

National Perspective: Leveraging Partnerships to Improve Student Achievement



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Well, 2007 will not be remembered for the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act. After a significant attempt by Chairman Miller in the U.S. House of Representatives and a minimal attempt by Chairman Kennedy in the U.S. Senate, the process unraveled. Those who wanted changes made to the law can only hope that it will be done in 2008. Unfortunately, officials who closely monitor the activities of Congress don't give much hope that it will be done in 2008 and only a glimmer of hope that it could even be done in 2009. The agenda for Congress is filled with a number of other priority issues, and the presidential election will be the focus of most political activity during the year. Not reauthorizing the law is far from a victory for those who oppose it, however. For now, NCLB remains the same, and the current provisions are what states and districts must comply with in order to avoid sanctions and receive federal funds. For states attempting to meet the rigorous challenges of the student accountability provisions in NCLB, the prognosis only becomes more difficult without some changes to the adequate yearly progress (AYP) determinations. So, our comprehensive center partnering with states to help increase student achievement will continue, but the bar moves higher and the sanctions could become more severe.

In addition to the task of meeting the requirements of NCLB, the news about U.S. student achievement compared to their international peers has not been encouraging. Two recent studies only give impetus to the advocates for more rigorous standards and assessment to determine the progress of students in core subjects. The 2006 Program for International Assessment found that 15-year-old Americans ranked lower than their peers in other developed countries. Thirty countries participated in the study. The subjects tested were mathematics and science.

The news was not much better for elementary students, either. Although American fourth-grade students scored higher than their peers in 22 of 39 countries on the Progress in International Literacy Study, there was no growth from the first assessment in 2001. Still, the trend seems to be holding that elementary students are performing fairly well, whereas older U.S. students seem to fall behind.

I like to think that the purpose of these assessments is to guide our work and focus on improvement. Working in a new context, states, along with their comprehensive centers, can focus on building the capacity of schools to help students achieve greater success. The goals that our Great Lakes East and West states have set for our collaborative work should provide a substantial opportunity to leverage our resources and achieve the anticipated results. The "old" model of expecting states to do the work independently is no longer sufficient. The "new" model—the federal government funding comprehensive centers to support the work of states—is a logical plan, and these partnerships should result in better strategies to improve teaching and learning.

The discussion above is an ominous introduction to an article about how policy can be used to improve student achievement. Yet, there is some sense that despite the flaws in NCLB, the Act has led to different leadership approaches to improve education systems. Leaders are using data for accountability, discussing and debating teacher quality and compensation models, and bringing more focus using better curriculum resources for what and how students are taught. The efforts of educators today present a different response to the need for reform than almost 50 years of commission reports, calls for reform, and studies on how to improve education prior to NCLB. For the most part, those reports “gathered dust” on bookshelves and didn’t elicit a sincere effort to bring about change. Today, states are working together to design new plans to improve their services; their education leaders are setting challenging benchmarks for student success; and in some places, teachers are earning higher salaries and being rewarded for their work based on some form of merit ratings. It is difficult not to argue with those who say NCLB is a “total failure” in light of some of the more significant reform efforts that are underway in many states and districts. At the least, it can be said that federal policy has been a “lightning rod” for different thinking about how all students should be taught.

Policies that include sanctions might not be the most favored methods to achieve results to those who are affected by it, but until some states and districts were seriously impacted by NCLB, not much was changing. Now, more thought is given to how curriculum is selected, teachers compensated, and subgroups of student achievement analyzed, using data for decision-making and making that data available for all to see. The “carrot-and-stick” policy approach tends to work despite its shortcomings.

That said, there is a critical need for Congress to correct the flaws in NCLB so that states can focus on the important issues and the processes to improve student achievement and teacher quality, particularly in high-needs, high-poverty schools, without devoting too much time to thinking about the consequences of sanctions. The top priority must be to ensure that these schools receive the services they so desperately need.

That task requires more contemporary thinking about leadership. For many years, the overarching concept of leadership in education has been the “great man” theory in a hierarchical organizational structure. More progressive thinking about leadership suggests that leaders must work in teams and develop partnerships with those who can contribute to their success but who may sometimes be deemed competitors. For example, multiple states working together with their comprehensive centers and regional education laboratories as a consortium focusing on a complex problem could lead to diverse solutions from a variety of perspectives rather than using only in-house staff to generate new ideas and solutions. Engaging the private sector as part of that team might further enhance the opportunity for innovative thinking. The public sector has been slow to accept the notion that the private, for-profit sector can offer added value to its work. Yet, business leaders are learning that, in certain instances, partnerships with competitors are advantageous. That is why NBC also has MSNBC.

As funding for education becomes more difficult to increase, the private sector offers the potential for leveraged partnerships that might create innovative solutions to raising student achievement and training teachers. A willingness to open the door to partners may well help states comply with some of the most daunting policy challenges.