



# Policy Memorandum

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## Education Accountability Policy in the New Administration

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### SUMMARY

Federal education accountability policy is fundamentally flawed because it creates incentives for educators and other policy makers to:

- Ignore some critical curricular elements in favor of focusing all effort on raising the test scores of disadvantaged students in basic math and reading skills alone. This myopic focus widens the “achievement gap” in critical thinking, citizenship development, and other essential areas of education.
- Ignore the need to strengthen early childhood education, families, and after-school programs by failing to include these supports in accountability calculations.

These two flaws conflict with President-elect Obama’s stated goals of broadening the curriculum and of investing in early childhood, family support, and after-school programs.

Although we should re-commit to a strenuous accountability policy in education, it is not clear how to correct the flaws in No Child Left Behind (NCLB). As a consequence, we recommend a research and development effort to design a new accountability policy and avoid perpetuating the distortions created by NCLB.

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Federal education accountability policy, as expressed in NCLB, has focused national attention on the poor basic math and reading skills of disadvantaged children. NCLB has succeeded in compelling schools to produce evidence that all students they serve are learning, but seven years after enactment, the academic needs of many students have still not been met, and little progress is being made. The benefits of NCLB have been offset in two important ways: first, by the unintended consequence of narrowing the curriculum in many schools to math and reading alone (with a disproportionate focus on test preparation); and second, by the naïve demand that schools must close the achievement gap on their own, without the additional resources and social supports that disadvantaged children require to succeed.

These flaws are so inherently fundamental to the NCLB approach that minor modifications to the law cannot correct them. Designing a new education accountability policy that does not distort curriculum and that creates incentives for states to adopt a broader array of reforms will take several years, and cannot be completed in time for NCLB re-authorization.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act should be re-authorized, with minimal accountability requirements (e.g., similar to those in the 1994 re-authorization, in which states were required to make good-faith efforts to hold schools and districts accountable for their use of federal funds).

The incoming administration cannot and should not abandon more-strenuous school accountability, but it will have to do more to address the conditions and context of learning and child development in order to get accountability right. Unfortunately, because the unintended harmful consequences of NCLB are central to its design, there may be no reasonable alternative to temporarily backing off from federal accountability, while immediately investing expertise and resources in the design of a replacement. There are, as of yet, no readily available designs for a workable accountability law. As one of its early steps, the administration should convene a task force of experts to identify the problems and work on their solutions.

In this memo, we discuss the two chief unintended consequences of the existing federal accountability law—curricular distortion and the downgrading of social policy—to make the case for why an alternative approach is needed.

## **Curricular distortion**

Curricular distortion in present policy is inevitable because schools are held accountable for only some of their many public goals. NCLB demands that schools produce evidence of adequate performance in math and reading scores. As a consequence, educators rationally respond to this demand by focusing attention and resources on math and reading instruction (test preparation and drill), often at the expense of instruction in social studies, history, science, arts and music, character development, citizenship education, emotional and physical health, and physical fitness.

This shift in time and resources has been most severe for the disadvantaged children whom NCLB was designed to help, because these children are the ones most at risk of failing to meet the math and reading targets. But these children are also, therefore, the most at risk of losing curricular opportunities in other areas that are also important goals of public education. As a result of this narrowing of the curriculum, NCLB has actually contributed to a widening of the “achievement gap” in critical content areas.

Another inadvertent drawback of NCLB is the considerable emphasis it places on developing the basic skills of children to the neglect of higher-order skills. Public universities and community colleges report that many students, whose scores suggest that they are high achievers, must take remedial courses in writing and math. This suggests that our national fixation with easily tested basic skills is missing the larger goal of ensuring that a greater number of American students possess the literacy and problem-solving skills to excel in higher education.

As Murnane and Levy point out in their book, *The New Basic Skills* (2001), jobs in the information sector will require a much higher level of cognitive ability than our schools typically impart. If we seek to enhance the ability of disadvantaged children to compete for newly created jobs in “green” and other technologically advanced industries, then we will need to aim much higher in the goals we set for all American students.

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The president-elect has vowed to correct this distortion. Mr. Obama has noted that NCLB “has become so reliant on a standardized test model that...subjects like history and social studies have gotten pushed aside. Arts and music time is no longer there. So the child is not having the well-rounded educational experience I benefited from and most in my generation benefited from.” We must change NCLB, he says, “so that the assessment is one that takes into account all the factors that go into a good education.”

There is broad bipartisan awareness of this policy flaw. Although some Democrats and Republicans choose to ignore NCLB’s goal distortion because they have no solution for it within the NCLB framework, there are also many who share the president-elect’s view that NCLB requires a radical reconsideration. The Center on Education Policy has publicized the loss of instructional opportunity in social studies, science, the arts, and physical education (especially for disadvantaged children) that has resulted from NCLB enforcement. Former Republican officials Chester Finn and Diane Ravitch complain that present policy means “top private schools and a few suburban systems will stick with education broadly defined...Rich kids will study philosophy and art, music, and history, while their poor peers fill in bubbles on test sheets.” There is a “zero-sum” problem, they conclude: “more emphasis on some things inevitably...mean[s] less attention to others.”

Retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor has publicly lamented that NCLB “has effectively squeezed out civics education because there is no testing for that anymore and no funding for that...We can’t forget that the primary purpose of public schools in America has always been to help produce citizens who have the knowledge and the skills and the values to sustain our republic as a nation, our democratic form of government.”

By placing such inordinate emphasis on basic-skills test scores, rather than on the underlying cognitive skills that schools should develop, NCLB has also created incentives for educators to “game” the system. Such gaming takes many forms: excluding low-scoring students from testing; manipulating the assignment of students to sub-groups based on their test scores; and narrowly concentrating all attention on the students just below the passing point on standardized tests to the detriment of both the students who are far below that point and those who are already above it.

Public discussion of NCLB re-authorization has focused almost entirely on correcting flaws in math and reading measurement: substituting value-added for fixed levels; modifying the 2014 target date; standardizing state definitions of proficiency; improving the quality of math and reading tests; and modifying confidence intervals in test reporting. While each of these may improve the sophistication with which states can measure math and reading performance, none addresses the goal distortion resulting from exclusive measurement of math and reading.

There has been some discussion of “multiple measures,” but this has involved adding graduation rates or other processes, not the measurement of a broader set of outcomes. Simply adding tests in other subject areas will not suffice—there is already too much testing in schools, and some priority outcomes are not easily testable.

Designing a new accountability system for education that requires satisfactory performance across a balanced set of public school outcomes will involve a significant federal research and development effort. The Obama campaign’s formal program for education, *Barack Obama’s Plan for Lifetime Success Through Education*, calls for “funds for states to implement a broader range of assessments that can evaluate higher-order skills, including students’ abilities to use technology, conduct research, engage in scientific investigation, solve problems, present and defend their ideas.” Development of such a broader range of assessments cannot be accomplished if the current emphasis on assessment is not altered. The proper balance between assessment and high-quality instruction in intellectually stimulating learning environments must be achieved if genuine improvement in student learning is to be realized. It makes little sense to continue to distort the school curriculum by maintaining the NCLB requirements, while such development is taking place.

The commitment to a broader range of assessments challenges a commonplace misunderstanding: that goal distortion is unimportant because basic skills are so fundamental. Michelle Rhee recently summarized this view, saying that “if the children don’t know how to read, I don’t care how creative you are.” While we understand this sentiment, we also insist that if children have no creativity, it matters little how well they read. In truth, children need to develop both kinds of skills simultaneously, but present accountability policy creates incentives for schools to sacrifice one for the other.

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The commitment to a broader range of assessments also means the rejection of the present focus of many Democratic policy makers and advocates on developing ever-more-precise measurements of math and reading; a new system of accountability requires an acknowledgement that many important outcomes of education, while measurable, cannot be measured with the perfect precision that existing accountability policy seems to require.

New policy efforts can build on some prior experience as we chart a new direction. When the National Assessment of Educational Progress was developed in the 1960s, it included measures (some by trained NAEP observers in schools) of a broad range of cognitive and non-cognitive knowledge, skills, and character traits, including a commitment to civil rights, awareness of the habits of good health, and the ability to cooperate with others in solving problems. Early NAEP assessments resulted in reports on national percentages of students who were succeeding along these criteria. But NAEP abandoned this breadth of measures when its budget was slashed in the 1970s, and never restored it.

Designing a new accountability system will take time and care, because the problems are daunting. Observations of student behavior are not as reliable as standardized tests of basic skills, so the Obama administration will have to insist that it is better to imperfectly measure a broad set of outcomes than to perfectly measure a narrow set. We will have to resolve contradictory national convictions that schools should teach citizenship and character, but not inquire about students' (and parents') personal opinions. Developing a new system will require tough decisions about how to weight the measurement of the many goals of education in order to avoid new distortions. And the Obama administration will have to think through the relationship between formative assessments that, in Obama's campaign document's words, "will provide immediate feedback...so that teachers can begin improving student learning right away," and assessments for purposes of public accountability, requiring greater standardization.

## **The downgrading of social policy**

The president-elect has embraced and promoted research showing "that early experiences shape whether a child's brain develops strong skills for future learning, behavior, and success. Without a strong base on which to build, children, particularly disadvantaged children, will be behind long before they reach kindergarten" (*Barack Obama's Plan for Lifetime Success Through Education* 2008). The Obama program includes high-quality early childhood care and education, beginning at birth as well as support for parents to enrich children's cognitive and non-cognitive development with programs such as the "Nurse-Family Partnership." Obama's plan also asserts that closing the achievement gap requires providing disadvantaged youth with extended learning time, "high-quality after-school programs," and "summer learning opportunities for disadvantaged children through partnerships between local schools and community organizations."

Although there are long-term pay-offs to such programs—returning greater savings than their costs—the initial investments are very expensive and cannot be scaled-up rapidly in a responsible fashion.

Yet if it is true that disadvantaged children require such programs to succeed, then it is irrational to maintain a school accountability system that requires schools alone to close the achievement gap (and sanctions them for not doing so). NCLB effectively undermines the new administration's conviction that out-of-school supports are necessary.

Furthermore, the nation is now in the midst of a deep recession. States and their school districts are cutting back programs (after-school and summer programs, for example) that had been implemented because they were believed essential to student success. It is irrational to demand that schools achieve the same outcomes without these programs (or with reduced programs) that we demanded they achieve when they had the benefit of these programs. The current accountability framework (NCLB), however, demands the same outcomes with resources or without. If this demand was legitimate, then the resources were apparently superfluous to begin with.

Again, we are not advocating the abandonment of a commitment to a tough accountability system. But in such a system, expected outcomes will have to vary with the resources available. Accountability will have to be systemic, including the outcomes not only of schools but also of those other institutions—early childhood resources, parent support, health, community after-school and summer programs—that the incoming administration has concluded are necessary for youth success.

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The design of such a system requires research and development in these areas as well. There is limited precedent to consult. In England, for example, the Office of Standards in Education (Ofsted) now coordinates its inspections of schools with its inspections of other institutions in the same community that provide early childhood care and education, adult learning, and health care. Accountability for schools includes test scores, but schools cannot pass inspection with adequate academic test scores alone; they also must demonstrate satisfactory student behavior, citizenship traits, and social awareness.

## Conclusion

The new administration's education accountability policy will be torn by two competing approaches, both strong within the Democratic Party and its constituent groups. One calls for "fixing" NCLB by improving its measurement of basic skills (most importantly by developing "value-added" growth models to supplement fixed-level test score targets). The other group calls for abandonment of this approach to accountability, and investing time and effort in the development of an alternative that holds schools, as well as other institutions of youth development, accountable for generating youth outcomes that include a broad range of cognitive and non-cognitive knowledge and skills.

This memo attempts to make the case for the second alternative, one that is fully consistent with the principles President-elect Obama set forth in his campaign. These broad principles are also those found in a statement ("A Broader, Bolder Approach to Education," [www.boldapproach.org](http://www.boldapproach.org)) issued last June by a bi-partisan group of 60 distinguished leaders in education and other social policy fields.

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