Has No Child Left Behind Changed the Face of Leadership in Public Schools?

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Abstract

A national study examined the perceptions of educational leaders and classroom leaders as to the changes that have occurred in public P-12 schools since the inception of No Child Left Behind. Administrators and teachers who had remained in the same district for five years, and who had been in the field of education since at least 2002, were asked to respond to a comparison of priorities regarding their time resource allocations before and since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. Teachers and administrators shared some common perceptions but differences in their beliefs regarding the value of identified changes became apparent. This study identified some positive and some negative unintended consequences that become the legacy of No Child Left Behind.

Keywords: no child left behind, leadership, management, public schools

1. Introduction

For seemingly an eternity, education has been set within a political, social, environmental and fiscal landscape that is often tumultuous. As Margaret Wheatley (2005), a noted leadership and change theorist stated, "In these troubled, uncertain times, we don't need more command and control; we need better means to engage everyone's intelligence in solving challenges and crises as they arise." Even though No Child Left Behind (NCLB), passed by congress and signed into law in 2002, was an attempt to add accountability, these assessment mechanisms as applied have serious flaws. Unintended results occur too often in the field of education and as Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1998) stated "We catch a glimmer of the results that are emerging (the unintended consequences,) and quickly realize that they're not what we had planned for ..." "Without reflection, we go blindly on our way, creating more unintended consequences, and failing to achieve anything useful" (Wheatley, 2002). This study asks educators to reflect on the first nine years of the implementation of NCLB.

In 1983 *A Nation at Risk* crystallized, in the public's mind, the idea education must be more accountable with quantifiable measures consistent with business production standards. The movement toward measurable standards began soon thereafter. Authentic assessments (portfolios, capstone projects, etc.), scoring, and standardization across teachers and schools are time intensive and expensive (Wiggins, 1989). As a result, the federal government selected other assessments that were relatively quick to administer, score and analyze. In the interest of time and costs, detailed, authentic reporting of student skills and achievement were being replaced with a standardized achievement test (Clark & Clark, 2000). After numerous iterations, No Child Left Behind became the federal government's solution to the accountability question.

Froese-Germain cautioned "while useful for sorting and ranking of students, [research shows] standardized tests are inadequate in assessing student learning and development" (2001, p. 112). Actually research has found standardized test scores tell more about the size of students' houses than about the quality of their learning (Kohn, 2001, 349a). Popham (1999a) believed one of the chief reasons children's socioeconomic status was so highly correlated with standardized test scores was that many items really focused on assessing knowledge and or skills learned outside of school, knowledge more likely to be learned in higher socioeconomic settings. No Child Left Behind determined success or failure of students and schools on the basis of sorting and ranking of scores. Unless achievement benchmarks were met in the year-to-year test scores at specific grade levels involving non-cohort

groups of students, federal money could be cut and channeled into other programs. Schools were publicly identified as failing or in need of remediation. Teachers' and administrators' abilities to educate and lead were brought into question by the published test outcomes and parent notification requirements of NCLB.

2. Purpose

A national study was conducted to examine the responses of educational leaders and classroom teachers in the face of high stakes federal mandates. This study explored alterations in curriculum priorities related to NCLB mandates. This study also considered the impact of NCLB on leadership in public schools.

3. Background

Elmore (2005) highlighted schools were always accountable, regardless of the policies under which they operated. An umbrella policy through No Child Left Behind (NCLB) with accountability to predetermined outcomes was established. School districts and states were required to meet federal mandates to keep funding streams available and the local schools in local hands. NCLB set a new tone in the relationship with educators. The rules, requirements, and threats of NCLB applied to all public schools whether or not they received Title I funding. Several states and educational organizations drafted lawsuits to challenge the intrusive nature of the NCLB mandates. "What makes NCLB's design flaws so important is that they come with an unprecedented nationalization of educational policy. This nationalization overrides the usual corrective processes where the 50 states moderate through adaptation the mistakes of federal policy" (Elmore, 2003, p. 8). This federal mandate limited the traditional framework of local control under states' rights guidelines because to refuse NCLB meant refusing all aspects of federal educational funding on which schools and states had come to rely.

Local control with the establishment of the local school board has been the hallmark of the U.S. public education system, making it different than most of the industrialized world (Edwards & Richey, 1947). Historically Local Education Agencies (LEAs) hired educational leaders to support the local culture of the community and to be the guarantors of the educational quality for the children of that community (Lutz & Merz, 1992). Those leaders then selected the best teachers for the job. Curriculum emphasis was based on community culture and mores (Kaestle, 1976). Yong Zhao compared China's education system to the U.S. and emphasized that local schools looked and acted differently from each other even as they produced the leaders of tomorrow. This sparked the trend in other industrialized to decentralize education to better meet the needs of diverse student populations in order to reproduce the same type of non-conformity in thinking as the American public schools. Yet at the same time, the U.S. federal government has stated its desire to emulate other countries' systems and shifted towards a format some of those countries no longer use (Zhao, 2009).

To carry out change, schools need committed, intelligent leadership, an agenda, an awareness of the conditions that have to be put in place, a grasp of the strategies that one has to use to effect change (Goodlad, 1979). Datnow and Castellano (2001) found in researching *Success For all Schools* strong leadership was critical for school reform. Instead schools have been frozen in time. Even with the increasing demands and changing expectations in the role of school administration, researchers, practitioners, and policy makers have focused primarily on accountability (Normore, 2004). Yong Zhao in his book *Catching Up or Leading the Way* (2009) recommended that indeed American public schools should go back to the traditions of decentralization and having a broad rich curriculum that embraces diversity instead of striving to make all schools the same.

4. Research Question

Has NCLB changed the role of classroom teachers and educational leaders?

5. Methodology

A survey was sent to a random sample of school districts across the United States. The variables were pre and post NCLB time allocation for the principals, as well as classroom teachers. The time allocation changes were considered for the period of 2002 through 2011. Further analyses were performed based on whether a district had made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in 2006 – 2011. These data reflected the individual perceptions, reactions, and strategies of educational leaders and classroom teachers who were responsible for meeting the NCLB mandates.

The study yielded a national random sample with 218 responses. Responses were classified by state, building size and area designations according to the Urban-Centric Locale Codes under four broad categories of city, suburbs, town, and rural as defined by the National Center for Educational Statistics. In the 218 responses, forty-six states were represented. There were no surveys returned from Alaska, Hawaii, Massachusetts, or Virginia.

The responses were recorded by tally using spreadsheets listing the answers and then coding them according to frequency given. Averages were determined by the demographic information and the comparisons between

2001-2002 and 2010-2011. Relationships between responses were explored as well as to whether the school district met AYP were observed. Respondents were asked to attribute their responses about change to either a natural school based progression or as a response to NCLB. The respondents' personal/professional perceptions guided the interpretation of the data as to whether they perceived the response was due to mandated changes or naturally occurring professional development in the school that may have changed their perceptions of the curriculum and time spent on various duties.

The methodology for this study was guided by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) who suggested, "a research method for subjective interpretation of the context of text data [was] through a systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (p. 1278). Patton (2002) also indicated qualitative research is "any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify corer consistencies and meanings" (p. 453).

6. Findings

No Child Left Behind is an education reform package with extensive demands for professional training, goal setting, and public reporting. Since 2002 building principals are experiencing higher demands in all aspects of their jobs, and their success is often being evaluated based on AYP. Leadership related activities were not as high a priority in 2011 as they were in 2002. In overall rank the management demands of AYP were the highest priority in 2011. While a reality, this is a troubling phenomenon based on the following prediction:

> To survive in the twenty-first century, we are going to need a new generation of leaders — leaders, not managers. The distinction is an important one. Leaders conquer the context — the turbulent, ambiguous surroundings that sometimes seem to conspire against us and will surely suffocate us if we let them — while managers surrender to it. (Bennis, 1991, p. 23)

According to the findings of this study, meeting the demands of NCLB requires extensive management. While both leadership and management are important, leadership builds relationships with all stakeholders to promote student success. "The leader wants to do what is right for children while the manager wants to do things right. The leader focuses on effectiveness while the manager is concerned with efficiency" (Kussmaul, 2005, p. 45).Effective leaders will use a multifaceted approach to the evaluation of student learning while managers look for limited and easily accessible data (AYP) to determine success. Because of the mandates of NCLB school administrators are becoming more focused on attaining the standard of AYP which may not truly represent student learning and success.

The findings of this study are consistent with concepts illustrated in *Strategic Management and Organizational Dynamics.* Stacey (1996) posited that instability and disorder justifies the existence of managers. The rapid implementation of NCLB has often led to instability and disorder in public schools. The National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research (CALDER) reported that educational leadership is time consuming and is not as effective as organizational-management in meeting AYP goals (Robelen, 2009).

In the survey, principals were asked to prioritize their use of time for 2002 and 2011. Principals' 2002 time priorities were more focused on leadership activities promoting excellence through teacher support. In 2011 management issues took the forefront including issues primarily related to NCLB standards compliance. In 2002, it appears principals were more focused on being instructional leaders while in 2011, demands of NCLB have forced principals to be more focused on managerial tasks and less on instructional leadership.

Table 1. Principal Priorities where schools have met AYP 5 or more year

| Priority Rank | 2001-2002 | | 2010-2011 | |
	Responses	Percentage	Responses	Percentage
1	Reading time/Math achievement	20%	Student achievement, Test scores, compliance, State standards	29%
2	Superior Instructional techniques, Prof Development	20%	Superior Instructional techniques, Prof Development	24%
3	Evaluating Teachers	18%	Reading time/Math achievement	12%
4	Prep Time & Grade level Meetings	18%	Prep Time & Grade level Meetings	10%
5	Student achievement, Test scores, compliance, State standards	14%	Evaluating Teachers	8%

In Table 1 the responding principals' list of their top priorities showed that concerns regarding student achievement, test scores, compliance issues, and state standards were a top priority in 2011. These demands on their time moved from fifth place in 2002 to first place in 2010-2011. Twenty-nine percent of principals listed it as the top priority in 2011, representing a 15% increase in the number of principals now seeing this as their first priority. Professional development stayed as the number two priority for both 2002 and 2011. The responsibility for both summative and formative evaluation of teachers dropped from third priority in 2002 to fifth priority in 2011.

Principals across the country identified negative impacts from NCLB. Based on the responses to open-ended questions, principals whose schools had made AYP for the previous five years (2006-2011), indicated : (a) the need to cover as much curriculum as possible prior to the statewide testing led to a decrease in the depth of student knowledge; (b) the expense and time related to train teachers, principals and central office administrators in the use, analysis and relevance of student data took away from the central mission of meeting the educational needs of all students. Adequate yearly progress is not based on individual student growth or even cohort student growth; and(c) the mantra of accountability where student achievement, albeit inadequately assessed, is used as a measurement of the success of school, the principal and the individual teachers.

Principals whose schools had not made AYP for the previous five years shared similar concerns regarding NCLB mandates. In addition, their open-ended responses also indicated the need to deal with faculty and staff stress related to the pressure to perform in an assessment environment that is not conducive to good instruction led to difficulty in formative evaluation. The findings show in order to meet the requirements of NCLB principals must support teachers in accelerating the curriculum, thus creating a weak form of summative assessment.

- In this study, few respondents mentioned instructional times or core curriculum subjects other than for reading and math. Reading and math also were not listed as having been impacted negatively by the NCLB mandates. According to study participants, social studies, science, writing and history instruction were negatively impacted by the NCLB mandates. Powell, Higgins, Aram, and Freed (2009) in a rural Missouri study found primary teachers to preserve time for other subjects than reading or math made cuts in non-instructional areas such as recess, prep time, and lunch. They left PE, music, and art mostly intact because those were generally taught by a specialist. Principals listed 151 changes in priorities they believed were due to NCLB and 113 other changes that were made in the same timeframe that were not due to NCLB.

- Principals believed the following changes had a <u>mostly positive</u> impact on student learning whether they had been made due to NCLB or not.

  1. Movement toward common formative assessments
  2. Data training for teachers and administrators
  3. Math improvement
  4. Reading improvement

- Principals believed these changes had a <u>mostly negative</u> impact on student learning:

  1. Covering as much curriculum as possible prior to the state assessments.
  2. Increase in mandated paperwork.
  3. Increase in school employee stress.

Teachers across the country shared many of the same concerns with responding principals. Teachers identified 95 items they believed had changed due to NCLB and identified only 19 of these changes as having a positive impact on student learning as assessed by criterion reference testing.

Teachers indicated additional meetings required to comply with the federal mandates cut into planning and instructional time. They also identified a lack of supplemental support and a decrease in the availability of remedial help for students as another challenge related to NCLB. These missing resources included personnel and equipment to support the level of identified need for each student; instructional aides to assist with small group instruction; counseling and social work needs; revenue to purchase the learning materials needed to differentiate instruction for the variety of learning styles and rates. Teachers identified a lack of time for individualizing lessons and learning plans. Also, the amount of time required for formative assessment has increased and there is significant pressure to teach the entire year curriculum prior to the statewide assessments which usually occurs in spring.

Many teachers identified the new emphasis on the use of data to understand student literacy as a positive outcome of NCLB. Some teachers included the emphasis on teaching student test taking strategies to be both positive and negative. Under NCLB, students will be tested more frequently and in formats they may have not seen before. The ability to practice performing in the format of the assessments gives a student a better opportunity to be successful. However, some teachers believe that once a student becomes familiar with a test taking strategy, we are then assessing the student's skill at using the strategy as opposed to his/her actual knowledge, skill or comprehension.

7. Recommendations

Standardized testing often assesses surface knowledge and reveals little about the real, usable knowledge of the individual. "When we focus almost exclusively on teaching for and assessing surface knowledge, we also tend to interfere with and inhibit a student's capacity to learn effectively" (Caine & Caine, 1999, p. 12). Chappuis, Stiggins, Arter, and Chappuis (2004) indicated "we must also develop balanced assessment systems that not only provide information on how well students have learned, but that also use assessment to promote greater learning."(p. 3) "Standardized accountability systems [like NCLB] are predicated on the idea that all students will learn a predetermined body of knowledge to a particular level of mastery" (Hess & Brigham, 2000, p. 12). It is important for school leaders to understand assessment and make assessment outcomes meaningful to the student, the teacher, parents and the educational system. It is incumbent that school systems not throw out statewide assessments, but put them in perspective as to the role they play in informing and enhancing the learning process. Collaboration, collegiality and joint planning were listed as the teacher respondents' priorities for 2002. Teachers need to be allowed to return to those priorities so together they can have common goals and strategize to meet those goals. Focusing on the test cannot be all consuming. Student educational success encompasses so much more than test scores. It is time for educational leaders across the country to revisit the mission and goals of our educational system and develop an assessment system that truly informs our progress toward those goals at the national, state, local and individual student level.

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