

District Implementation of *No Child Left Behind*

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, shifts how the federal government oversees local schools by imposing measurable requirements on Local Education Agencies (LEAs), or districts. Building on its 1994 precursor, NCLB gives new meaning to accountability by providing concrete steps and clear guidelines for improving student achievement across the board and, especially, in schools identified as “in need of improvement.” While states bear the initial responsibility of drafting NCLB compliance plans, the real onus for implementation is on districts. Some characterize the law as providing districts with the necessary opportunity and flexibility for ensuring that every student achieves high standards by 2013-2014, thereby closing the achievement gap. Others say it simply adds an unreasonable overlay of roles and responsibilities to an already overburdened system. Either way, NCLB requires significant changes in how districts support their schools.

To get a feel for how districts nationwide are dealing with this new challenge, WestEd interviewed staff, visited Web sites, and examined other documentation from districts across the country, as well as from national and regional education organizations.¹ This national scan identified four main areas of concern about district-level NCLB implementation. Within their overall effort to turn around low-performing schools, districts are particularly concerned about NCLB requirements for providing students with supplemental services and public school choice when their schools do not make adequate yearly progress; for ensuring that their teachers are highly qualified and their paraprofessionals adequately trained; and for expanding data collection, use, and reporting. They also express concern about the adequacy of financial resources to carry out the law.

WestEd then convened a group of district leaders from Arizona, California,

Nevada, and Utah to share information about implementation efforts and to exchange promising ideas and practices. Based on the small sample of leaders attending WestEd’s spring Policy Symposium, it appears that NCLB-related concerns in their states partially overlap but are not completely congruent with those identified nationally. Chief among them are: getting a qualified teacher in every classroom, developing data-related capacity, marshalling adequate resources to support school improvement and student learning, and developing and supporting effective school leadership.

NCLB Implementation Issues and Strategies

ENSURING QUALIFIED TEACHERS. NCLB requires a “highly qualified” teacher in every classroom by 2006, but leaves it to states to define the term. In states that

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have already developed a definition (e.g., teachers who have full certification, a bachelor’s degree, and demonstrated competence in subject knowledge and teaching skills), districts are gearing up to make sure or help current teachers meet the new definition, by requiring or providing necessary training. They are also anticipating turning away teacher applicants who do not meet the new requirements. Ensuring a qualified teacher in every classroom is likely to be more difficult for states like California where extraordinary state budget deficits are resulting in reduced education funding. California’s situation is further exacerbated by a pre-existing and severe shortage of qualified teachers caused in part by a class-size-reduction policy that requires more teachers overall.

NCLB also imposes its own quality-related restrictions for teachers, such as a prohibition against teaching out-of-field. This limitation is likely to have its biggest impact on rural and small schools where, because of budget restrictions and/or difficulty in attracting teachers, staff have more often been expected to cover multiple subjects. Similarly, NCLB’s requirement that teachers demonstrate “competency” in any core academic subject they teach has caused particular concern for LEA administrators and middle school teachers in some states that issue a general K–8 credential. For example, Arizona offers only two teaching credentials: elementary (K–8) and secondary (7–12). Elementary-certification candidates currently must pass a test of basic cross-content, cross-

grade knowledge, but do not have to demonstrate content competency in specific subjects. Teachers of special education students and English language learners must also be highly qualified and show “competency.” Based on state definitions, this could mean that already-certified special education teachers who teach core academic subjects must earn additional credentials to satisfy NCLB.

California’s Elk Grove Unified School District offers one example of how a district might ensure teacher quality through a collaborative district-university program. Nine years ago, in partnership with San Francisco State University, the district created its own teacher-credentialing program, the Teacher Education Institute (TEI). In California, prospective teachers must earn a four-year college degree and then complete a credentialing program. University-based credentialing programs have traditionally required up to two years to complete. In contrast, the TEI is a fast-track, intensive program, which includes 1,200 hours of hands-on classroom experience, and which teacher candidates, or “interns,” can complete in 11 months. Ninety-six percent of the program’s graduates are still teaching.² According to superintendent Dave Gordon, the TEI has helped attract second-career teachers “who bring confidence, maturity, and a wealth of life experiences.”

BUILDING DATA CAPACITY. NCLB’s heavy state and local reporting requirements, including its mandate to make data available

to parents and the general public, call for a sophisticated data-collection infrastructure as well as a capacity to effectively use the data collected. Both are lacking in many states and districts.³ Without systematic and uniform data collection guidelines and infrastructure at the state level, these requirements pose challenges to any district not accustomed to gathering data other than for internal purposes.⁴ The challenge is twofold: establishing an efficient and user-friendly data collection and reporting system and developing capacity among school and district staff to analyze and use it effectively in decision-making. Many districts are turning to promising online data management systems to help them meet this challenge.

Some district administrators stress the importance of parents receiving timely information on student achievement. Research shows that parent involvement is the most accurate predictor of a student’s achievement in school.⁵ One Arizona district reports implementing an online assessment system with an information-sharing component that allows parents to view their child’s scores shortly after students take the test.⁶

Anticipating that some schools and their districts would need help in making better use of their data, a former district superintendent in Utah, now with Utah’s Education Reform Foundation, has begun working with schools in the same high school feeder systems. The intent is to take advantage of their

natural community of interest to build a collaborative network aimed at ensuring continuity in curriculum and instruction programs from the elementary schools up through the high school. Participating principals meet monthly with representative teachers to analyze performance data. The objective is to pinpoint those schools, grades, and perhaps even teachers where student performance would appear to be especially strong or weak. If the data shows that one group of high school students is performing very well — or conversely poorly — on state math standards, the staff charged with analyzing the data would identify which feeder schools these students had attended and might even look to see if they were clustered with a particular teacher or group of teachers or had been taught with a particular curriculum. If so, the next step might be to work with the staff in those schools to build on strengths or mitigate weaknesses.

MARSHALLING RESOURCES. NCLB requires each state to define “adequate yearly progress” for its schools. Depending on the details of that definition, over time a significant number of its schools might be deemed “in need of improvement.” Under NCLB, this designation would trigger required action on the part of a school or its district. Among other things, if requested by a student’s parent or guardian, the school itself would need to provide and pay for approved supplemental education services, such as after-school tutoring, and its district would need to offer transfer options to other public schools. One specific

LEA concern is how to accommodate requests for transfer to desirable schools in which there is not space for new students. The costs associated with such requirements, as well as the costs of the broader effort to improve school performance, could be considerable.

Some districts and schools are trying to mitigate costs associated with school improvement by building internal capacity so as not to have to rely on — and pay for — outside technical assistance. One example is those Utah schools that are bringing staff together to analyze data in order to pinpoint strengths and weaknesses within their system. In these schools, the principals have also met with teachers to cooperatively set and make sure expectations about curriculum and practice are articulated across the grades, along with student performance expectations. This collaboration has reportedly established a joint sense of responsibility for student achievement across schools in the districts and has helped schools meet their goals.⁷

In California, county offices of education have a history of providing support to local districts, such as standards-based professional development and school support and assistance teams that conduct audits of instructional programs and provide recommendations for effective research-based school reforms and instructional improvement strategies. With the advent of NCLB, however, some county offices are expanding these services to help districts meet new

NCLB-related demands, specifically to help schools do what is needed to make adequate yearly progress.

However else LEAs might attempt to build internal capacity for meeting the expectations of NCLB, the consensus among symposium participants was that they will need to form strong relationships with regional support networks, assistance centers, universities, and other external entities to gain access to necessary support.

DEVELOPING AND SUPPORTING LEADERSHIP. Research shows that leadership is a critical factor in improving failing schools,⁸ which is the overarching intent of NCLB. NCLB increases the pressure for leaders to be effective in two key arenas: management (e.g., hiring qualified staff, coordinating services and other resources) and instructional leadership. In the push to help schools make adequate yearly progress, leaders are expected to develop improvement plans, make decisions about effective services and practices, and take corrective action when schools fail to make progress. Yet even absent this additional pressure, fewer and fewer educators have been eager to take on a principalship, citing low salaries for enormous responsibility and job stress caused by unreasonable demands.⁹ To help counter this trend, one Nevada district has sought grants for leadership training.¹⁰ Moreover, in recognition of the need for leaders to be available as instructional mentors during school hours, the district has also eliminated all district-

level meeting requirements for principals during school days.

To foster stronger and more distributed school leadership, several Arizona districts have created site-level curriculum management teams to assist with the implementation of standards-based instruction and make other crucial decisions about school improvement. In shifting additional decision-making responsibility to school sites, the hope is, in part, that school leadership and staff will become more committed to school improvement.

In an effort to build leaders from within, California's Elk Grove Unified School District has established the Leadership Development Institute, which identifies potential leaders at school sites and helps foster their skills by giving them additional responsibilities. The district and California State University, Sacramento, have also partnered to support these individuals in pursuing their administrative credentials.

Conclusion

NCLB asks states, districts, schools, and individuals to set tangible goals and measure progress toward their achievement. If implemented successfully, the law should help close the gaps between high- and low-performing students, a worthy ambition. The law's implementation challenges notwithstanding, districts and

schools in WestEd's region share NCLB's underlying goal of improving under-performing schools in order to help all students succeed, and they are doing their utmost to foster that improvement. By understanding the hurdles LEAs face in these efforts, state policymakers and other assistance providers can begin to consider their own role in supporting success.

ENDNOTES

1 For a complete list of these references, see http://www.wested.org/online_pubs/districts_nclb.pdf.

2 Gordon, D. W. (2002, March 5). White House Conference on Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers. Available online: http://www.ed.gov/units/preparin_gteachersconference/gordon.html.

3 Education Commission of the States. (2003). *No Child Left Behind* pages. Available online: <http://www.ecs.org/nclb>. Also, The Princeton Review, (2003). *Testing the testers 2003 state data: An annual ranking of state accountability systems*. New York: Author. Available online: <http://www.princetonreview.com/footer/testingTesters.asp>.

4 American Association of School Administrators. (2003). *Successful strategies for district data reporting in the era of No Child Left Behind*. Washington, DC: American Association of School Administrators.

See examples of exemplary district report cards at <http://www.aasa.org/reporting>. The American Association of School Administrators collected examples of district-produced report cards and gave recommendations for success in both meeting NCLB requirements and providing an accurate and accessible message to the community.

5 Haro, A. (2000). *How can internal and external evaluations help improve parent involvement programs?* Presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Conference, New Orleans, LA. Available online: <http://www.laamp.org/parent/AERA1.html>.

6 Wade McLean, Superintendent of Marana Unified School District, Arizona (reported at WestEd's Policy Symposium, April 9, 2003).

7 John Bennion, Director of the Utah Urban School Alliance (reported at WestEd's Policy Symposium, April 9, 2003).

8 Brady, R. C. (2003, January). *Can failing schools be fixed?* Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.

9 Hoachlander, G., Alt, M., & Beltranena, R. (2001). *Leading school improvement: What research says*. Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board.

10 Jim Hager, Superintendent of Washoe County School District, Nevada (reported at WestEd's Policy Symposium, April 9, 2003).

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