students transfer to other public schools, or to reopen as charter schools. These steps may look punitive to many adults inside the schools. For children who aren't learning, however, these measures offer hope for a better education.

Other proposals from the left would dash inner city hopes to placate suburban anxieties. Many parents at better schools now worry that rote "teaching to the test" has crowded out better teaching. Much of that problem could be addressed by spending more on complex assessments worth teaching to. That would preserve the accountability so critical in the worst schools, which, at least now, are teaching to something. Yet many progressives, including state legislators and Connecticut Senator Chris Dodd, would allow student performance to be counterbalanced by academic indicators of states' choosing. In some iterations, these measures could include parental satisfaction or student attendance. This regime would replace the clear demand for student achievement with a malleable nonstandard. It would be fine for most students in Greenwich, but a step backward for Bridgeport and New Haven.

Progressives seeking to gut NCLB should explain when, if their effort succeeds, the federal government will again commit to ensuring that every poor African American child can read. Progressives should be working to fix NCLB in a way that honors their values. It is right to seek the \$12 billion needed for full funding of NCLB but wrong to disable the law until that staggering sum arrives. It is right to distinguish truly lousy schools from those on the margin but wrong to leave the distinction to state bureaucracies.

Rather than siding with foot-dragging states, progressives should support more vigorous use of federal power in the service of equal citizenship for all. National standards and national tests in reading and math would advance that ideal. There is no reason that 50 states should have 50 different definitions of proficiency; the reading and math skills required to flourish economically and participate politically across the United States are increasingly the same. In states across the South and West that now spend little on schools and mask weak results by applying low standards, national norms would become a lever to increase both achievement and funding. Generous funding could ensure a high-quality test that adequately measures complex knowledge and skills. (An existing test, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, does a good job but is not widely used.) With a huge data set, educators could better measure achievement. Parents would get a better picture of their children's progress compared with others.

National standards and a national test aren't radical ideas. Clinton proposed them on a voluntary basis; a few conservatives like the Fordham Foundation's Chester Finn have supported them. The right has kept standards entirely at the state level with talk of a "national school board," but Americans are loyal to their children's schools, not state bureaucracies. Polls have shown that two-thirds of Americans would support a national test. Progressives should welcome a debate over whether American citizenship should mean the same thing everywhere or if states should protect their prerogatives. Let Bush defend states' rights for a change.

The tougher challenge for progressives is not to fix NCLB, but to stop talking about it all the time — and instead offer an education vision of their own. Bush isn't vulnerable for supporting standards; he is vulnerable for believing standards are enough. Tests measure progress but don't teach children.

Progressives should tackle a challenge all but ignored by Bush: strengthening the quality of teachers. As the Education Trust notes, good teachers are the single most important factor in good schools — affecting

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student achievement more than race, poverty, or parental education. Three years of good teachers can lift students' scores by 50 percentile points compared with three years of lousy teachers, according to researcher William Sanders. Education majors score below national averages on standardized tests. Most schools do little to draw or keep more talented teachers. Schools offer \$80,000 salaries to middle-aged and mediocre gym teachers while losing bright young chemistry teachers who make only \$40,000. Today, a middling performer can get a routine grant of tenure after three years, then become virtually impossible to remove for three decades. One North Carolina study showed that school superintendents would have liked to remove about one in 25 tenured teachers per year but actually removed fewer than one in 600. Teacher quality is lowest in the poorest schools, where good teachers are needed most. Students at high-poverty schools are nearly twice as likely to be taught by teachers who lack even a minor in the relevant subject.

Strengthening teaching requires changes to the pay system and school culture that abet mediocrity. Standing alone, the usual liberal solution — across-the-board pay hikes — perpetuates the maldistribution of good teachers and reinforces the irrelevance of achievement. High-poverty schools need to attract more teachers with bonuses, and all schools need to attract better teachers with the promise of higher earnings for better results. Teachers reasonably worry about arbitrary merit bonuses, but performance pay need not be arbitrary. Sanders and others are developing methods to measure each teacher's contribution, accounting for students' starting points and their expected progress. Together with peer and principal reviews, these methods promise at least as rich a basis for evaluation as those available in other professions where performance pay is the norm.

While schools need better pay to attract good teachers, they also need better systems to remove bad ones. Today dismissal can take years, cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, and require proof of outrageous conduct. Faculty deserve protection against dismissals based on politics or personal animus, but schools should extend the periods needed to get tenure and streamline procedures so dismissals are fair but fast. Finally, talented young people seeking to enter teaching should not be required to get education degrees with no proven link to classroom performance.

When Chattanooga's lowest-performing schools offered teachers \$5,000 bonuses, free graduate school tuition, and mortgage assistance, vacancies dropped by 90 percent. The Milken Family Foundation's Teacher Advancement Program offers bonuses up to \$5,000 based on a combination of evaluations and test scores. Most schools in the program are outperforming similar schools outside it. According to a recent evaluation, Teach for America's talented novices, lacking traditional training, outperform typical teachers in math instruction and equal them in reading.

A sound national plan would put big money on the table for school districts that adopt real reforms in pay, tenure, and licensing for teachers. Schools should be encouraged to try different — and ambitious — approaches. With federal help, a city might offer a promising new math teacher in a poor school district \$60,000 instead of \$40,000; after excelling in the classroom for two years, that teacher might earn \$80,000. Raises averaging \$20,000 for one third of the teachers at 10 percent of schools would cost \$2 billion annually in a system spending over \$400 billion but could show the way to transform teaching.

Progressive leaders should couple these reforms with a sustained call for Americans to teach in troubled schools. Twelve percent of Yale seniors applied to Teach for America this year. How many more talented Americans, young and old, would teach if their country called?



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Most of these ideas have long been championed by the Progressive Policy Institute and, more recently, by the bipartisan Teaching Commission. But, while such proposals thrive in think tank hothouses, they wither in the heat of Democratic politics. Al Gore and John Kerry both offered agendas along these lines for teacher quality. But after giving speeches and garnering media accolades, both candidates barely mentioned their ideas again. Nor have congressional Democrats stepped up to promote them.

One reason is ideology. Progressives remain uncomfortable with market pressures in education. They prefer to talk about teachers as saints who never worry about money. Most teachers are great people, and many perform heroically in impossible circumstances. But it is no insult to say that teachers are also human beings who vary in talent, who respond to incentives, and who need to be accountable like other professionals. At a time when capitalism has enhanced productivity around the world, there is something sad about liberals stopping performance pressure from improving the public institutions they hold dear.

Political opposition from teachers' unions is a different problem. Although the American Federation of Teachers has historically been open to performance pay, the much larger NEA (with the exception of one affiliate in Denver) opposes it. Both unions oppose serious tenure reform.

But the unions do not control the agenda. After four years of inaction on teacher quality, Bush has a performance-pay pilot — though one funded far less generously than Kerry had proposed. Republican governors like Minnesota's Tim Pawlenty and California's Arnold Schwarzenegger are pushing performance pay, and Schwarzenegger is putting tenure reform on California's ballot. Polls show broad public support for teaching reforms; performance pay, for example, is favored even by a majority of Democrats. A smart Republican presidential candidate will probably press teacher reform in 2008, as Senator John McCain considered doing in 2000.

Progressives can let conservatives use teacher quality as a political bludgeon, or they can make the teacher agenda their own and attack the Bush administration's timidity. There is no question that the bolder course will cause some immediate political pain, but progressives must return to their roots as reformers if they are to recapture their leadership on an issue at the heart of their identity.

Many progressives are viscerally uncomfortable disagreeing with unions while the president is assailing already decimated rights to organize and bargain. But there has to be a distinction between supporting the rights of unions and supporting their every demand. And labor has a stake here, too. Support for reform feeds support for resources. The number of Americans who identify lack of funding as the biggest problem facing schools has risen since 2001, before NCLB passed. As Center for American Progress Fellow Ruy Teixeira puts it, "Democrats will never build big majorities for more spending on education, or any other social program, unless they convince more voters they'll spend the money well."

Advancing national accountability and improving teacher quality should be only parts of a progressive education agenda. The achievement gap opens before children even reach elementary school, yet U.S. support for pre-school lags well behind other nations. So progressives should press for big expansions in high-quality early education. Parents want some choice and diversity among schools. So progressives should renew their support for public school choice and charter schools. There is probably much else besides.

But there should be a common thread to the progressive agenda. It's about thinking big again. It's about offering resources and reform. And it's about believing in public schools enough to challenge them. If

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being a progressive means anything, it should mean believing that public institutions like schools can take the hard steps necessary to improve themselves and improve our society. It is honorable to defend a Social Security status quo that works, but it is something else to defend an education status quo that does not. When progressives get their policies back in line with their commitments, they will serve American children, and themselves.

RICHARD ROTHSTEIN (DECEMBER 2005):

## *No Child Left Behind: Why It Does More Harm Than Good*

### *Part I: Regarding Robert Gordon's Defense of NCLB*

Robert Gordon proposes to “fix” No Child Left Behind (NCLB), but its flaws are so central to its design that the law is unfixable. Mr. Gordon himself puts forth a few proposals for a fix — calls for national standards and tests and for improved teacher quality by rewarding those who are more effective and who locate in disadvantaged communities. Yet even if such ideas could be implemented (more on these later), they would be insufficient to fulfill the egalitarian intent of NCLB.

Mr. Gordon is correct that more money for schools is not the cure (or at least, not the most important one) for the achievement gap. He is also correct that many of those who now attack NCLB claim a commitment to social and economic equality, yet he concludes that their opposition to NCLB belies their sincerity.

But Americans with such a commitment have historically insisted that equal opportunity requires a full menu of social, economic, and educational reforms: in employment policy, health care, housing, and civil rights enforcement, as well as in schools. NCLB has a very different theory: that improvement in schools alone can enable all children to reach high levels of proficiency, with social and economic disadvantage having no bearing on their chances of doing so. According to NCLB, by 2014, all children, regardless of racial, ethnic, or economic group, will be prepared to graduate from high school with college-ready academic skills. They would then, presumably, also be prepared to compete on a level playing field for society's most remunerative occupations, and it would become impossible to predict the adult socio-economic status of any graduate from that of his or her parents; in other words, we would achieve the classless society of meritocratic and socialist dreams, produced by school reform alone.

This is an absurd goal, and one whose accomplishment cannot possibly be met. We are used to hearing about how other industrialized nations have higher average test scores than Americans, but reports rarely note that within these other nations, social background predicts differences in academic achievement as strongly as it does here, and in many places, more strongly. To say that social and economic inequality in our and in other industrialized societies has roots that are more complex than inadequate schooling is not to say that our schools cannot and should not be improved, or that narrowing the academic achievement gap, to the extent feasible, should not be an important goal of public education. But the difference between such a realistic aspiration and NCLB's demand for equally high proficiency from all children of all social classes, is enormous — so enormous that no “fix” of the law is conceivable.

If we insist upon having a law that holds schools accountable for meeting firm learning goals for children, we could, I suppose, set different goals for children of different backgrounds, but this is something that, as a nation, we are not prepared (and should not be prepared) to do. But the only alternative is to have a

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\* Source: *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap* by Richard Rothstein.

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national conversation to develop realistic expectations for the contribution of schools to equality, relative to that of other social and economic institutions. Such a conversation has not yet begun. It will certainly not be concluded by next year, when NCLB must either be repealed or re-authorized.

Some supporters of NCLB acknowledge that, while schools can be improved, they cannot alone eliminate the achievement gap without complementary social and economic reforms that support children's readiness to learn. But these NCLB supporters say that holding schools to an impossible standard does no harm. They acknowledge that schools may not close the achievement gap on their own, but they say that requiring them to do so will elicit greater effort and more dedication from teachers and other school leaders. This may be the case, and there are certainly many examples of schools in the NCLB era that have redoubled their efforts and improved, in some cases dramatically, the instruction of minority and low-income children. Many teachers have, indeed, raised their expectations for such students.

But while these results are praiseworthy, they mask an impending disaster. What happens when, despite their improved efforts, schools still fall short of the NCLB goal? They will, of course, be labeled as failures. Already we see, in state after state, NCLB-driven accountability systems that make no distinction between higher and lower performing schools — all are deemed in need of improvement. A demand that schools do the impossible not only inspires some educators to do better; it also lays the foundation for a verdict that our public schools cannot succeed, a verdict that some supporters of NCLB are all too happy to reach.

The inevitable result must be cynicism on the part of educators who know, but are afraid to say publicly, that they cannot, even with Herculean classroom efforts, truly raise the average achievement of disadvantaged children to typical middle-class levels. Educators know, but are intimidated from stating, that the mix must include social and economic reform that enables children to come to school more ready to learn at high standards.

As public schools fall short of this assigned and embraced mission of being solely responsible for generating equality, their credibility will wither and, along with it, public support for continued improvement.

Like Mr. Gordon, other critics have suggested “fixes” for NCLB. Some say that these problems, inherent in an unreachable race- and class-neutral goal, can be averted if we judge school quality from measurements of achievement growth, rather than levels. “Value-added” approaches track the differences in achievement levels for a single student cohort as it progresses from grade to grade, rather than comparing different cohorts at the same grade level in successive years. Certainly, value-added accountability can be an improvement over current systems, but it does not solve the fundamental NCLB problem of a flawed ultimate goal. As Mr. Gordon alludes, Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings has granted some states the flexibility to use value-added approaches, but these states still must reach the impossible goal of 100 percent proficiency, based on high academic standards, for each sub-group by 2014.

Nor will extending the deadline to a later year solve this problem. Social class differences affect growth trajectories as well as achievement levels. Nobody, not even the most sophisticated psychometricians, knows whether lower-achieving disadvantaged students should be expected to demonstrate faster growth than middle-class students (because the disadvantaged have more room for growth), or slower growth than middle-class students (because socioeconomic disadvantages impede the pace of learning as well as its levels).

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Consider, for example, these federal survey data: 42 percent of black fourth graders watch six hours or more of television a day, compared to 13 percent of whites. This inequity should be addressed by providing high quality after-school care for children of working parents. Until we fund such high quality care, can we really expect children who watch television while their parents are at work to progress in school at the same rate as children who are taken to libraries and museums or are given sophisticated homework help in the after-school hours? No matter how high the quality of K-12 teachers, no matter how high are their expectations, no matter how good are schools' curricular standards, children with such different out-of-school experiences will, on average, respond to instruction in different ways. Until we understand such ways, it would be irresponsible to try to "fix" NCLB by substituting value-added for score-level accountability, even if it were possible to specify the end points toward which different subgroups of students are adding value.

Contemporary accountability systems, NCLB in particular, are not only making impossible demands that undermine public support for schools. They are also exacerbating inequity by forcing schools to deny disadvantaged students the well-rounded curriculum that middle class parents take for granted. Throughout American history, we've established goals for public education that go far beyond proficiency in reading and math. Historically, creating citizens with democratic inclinations and habits has been the most important school goal. Other goals reflected in our historic consensus include teaching children morality, social skills, a work ethic, appreciation of the arts, and habits of physical fitness and good health. NCLB notwithstanding, these are still widely accepted school goals today, as confirmed by public opinion polls as well as the demands of business leaders, who fault schools not primarily for failure to turn out graduates with sufficient cognitive skills, but for failure to turn out graduates with the non-cognitive traits that contribute to workplace flexibility, creativity, and efficiency.

Organizational theorists understand that if we hold a complex system accountable only for achieving one or a few of its many goals, it will achieve the goals in its accountability targets by sacrificing the others. That is indeed what is happening in our schools serving disadvantaged children today. This does not reflect a failure to properly implement NCLB. On the contrary, successful implementation requires more attention to math and reading, with time found by paying less attention elsewhere.

To evaluate the impact of NCLB, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) recently surveyed a representative national sample of school districts. CEP found that as many as half had reduced instructional time in other subjects to make more time for math and reading; about 50 percent had reduced social studies, 43 percent had reduced art and music, and 27 percent reduced physical education.

These reductions disproportionately affect disadvantaged children. In a 2003 survey of school principals in Illinois, Maryland, New Mexico, and New York, the Council for Basic Education (CBE) found that 47 percent of principals in high-minority schools (those where more than half the enrollment was non-white) had decreased the time devoted to social studies in order to devote more time to preparation for math and reading tests. In low-minority schools, as many principals increased social studies time as decreased it.

CBE found these trends to be particularly severe in Maryland, a state which has had better-than-average success in increasing math and reading scores but where there was "especially pronounced curricular erosion in areas for which neither the state nor the federal government currently holds schools accountable...."

In all four states, CBE also found that 36 percent of principals in high-minority schools have decreased

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instructional time in the arts, while 21 percent of principals in low-minority schools have done so. In high-minority schools, many more principals reported decreased foreign language instruction than in low-minority schools.

NCLB's role in distorting the curriculum is not unexpected by those who promote the law. Indeed, they are proud of it. Responding to a report by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation last December showing how NCLB's focus on math and reading has led schools to reduce the time devoted to science instruction, Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings boasted to *The New York Times*, "I'm a what-gets-measured-gets-done kind of gal," claiming that the solution to the problem was to test science as well. Yet although science tests are to be added to NCLB in 2007, schools will not be held accountable for the results. And even in the unlikely event that informational-only tests create incentives to redirect teaching time back to science from math and reading, the Spellings approach offers no correction for the many other skills and behavioral traits that are being dropped from the curriculum by schools held accountable only for math and reading.

Robert Gordon considers that some of these problems could be solved by "spending more on complex assessments worth teaching to." This sounds reasonable, but such "complex assessments" don't exist, nobody knows how to develop them in a standardized format and, in any event, we cannot expect meaningful progress towards developing them in the brief time remaining before NCLB must be repealed or re-authorized. For reading and math, Mr. Gordon praises the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for measuring complex knowledge and skills, and he is right to do so. But he fails to mention that NAEP is a matrix-sampled test, in which test-takers are given questions covering only part of the curricular domain, and average scores are computed by assembling the partial tests of many students. NAEP operates in this fashion because it would take too much student time to test a single student on the full range of topics implied by the phrase "complex knowledge and skills." And that is only reading and math. Schools are already suffering under the burden of too much testing, and adding additional tests for accountability purposes is more than most schools, teachers, parents, or students can bear.

Many of the goals we want schools to pursue (like teaching children to work in teams, or develop good work habits, or develop a sense of civic responsibility and a strong moral code, or appreciate the arts) do not lend themselves to assessments with simple numbers for politicians to consume. This does not mean that experts cannot tell whether schools are or are not doing good jobs in these areas. Evaluating schools on the broad range of school goals requires expert observation of student and teacher performance that can only partly be standardized. Evaluating whether students can work in teams or have developed good conflict resolution skills is not susceptible to NCLB-style accountability. Efforts to achieve these broad goals of public education will continue to be subverted, especially for minority and low-income children, so long as NCLB or anything like it remains on the books. Considering the broad range of public education's purposes, NCLB leaves more, not fewer, children behind.

There are additional technical problems with NCLB, also not fixable. For example, just as schools are dropping other important curricular areas in a short-term effort to boost math and reading scores, they have also learned to focus instruction only on those children whose achievement is just below the proficiency point. There is no incentive in the NCLB accountability system to teach children who are at, or above, proficiency, and there is no incentive, in the short term, to teach children who are far below it. Schools have learned to game the system to produce big boosts in test scores (reported as "percent proficient") while making insignificant gains in average achievement. Having a single national standard of proficiency, as Mr. Gordon suggests, will not solve this problem, which is inherent in any accountability

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system based on passing pre-determined cut points. Perhaps there is a fix for this problem, but Robert Gordon has not offered it. Until someone does so, it is unworthy for him to accuse NCLB's opponents of only wanting to "please angry activists" or side with "foot-dragging states."

Some NCLB supporters support a claim that all students can achieve high levels of proficiency by pointing to exemplary schools that have allegedly closed the achievement gap. Upon examination, however, the claims don't hold up. The schools may be very good schools, they may have succeeded in narrowing the gap more than other schools have done, but they have not closed the achievement gap in any meaningful sense.

Often, such schools can be said to close the gap by accepting a very low level of achievement as "proficient" — if a state's standards are low enough, certainly any student can pass. As Robert Gordon notes, NCLB creates incentives for states to lower their definitions of proficiency. As this process continues, more schools will certainly be able to boast of "closing the gap." In other cases, "gap closers" are schools of choice which benefit from the positive selection of more talented students or more ambitious parents. And in other cases, these schools' top achievement is a statistical fluke — high scores are posted in only a single subject, in only one grade, or in only a single year.

One reform in which Robert Gordon places great hope is paying higher salaries to more effective teachers. This is an unexceptionable ideal but, as with student testing, the devil is in the details. Nobody has yet solved the seemingly intractable problems of measuring teacher performance accurately, problems which parallel those of measuring students. How do we hold teachers accountable only for their own effectiveness, and not for the abilities which students inherited from teachers in prior grades, or for the advantages which they bring from home? How do we ensure that pay-for-results does not create even greater incentives for teachers to emphasize teaching the easily testable skills and downgrading equally important skills and traits which are not tested? For all the enthusiasm these days for paying teachers for results, it is noteworthy that private and charter schools, unconstrained by union contracts, have not typically adopted such schemes.

Nor are "merit pay" plans such as Mr. Gordon advocates utilized for professionals in other private industries. Although performance bonuses are widespread, they are typically based more on subjective evaluations than on quantifiable outcomes. There are some exceptions — salespersons paid on commission, for example. Do we really want teachers to manipulate students in the way that commissioned salespersons manipulate their customers? In retail sales, we are protected by the warning, "caveat emptor!" Who will protect children from teachers who narrow their curricula to earn bigger bonuses? There are certainly smart things to be done to improve the supervision of teachers, to reward those who are exceptional and remove those who are inadequate. Mr. Gordon is right to promote such experiments, but their implementation is not dependent on the continuation of NCLB and, indeed, the law's repeal will make solving these implementation problems less daunting.

Enhancing equality and raising the achievement of disadvantaged students are goals we should all endorse. But some of the most disastrous schemes of social engineering have, throughout history, emerged from the best of intentions. Instead of a law demanding utopia by 2014, we would be better served by adopting small incremental steps that have a chance of getting us closer to the goal we all seek. And to be effective, those steps should be balanced between all of the social, economic, and educational institutions of American society, each of which plays a role in perpetuating inequality.



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*Part II: Why Social and Economic Reform Should Complement  
School Improvement to Make Significant Progress  
in Narrowing the Achievement Gap\**

Many well-meaning people find it hard to understand why schools cannot, on their own, close the achievement gap. To many of us, it makes no common sense that it could be otherwise. How much money a family has should not influence how well that child learns to read. If teachers know how to teach and schools permit no distractions, children should be able to learn, whatever their income or wealth and whatever challenges they face.

This common sense perspective, however, is misleading. For while it is true that low income, racial isolation, and disadvantage don't directly cause low achievement, the collection of characteristics that define social class differences inevitably influences learning. There is no iron determinism implied here; the achievement gap is a difference in the average achievement of children from different social classes. There are always some children from more disadvantaged groups who achieve at higher levels than typical advantaged children and some middle-class children whose achievement is below that of typical lower-class children. But these characteristics of overlapping normal distributions don't invalidate the real relationship between social class and achievement.

We recognize this in many other areas of human behavior, yet often forget it when we talk of schools. Some people who smoke don't get lung cancer, and some non-smokers get it, but we don't conclude from this that smoking doesn't cause cancer. Yet when we see low-income children with high achievement, we are quick to conclude that this somehow "proves" that income and achievement have no causal relationship and if only schools did better, all low-income children would succeed.

Why is social class such an accurate predictor of average differences in achievement? For one thing, parents of different classes often have different child-rearing habits, different disciplinary philosophies, and different ways of communicating expectations. These differences do not express themselves consistently or in the case of every family; rather, they influence the average tendencies of families from different classes.

Social class patterns in child rearing make sense when you think about them: if upper-middle-class parents have jobs where they collaborate with fellow employees to solve problems, they are more likely to show their children how to figure out answers for themselves — a habit children are likely to continue in school. Lower-class parents whose own jobs simply require them to follow routines are more likely to give direct instruction to children. No matter how competent their teachers, lower-class children from homes where parents are not themselves trained to question authority will, on average, be less active learners.

Some 15 years ago, two University of Kansas researchers visited homes of families from different social classes to record the language used. On average, they found that middle-class professional parents spoke over 2,000 words per hour in the presence of toddlers, working-class parents spoke about 1,300, and welfare mothers spoke about 600. At four years of age, children of professionals had vocabularies that were nearly 50 percent greater than those of working-class children and twice as large as those of welfare children.



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These researchers also tracked how often parents verbally encouraged or reprimanded children's behavior. Toddlers of professionals got about six encouragements per reprimand. Working-class children had two. For welfare children, the ratio was reversed, one encouragement for two prohibitions. When children whose initiative was not encouraged at an early age later go to school, their teachers cannot fully compensate, no matter how well-qualified those teachers may be.

Many other concrete social and economic manifestations of social class also have implications for learning. Health differences are among them. For example, poor children have severe vision impairment at twice the normal rate, making it difficult to read or see what teachers write on the board. When trying to read, children's eyes may wander or have difficulty tracking print or focusing.

Lower-class children may be more likely to have vision problems because of less adequate prenatal development from poor medical care and nutrition. Vision deficits may also arise because, as noted earlier, poor children are more likely to watch too much television, an activity that does not train the eye to develop hand-eye coordination and depth perception. Middle-class children are also more likely to have manipulative toys that develop visual skills.

Even when vision screening leads to optometric referrals, low-income children are less likely to follow up. When they get prescriptions for lenses, they less frequently obtain them or wear them to school. For some parents, even subsidized costs seem like an unnecessary expense because children seem to function normally in daily life; vision deficiencies only show up in the reading of print.

Children without dental care are more likely to have untreated cavities, nearly three times as prevalent among poor as among middle-class children. Although not every dental cavity leads to a toothache, some do. Children with toothaches, even minor ones, pay less attention in class, on average, than children with healthy teeth. The same is true of earaches — middle-class children are more likely to get prompt treatment than low-income children. Other common childhood diseases also disproportionately affect low-income children, more of whom, regulations notwithstanding, come to school without normal immunizations.

Children without regular medical care are also more likely to contract other illnesses, some serious, others minor, that keep them out of school. Despite federal programs to make health insurance available to low-income children, there remain gaps in access and utilization, largely because the physician-to-population ratio is much lower in poor than in middle-class communities. The result is that low-income children are more likely to be absent from school because of illness than middle-class children. No matter how highly qualified a teacher may be, she won't have as much impact on children who are absent as on those whose attendance is regular.

Children who live in older buildings have more lead dust exposure that harms cognitive functioning and behavior. Low-income children have dangerously high blood lead levels, at five times the rate of middle-class children. Although lead-based paint was banned from residential construction in 1978, low-income children more likely live in buildings constructed prior to that date.

Asthma afflicts lower-class children more frequently, particularly those who live in densely populated cities, where high-sulfur heating oil is sometimes (unlawfully) used by landlords and where diesel trucks and buses

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pass frequently. Asthma keeps children awake at night; if they make it to school the next day, they are likely to be drowsy and inattentive. Because low-income children are less likely to get symptomatic treatment, those with asthma are about 80 percent more likely than middle class children with asthma to miss more than seven days of school a year from the disease.

The growing unaffordability of adequate housing also affects achievement. Urban rents have risen faster than working class incomes; low-income families are more likely to move when they fall behind in rent payments. In some urban schools, this boosts mobility rates to over 100 percent. Lack of affordable housing is not the sole cause — bouts of unemployment and family breakups are among the others — but is almost certainly important.

A 1994 government report found that 30 percent of the poorest children had attended at least three different schools by third grade, while only 10 percent of middle class children had done so. High mobility depresses achievement not only for children who move — each move means readjusting to teachers, classmates, and curriculum — but for stable children in schools whose classes are reconstituted. Teachers with mobile students are less able to adjust instruction to the individual needs of unfamiliar students. Econometric analysis suggests that nearly 15 percent of the black-white test score gap is attributable to differences in mobility rates alone.

Differences in long-term economic security are also likely to be important predictors of student achievement, but are usually overlooked because most analysts focus only on annual income to indicate disadvantage. Yet black families with low-income in any year are likely to have been poor for longer than white families with similar low-income in that year. This makes the lower achievement of poor black children more understandable than poor white children.

Middle-class whites are more likely to own assets that support children's achievement. Median black family income is now about 64 percent of median white family income, but black family net worth is only 12 percent of white family net worth. So, white families are more likely than blacks to have adequate and spacious housing (with quiet space to do homework), even when their annual incomes are similarly middle-class.

Asset differences also influence family savings for college education. Considering only liquid assets (not home ownership), median black net worth is only three percent of whites'. Awareness that parents have college savings can support children's assumptions that college attendance is within their grasp and thus bolster the dedication with which they study in high school. This adds another bit to the achievement gap.

Much of the difference between the average performance of blacks and whites can probably be traced to these many differences in their social class characteristics. And there are also cultural characteristics that likely contribute a bit to the achievement gap. These may have identifiable origins in social and economic conditions. For example, black students may value education less than white students because a discriminatory labor market has not historically rewarded black workers for their education. Black male high school graduates still earn less than white graduates with similar test scores; because the payoff to educational effort is less, black high school students may invest less effort in their studies.

School inequalities also contribute to the gap. Schools that low-income and minority children attend are inadequately funded, teachers are less experienced, fewer honors and advanced placement courses are

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offered, and expectations for student success are lower. Correcting these problems should be a priority but will not alone close the achievement gap.

Many improvements to which Robert Gordon refers or alludes can make a difference — better teacher quality and a restructured teacher pay system, improved curriculum, more complex assessments, as well as more adequate funding that could support, for example, smaller classes for disadvantaged children in the early grades.

School reform, however, is not enough. While many social class characteristics are impervious to short-term change, many can be easily affected by policy. For example, establishing optometric clinics in schools to improve low-income children's vision could have a bigger impact on their test scores than spending the same money on instructional improvement. A full array of health services, however, can't likely be avoided if there is a true intent to raise the achievement of lower-class children.

Increasing the access of lower-class families to stable housing can also have big educational impact, as can aggressive action against labor-market discrimination and the narrowing of income inequalities to reduce the emotional stress experienced by low-income families supported by irregular employment.

Investments should also be made to expand the definition of schooling to cover crucial out-of-school hours. Because the gap is already huge at three years of age, we should probably begin with early childhood programs for infants and toddlers, led by adults who can provide the kind of intellectual environment that is typically experienced by middle-class children. This goal requires professional caregivers and low child-adult ratios.

Providing after-school and summer experiences to lower-class children that are similar to those middle-class children take for granted would also likely be an essential part of narrowing the achievement gap. Certainly, remedial instruction should be part of adequate after-school and summer programs but only a part. The advantage that middle-class children gain after school and in the summer likely comes mostly from the self-confidence they acquire and the awareness they develop of the world outside, from organized athletics, dance, drama, museum visits, recreational reading, and other activities that develop their inquisitiveness, creativity, self-discipline, and organizational skills. After-school and summer programs can narrow the achievement gap by duplicating such enriched experiences.

For nearly half a century, the association of social and economic disadvantage with academic achievement gaps has been well known to economists, sociologists, and educators. In the contemporary climate, however, we avoid the obvious implication of this understanding — raising the achievement of lower-class children requires amelioration of the social and economic conditions of their lives, not just school reform. To resist holding schools solely accountable for the achievement gap is not, as Robert Gordon asserts, “opportunistic” or “unprincipled.” Rather, it attempts to reclaim a true commitment to equality which requires a balanced effort at social, economic, and school reform.



ROBERT GORDON (MAY 22, 2006):

I respect Richard Rothstein’s intellect, his commitment to children, and his research showing the importance of social and economic factors to educational achievement. I also agree with many of his prescriptions. America should do far more to ensure that children come to school ready to learn, from pre-school to after-school to health care. Most progressives support this agenda, and the Center for American Progress promotes it.

The question that divides Mr. Rothstein and me is what America should ask of schools until these reforms happen. For a long time, the nation took Mr. Rothstein’s advice and rejected “firm learning goals for children.” We asked schools to achieve little for poor and minority children — and schools expected these children to achieve little for themselves. So when the schools did badly, politicians said, “We understand.” And when the kids did badly, schools said, “We understand.”

But the evidence showed that some schools and states did substantially improve achievement for poor and minority children. And a common element in many of the greatest successes was a fierce belief in the power of education and the capacities of kids. “No excuses” and “whatever it takes” are slogans, but they are powerful slogans. The No Child Left Behind Act reflects an understanding of the impact of high expectations, within a framework of standards, measurement, and accountability.<sup>1</sup>

According to Mr. Rothstein, it is “absurd” for NCLB to ask virtually every child to achieve proficiency by 2014. He is right that Congress may well have to push the 2014 deadline back. But this is what happens with laws. They are written, then they go into effect, then they are changed based on experience. Although Mr. Rothstein says that “no ‘fix’ of the law is conceivable,” a bipartisan commission, responsible members of Congress, and many policy experts are already hard at work on sensible proposals for improvement.

Mr. Rothstein suggests it is impractical to ask every child to read and do math tolerably well (“proficiency” is not an exacting standard in most states today) by any date, absent myriad reforms outside the school. In my view, no human being can know what children could achieve in the distant future if we remain committed to improving our schools. What we do know is that children will achieve far less if we stop setting real expectations for the system.

1. For discussions of reforms at the state, district, and school levels, see Citizens’ Commission on Civil Rights, Title I at Midstream: The Fight to Improve Schools for Poor Kids 23-25 (1998); Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, Gaining Ground: Hard Work and High Expectations for Kentucky’s Schools (1999); Charles A. Dana Center, University of Texas, Equity-Driven Achievement-Focused School Districts: A Report on System School Success in Four Texas School Districts Serving Diverse Student Populations 18-36 (2000); Education Trust, Achievement in America (2001); James S. Liebman & Charles F. Sabel, A Public Laboratory Dewey Never Imagined: The Emerging Model of School Governance and Legal Reform, 28 N.Y.U. Rev. L. & Soc. Change 183, 229-266 (2003). For a new study in the same vein, see Morrison Institute for Public Policy & Center for the Future of Arizona, Why Some Schools with Latino Children Beat the Odds... And Others Don’t (2006).

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In any event, the focus on NCLB's targets is misguided. If a doctor tells an obese man to lose 200 pounds and he loses 100, did the doctor fail? You probably could argue that abstract proposition either way. But for most people, the more important question is whether the doctor helped the guy lose weight. The more important question here is not whether deadlines are ideal as a theoretical or academic matter, but whether NCLB is improving student achievement. The verdict is still out on that question, but there have been some promising results.

Acknowledging that NCLB may be doing some good, Mr. Rothstein says any improvements "mask an impending disaster." NCLB means many decent schools will be "labeled as failures," and this will "lay the foundation for a verdict that our public schools cannot succeed." But many schools deemed "in need of improvement" are already clamoring for relief, and the Education Department is now giving it, sometimes unwisely. Meanwhile, federal funding for public education has increased since NCLB's enactment, and public support for funding of public education has increased too. School systems are now working hard to find different ways to improve achievement for the children most in need. These are positive consequences of a law that has made real demands.<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Rothstein also says that NCLB fosters cynicism in public educators who feel they cannot do what an impractical law requires. This is doubtless true for some teachers.<sup>3</sup> But whatever cynicism NCLB now fosters in some adults, abandoning meaningful expectations would foster a more destructive cynicism in both adults and children. Teachers angered at NCLB's overreaching will think less of politicians and policy wonks. School leaders and schoolchildren, told that obstacles matter more than opportunities, will think less of their own capacities.

We are told that NCLB is "exacerbating inequality by forcing schools to deny disadvantaged students the well-rounded curriculum that middle class parents take for granted." The extent of such curriculum narrowing is much disputed, and poor parents do not seem especially exercised. Perhaps that is because poor parents believe that their children, even more than others, need reading and math to be prioritized over pottery and painting.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, negative consequences of NCLB are legitimate concerns. We all should worry, for example, that the law has now created such focus on basic proficiency that higher levels of attainment, especially critical in today's global economy, are getting short shrift. But these concerns can be addressed with more differentiated demands for student achievement, more sophisticated standards, higher quality tests in more subjects, and better curricula that, for example, integrate social studies into reading instruction and vice versa. We should dedicate our energies to sound improvements on these fronts, not blowing up NCLB.

Mr. Rothstein's criticism, like many arguments against reform, seems to me to take this form: Unless your proposal is perfect, it is best to do nothing. But if we throw NCLB out the window, we will not be delivered into a perfect world. Poor children will not suddenly have universal pre-school or health

2. According to the U.S. Department of Education, federal funding for primary and secondary education was \$27.3 billion for fiscal year 2001 and \$37.9 billion for fiscal year 2006. According to the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll of attitudes toward education, the percentage of Americans identifying lack of money as the biggest problem for public schools ranged from nine to 18 percent between 1999 and 2001 and from 20 to 25 percent between 2003 and 2005.

3. But see Abigail Smith, *Equity Within Reach: Insights from the Front Lines of America's Achievement Gap* (2005) (Survey of Teach for America members).

4. See Editorial, *Doubling Up on Literacy Classes*, N.Y. Times, Apr. 2, 2006, at A11, criticizing findings reported in Sam Dillon, *Schools Cut Back Subjects to Fund Reading and Math*, Mar. 26, 2006, at A1.

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care. They will simply have the status quo minus NCLB. With that point of reference, the law is an improvement, and the focus should be how to make the law better.

Mr. Rothstein raises a serious question about politics in suggesting that emphasizing the power of education reduces public pressure for other social and economic reforms. There may be something to this. Parents might better recognize the importance of pre-K and after-school programs if America expected less from K-12, for example. In this spirit, some have argued that progressives should spend less time demanding full funding of NCLB and more time pressing for expansions and improvements in Head Start.

But one can tell a different story. Perhaps the demand for high achievement in NCLB is driving politicians to look more closely at all of the factors standing in the way of progress. The National Institute for Early Education Research reports an “astounding” jump in the percentage of four-year-olds enrolled in state pre-school programs from 2001-02 to 2004-05.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, that expansion is likely to hit a ceiling. But the ceiling is not the nation’s commitment to K-12 education. Pre-school programs and other important social reforms cost a lot of money; raising that money eventually requires raising taxes on the middle class, and middle-class Americans do not want to pay higher taxes. They like their hard-earned money too much, and they trust government too little.

One of the great tasks for progressives is to change those attitudes and build the political momentum for the reforms Mr. Rothstein advocates. But knocking schools and children is not the way to do it.

5. W. Steven Barnett et al., *The State of Preschool 2005*, at 4 (2005).

RICHARD ROTHSTEIN (MAY 26, 2006):

Robert Gordon argues that NCLB, though imperfect, is better than nothing. But I certainly don't suggest we do "nothing" to improve schools' ability to elicit higher achievement from disadvantaged children. I advocate many school improvements with solid research backing (and that Mr. Gordon also supports): high-quality early childhood programs and pre-school expansion; improvements in how teachers are trained, compensated, rewarded, and assigned; redressing the curricular balance between basic and more advanced skills; extending the school day, including after-school enrichment; attending to children's health needs; smaller class sizes for at-risk young children; more emphasis on writing at all grade levels (also requiring higher teacher-pupil ratios); and so on. It is NCLB that does nothing about school improvements that we know are effective, and instead demands that, without any of these programs, schools and teachers be accountable for raising standardized scores of all children, middle class and disadvantaged alike, to impossibly high levels of proficiency.

In no nation, even those with greater social supports than ours, do all children reach such levels, and in no nation have students ever posted growth rates anywhere near as great as those NCLB requires.

Doing NCLB may be worse than nothing because in policy, as in medicine, we should first "do no harm." Good intentions are no political or moral excuse for implementing policies, like NCLB, whose dangers — demonstrably unattainable goals, narrowing and dumbing-down curricula, false positives and false negatives in identifying failing schools — are well-known.

Teachers and schools should be accountable for improvement by those close enough to evaluate quality in non-mechanistic ways: principals, superintendents, school boards; even governors and legislators are better, in this case, than federal officials. Washington cannot successfully use mindless data to standardize every classroom in the country. Progressives should adopt no iron rule that Washington always knows best. Despite the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 60s, the federal government has not always been progressive relative to states. Earlier in the 20th century, the federal government prevented states from enacting minimum wage, child labor, and other protective legislation.

Saying that poor parents want reading and math prioritized over "pottery and painting" trivializes the problem. NCLB supporters often invoke parental preferences when convenient but ignore them otherwise. In his opening essay, Robert Gordon was contemptuous of state bureaucracies that consider parental satisfaction one indicator of school quality rather than standardized scores alone.

While I don't minimize a role for "pottery and painting" in a well-rounded curriculum, more than arts are being squeezed out by test preparation under NCLB. That's why, for example, retired Justice Sandra Day O'Connor now co-chairs the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, which laments that, under NCLB, "as civic learning has been pushed aside, society has neglected a fundamental purpose of



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American education, putting the health of our democracy at risk.”<sup>6</sup> The Campaign wants NCLB to leave “space for civic learning,” but adding another standardized test of memorized civic facts will not do it.

Or consider Robert Schwartz, founding president of Achieve, the joint business-governors group, largely responsible for testing and accountability demands that culminated in NCLB. He now writes: “[T]he goal of equipping all students with a solid foundation of academic knowledge and skills is leading to an undue narrowing of curricular choices and a reduction in the kinds of learning opportunities for academically at-risk students that are most likely to engage and motivate them to take school seriously. This is a painful acknowledgment from someone who considers himself a charter member of the standards movement...”<sup>7</sup>

Because at-risk students are more likely to be subjected to excessive test preparation in math and reading, the achievement gap in other curricular areas will grow.

Mr. Gordon has faith that a bipartisan commission can fix these problems, but he can identify no specific fixes because the problems are unfixable. Postponing the 2014 deadline won’t negate realities that: school reform alone cannot produce a single high proficiency standard for all children of all social classes; trying to substitute growth models is incoherent if a single fixed goal remains (Chester Finn aptly likens such models to “balloon mortgages,” where only growth matters until 2013 when suddenly achievement must make gargantuan leaps); difficult though it is to standardize math and reading achievement, it is even more difficult to balance accountability by standardizing civic motivation, science, physical fitness, arts appreciation, etc. The commission is a “punt,” not a serious effort to address these issues.

We have a precedent. In 2001, when the administration and Congress were designing NCLB, scholars demonstrated that statistical flukes would result in many schools inaccurately rewarded or punished.<sup>8</sup> The analysis was so compelling that the bill was delayed for months while experts tried to solve the problem. They couldn’t. But the bill was introduced anyway, with predicted consequences: schools rewarded one year and punished the next with no underlying change in effectiveness; schools rewarded under a state’s system and simultaneously punished under the federal one, and vice versa. Ideological commitment to the NCLB philosophy trumped a willingness to confront honestly the system’s irresponsibility.

Three complementary cynicisms contributed to NCLB. First was a willingness of some on the right to countenance unachievable goals in hopes that public schools would fail, lending support to privatization. President Bush’s proposed vouchers as sanctions for failing schools was an example. Second was a willingness of some liberals, including some Congressional Democrats, to countenance unachievable goals, hoping to dramatize claims for higher funding. Third was a belief of some liberals and civil rights advocates that unachievable goals do no harm if you can fool teachers into believing in their possibility and therefore striving harder to achieve them, even if we know that even the best teachers will ultimately fail. Robert Gordon’s arguments fall into this camp.

Demanding that teachers get all disadvantaged children to high proficiency levels, without any reform of social and economic conditions that produce failure, is not like doctors asking patients to lose 200 pounds

6. [http://www.civicmissionofschools.org/index\\_html](http://www.civicmissionofschools.org/index_html)

7. Robert B. Schwartz. 2004. “Multiple Pathways – And How to Get There.” In Richard Kazis, Joel Vargas, and Nancy Hoffman, eds. *Double the Numbers. Increasing Postsecondary Credentials for Underrepresented Youth*. Harvard Education Press.

8. Subsequently published as: Thomas J. Kane and Douglas O. Staiger, 2002. “The Promise and Pitfalls of Using Imprecise School Accountability Measures.” *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 16 (4), Fall.



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and being satisfied with 100. Doctors are not held accountable only for weight loss, creating incentives to ignore patients' other health problems. And when patients do lose only 100 pounds, doctors are not required to issue report cards to the public and to their peers saying their skills "need improvement," doctors' services and payments are not redirected to (often unqualified) contractors, and doctors' practices are not reconstituted with new physicians brought in as replacements, only to repeat the failures.

Scuttling NCLB does not mean giving up on poor children. It is rather an honest recognition that, however well-intentioned supporters like Robert Gordon may be, NCLB actively harms the interests of poor children: denying them high quality curricula; throwing even good schools serving poor children into turmoil (of course, not all are good); and providing NCLB's supporters with excuses to duck responsibility to advocate — notwithstanding some taxpayer resistance — educational and social programs that we know will have a positive impact. Needed, instead of NCLB, is a comprehensive effort to improve schools along with efforts to address non-school factors, such as health, poverty, and housing that affect student achievement. We can work on two tracks at once: We know at least as much, if not more, about how to ensure good health and stable housing for all children as we know about how to improve school performance.

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*Cindy Brown and Elena Rocha*

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#### TEACHING READING

What's Going on with Reading...or Not?

*Cynthia G. Brown*

This column discusses the problem of little progress in improving American students reading achievement despite numerous policies and programs aimed at jump starting progress. It proposes several steps that should be taken to reverse factors now hindering improvement in reading skills and the closing of achievement gaps.

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## IDENTIFYING EFFECTIVE TEACHERS USING PERFORMANCE ON THE JOB

by Robert Gordon

*The Center for American Progress; Thomas J. Kane, Harvard; Douglas O. Staiger, Dartmouth*

A key determinant in how much students learn is the quality of their teachers. To get real results, America needs a dramatic shift in how teachers are hired and evaluated. Moving our focus from teacher credentialing to teacher effectiveness on the job would bring more people into the profession and increase teacher quality.

## *Economic Policy Institute*

### CLASS AND SCHOOLS

Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap

*Richard Rothstein*

This book—co-published by the Economic Policy Institute and Teachers College, Columbia University—shows that social class differences in health care quality and access, nutrition, childrearing styles, housing quality and stability, parental occupation and aspirations, and even exposure to environmental toxins, play a significant part in how well children learn and ultimately succeed.

### RETHINKING HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES AND TRENDS

By Lawrence Mishel

Scholars and educators disagree on the rate of graduation in U.S. high schools, and some new, widely reported statistics seriously understate minority graduation rates, failing to reflect the tremendous progress in the last few decades in closing the black-white and the Hispanic-white graduation gaps. *Rethinking High School Graduation Rates and Trends* analyzes the current sources of available data on high school completion and dropout rates and finds that, while graduation rates need much improvement, they are higher than in the past and getting better.

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Examining the Evidence on Enrollment and Achievement

*Martin Carnoy, Rebecca Jacobsen, Lawrence Mishel, & Richard Rothstein*

When federal statistics showed test scores lower in charter than in regular schools, some charter school supporters insisted this must result from charter schools enrolling harder-to-teach minority students. Data show, however, that typical charter school students are not more disadvantaged, yet their average achievement is not higher. This book reviews the existing research and suggests how such debates could be improved in the future.

### EXCEPTIONAL RETURNS

Economic, Fiscal, and Social Benefits of Investment in Early Childhood Development

*Robert G. Lynch*

The problems for children and society that result from childhood poverty cry out for effective policy solutions. There is a strong consensus among the experts who have studied high-quality early childhood development (ECD) programs that these programs have significant payoffs. This study demonstrates, for the first time, that providing all 20% of the nation's three- and four-year-old children who live in poverty with a high-quality ECD program would have a substantial payoff for governments and taxpayers in the future.

