

No Child Left Behind

Prevention and Partnership

By Lori G. Thomas

“It is a child’s overall development — not simply cognitive or intellectual development — that makes academic learning possible.”

James Comer (1997)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is the federal education law for public schools. It has been in the news almost daily since its proposal in 2001 and has been debated, hated, lauded and modified. But what is it, and what does it mean for people who care about families and children?

NCLB is designed to improve student learning and to hold schools accountable for outcomes by requiring student testing, ensuring that teachers have proper credentials and mandating parental choice. Aspects of this law affect every public school, while sanctions it prescribes affect schools that are not showing improvement.

The law has generated stress and strong reactions. Teachers and students stress over tests. Administrators worry about not making “adequate yearly progress” (AYP). Parents wonder, “What about *my* child?” University academics and politicians react with arguments for and against, analyzing and dissecting, while rarely offering real solutions.

What is needed is less reaction and more education about the law and its results as it is put into effect. The Illinois Scholastic Assessment Tests (ISAT) are based on the Illinois Learning Standards. That information and each school’s report card are easily accessed by Internet, as are numerous parent resources about NCLB. Prevention providers can take such information to parents and communities and assist people in making informed decisions, rather than having knee-jerk reactions. For example, one particular elementary district did not make adequate yearly progress this year. Rather than reacting, parent leaders first asked the question, “Why?” They learned that the only sub-group not making AYP in the district was the learning disabilities group, and steps were being taken to correct the problem (including the fact that the law itself is being updated to accommodate more modified testing for that particular subgroup). All other groups were doing quite well compared to state averages. Energy and resources could be focused on the one area of need.

NCLB also requires schools to develop ways to get parents more involved in their child’s education and in school improvement.



However, this can vary widely in actual practice. Research has identified patterns of family life that contribute significantly to a child’s ability to learn in school and that can be influenced by outside support (Redding, n.d.; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). At the 2003 Working Together for Student Success conference, researcher Karen Mapp said, “It’s not the number of parents who come to meetings that counts, but what parents are doing at home with children . . . trusting and respectful relationships between school personnel and parents are of utmost importance.” Research also documents numerous barriers to parental involvement and to productive home-school communication that must be overcome, from parents who had poor school experiences to teachers who lack training or harbor misconceptions about parent involvement to scheduling conflicts (Gonzalez-DeHass & Willems, 2003).

So, what can the prevention community do in light of all of this?

- **Reduce test anxiety** by teaching test preparation — promoting good nutrition and sleep habits and counseling confidence in “doing your best.”

- **Link prevention programs and initiatives to learning outcomes.** Both parents and schools want to know that whatever is being done will ultimately lead to better learning, and good documentation of these outcomes is important to policymakers and funders. (See, for example, Henderson & Mapp's 2002 research synthesis.)
- **Promote parent involvement.** Teach parents how to help with homework, encourage them to establish a routine for study in a quiet place and support them in communication with the school staff. (See *A Parent Guide to No Child Left Behind* for tips. Go to www.ed.gov.)
- **Promote two-way communication and positive interactions between schools and families.** Research has shown that every parent, regardless of income, education or any other factor, wants his/her child to succeed, but may need to learn how to help. (See, for example, Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Weiss, et al., 2003).
- **Approach schools and districts diplomatically.** Personnel may become defensive when they hear the word "help," so approach this as a partnership: "How can we work together to benefit this family?"
- **Connect students and families to available resources.** Know the resources available in your area and on the Internet. This can include everything from tutoring or mentoring programs to mental health services to affordable counseling and job training. In Illinois, the Academic Development Institute offers NCLB institutes, workshops and family guidance sessions in collaboration with community-based and faith-based partners. (See www.adi.org for information, dates and locations.)
- **Support families confronting choices.** Families in schools that are in need of improvement benefit from extra help in understanding their options and making timely choices based on the unique needs of their children. Should they request a transfer under school choice, or opt for supplemental educational services (SES)? Who is the best SES provider for their children?

- **Provide clear information about NCLB** to families, school personnel and organizations that may be able to help.

Collaboration is a key to improving families' lives and students' success. Keeping all stakeholders involved in the decision-making process can be a challenge, especially as networks grow. The effort is worthwhile to create thriving learning communities.

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References

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Overview of No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

NCLB's goal: All students will be meeting state standards for reading and math by 2014. Testing is used to compare subgroups of students, each school and each district from year to year.

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP): A school "makes AYP" if they meet state reading and math goals. Non-Title I schools not making AYP are subject to state sanctions, while Title I schools are sanctioned by NCLB.

School Report Card: Shows yearly academic performance and AYP status; also gives valuable information about average class size, staff-to-student ratios, parental contact percentages, teachers' and paraprofessionals' qualifications and more. (Find any school's report card at www.schoolresults.org.)

Public School Choice: Failing to make adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years makes a school "in need of improvement," and

the district must offer parents the opportunity to transfer their children to another school (including public charter schools) and provide transportation to that school. Low-achieving, low-income students are given priority if space is limited.

Supplemental Educational Services (SES or supplemental services): Offered to low-income students in schools not making AYP for three or more consecutive years. These services include tutoring and other high-quality academic enrichment services provided outside of school time to help students with reading, language or math. Low-achieving students have priority.

Choice Limits: Parents will be notified if their school is in need of improvement. Parents have **only 30 days** to request a transfer or SES. They may choose either school choice or supplemental services for that school year, not both.

Approved Providers: A list of approved SES providers is available from the state board of education; these may include the school district itself, non-profit community-based or faith-based organizations or for-profit entities. For Illinois providers, see www.isbe.net/nclb/htmls/sep_isbe_resources.htm.