

AN ANALYSIS OF THE EFFECTS OF NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ON GRADUATION RATES

Issue # 2

Spring 2011

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has met with a great deal of adversity in its 10 years of existence. So much so that President Barack Obama called for its replacement in his 2011 State of the Union Address. This analysis will show that the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has had dual effects on graduation rates in the United States. First, that graduation rates have begun to be calculated far more accurately, albeit indicating that graduation rates have been overestimated for the past few decades. And second, that the policies enacted under No Child Left Behind are systematically pushing underachieving and disadvantaged students out of the school system, leading to a further increase in the dropout rate. While the former is a positive change to the schooling system, the latter needs to be addressed via legislation.

The foremost recommendation in order to realize the needed change is a restructuring of the assessment process for schools such that underachieving and disadvantaged students are empowered to learn at their own pace. This type of restructuring would cause a paradigm shift in the way that schools are found to be achieving the “Adequate Yearly Progress” as set forth by the No Child Left Behind Act.

INTRODUCTION

The kindergarten through 12th grade school system has a goal of paramount importance: to produce graduates who are capable of becoming productive members of society. Whether this means that they go directly into the work force or continue their education at a university or trade school, the K-12 school system is the common path that all must take en route to their chosen divergence. As such, the rate at which students graduate from a given institution is a good indicator of the extent to which that institution is accomplishing its goal. Indeed, from 2001 to 2009, a three percentage point increase in the national graduation rate occurred, from 72% to 75% [NCES 2010]. However, this indicates that a quarter of the youth in the United States are not graduating from high school.

This deficiency in graduation rates has a number of costs. The foremost of these are social costs. If an individual does not graduate from high school, he/she is far less likely to find gainful employment, and thus is more likely to live on some form of government assistance. As such, the lack of a high school diploma is causing dropouts to have an adverse effect on the country as a whole. When one considers the number of youth that this encompasses, it is

clear that a huge inefficiency is present. If this were to be corrected, it could lead to increases in productivity and decreases in welfare payments.

Considering the extent to which the U.S. economy and job market are entrenched in technology and high-human-capital-requiring positions, the 25% of students not graduating are severely hindered in becoming productive members of society. This is, of course, an unacceptable situation. Such was the conclusion of former President George W. Bush, who in his first term promoted the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 [Bush 2004].

THE ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION ACT

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which was first passed in 1965, is the piece of legislation that allows the federal government to fund K-12 education. One of the most notable stipulations of the bill is that there can be no federally mandated, overarching curriculum to which all schools in the country must comply. As such, school districts are given the power to choose the curriculum necessary to produce graduates which satisfy their district's standards..

The provisions of the bill are such that the federal government is capable of giving greater funding to those schools that service a proportion greater than 40% of those students whose families qualify as being "low income" as defined by the US Census [NCLB 2001]. Additionally, after the 1966 reauthorization of the bill, increased funding is afforded those schools that service a greater proportion of English language learners. Both of these groups, children of low-income families and English language learners, are historically disadvantaged groups in terms of graduation

rates, and as such are targeted by the federal government in an attempt to influence their graduation rates.

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is the current iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The No Child Left Behind Act constituted a major overhaul of the previous reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994. The Act was signed into law on January 8th of 2002 by former President George W. Bush after passing both the House of Representatives and the Senate with the support of the Democrats and the Republicans. A discussion of a number of the provisions, and the effects thereof, will follow.

DROPOUT RATES

The No Child Left Behind Act had two major effects on the national high school dropout rate. The first of these was in line with the Act's intent of improving upon the current state of schools in the United States, while the other had the opposite effect by imposing rigid testing standards.

Prior to the No Child Left Behind Act, the national high school dropout rate was extrapolated from population statistics gathered by the US Census and the Current Population Survey. This led to the systematic undercounting of dropouts such that the national high school graduation rate was approximated to be 85% [Swanson 2004]. After the No Child Left Behind Act was signed into law, one of the criteria for assessing high schools' performance was graduation rates. This meant that the data would now be collected at the source. As such, a far more

specific count of high school graduates was being conducted that showed that the national high school graduation rate was closer to 70% [Swanson 2004]. Although this clarification was blithely considered by some as a temporal decrease in the graduation rate as brought about by the No Child Left Behind Act, this was actually a rather telling discovery about the state of the education system in the United States.

The testing and evaluation process of the No Child Left Behind Act on the national high school graduation rate is quite negative. One of the criteria for assessing high schools' performance is students' scores on achievement tests, which are all multiple choice. As such, the subjectivity in the grading process has been eliminated. Because the schools' funding is based on their students' respective test scores, an unquantifiable number of teachers have begun teaching to the tests to the extent that they can [Darling-Hammond 2007]. This is causing a rift between the curriculum that the institutions want to teach, and the test-taking skills necessary to perform adequately on the assessment tests. It has been posited that this is detracting from the overall education of the students [Darling-Hammond 2007]. Additionally, for those students which the bill was most meant to help, severely underachieving students, the stress placed on test scores has caused a number of students to be systematically "pushed" out of the schooling system [Thornburgh, 2011]; either by the faculty at the schools, or by their own inadequacies. This is exacerbating the dropout problem faced by the U.S. schooling system.

POLICY OPTIONS

As evidenced above, the two major problems that have arisen due to the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 are teaching

time being allocated to teaching the tests used for assessment and pushing underachieving students out of the schooling system.

The former can be addressed via a number of changes to the assessment process. An example of such a change would be to introduce subjective grading into the assessment process. This would allow for teachers who observe the student closer to give a grade that the student is more deserving of, other than that which the multiple choice assessment tests indicate. However, there lies a pitfall in that teachers would be more capable of giving unwarranted high grades to underachieving students. Another proposed change is to fund after-school programs that allow underachieving students to work at their own pace, either through the testing procedures or through their regular school work.

The latter problem of students being pushed out of the schooling system is far more difficult to solve due to the nature with which the students are pushed out of the schooling system. Generally, the students are either given the suggestion that they are not capable of completing school, either at all or at a particular institution; or they become discouraged with school due to levels of difficulty that do not motivate particular students. The question of difficulty can be considered from the perspective of classes being too difficult or not difficult enough, depending on the student. In regards to the "power of suggestion" problem, it would be difficult to monitor the seemingly innocuous suggestions made by faculty or staff to underachieving students that they quit school or transfer to other institutions. Strict penalties would need to be put in place to discourage any such suggestions. To address the problem of students becoming discouraged, funding after-school programs for underachieving students and accelerated programs for students who find themselves stagnating are two of the

proposed solutions. For those students who become otherwise discouraged with school, a greater understanding of what is pushing them out of the schooling system would be necessary in order to address any functional problem therein. Another posited solution to this problem is hiring, training, and retaining quality teachers who are able to engage the students in such a way as to elicit participation and true learning in each of their pupils. As of late, this has not been the trend in the hiring of educators in the United States. Whether this is a funding problem, a training problem, or a problem that relates to the perceptions about a career in education is wholly debatable.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This analysis shows that the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has led to a greater understanding of the true dropout rate of high school students in the United States, which was found to be 15% lower than previously thought. However, the assessment provisions of the act are systematically pushing underachieving students out of the system, thus lowering the national high school graduation rate. The most effective way of combating this failing of the act would be to streamline the assessment process in such a way that the student examinations are less strict, in terms of the multiple choice format, while still allowing for a standardized evaluation process, provided that the grading process be spread across the individual teachers, as opposed to being entrusted to an outside organization that will require a far greater amount of resources.. While this does introduce a degree of subjectivity to the process, a system of checks and balances would lead to an overall positive outcome. Additionally, the incorporation of after-school programs into the funding allotted by the No Child Left Behind Act

would be of great benefit to students who are found to be underachieving on the assessment exams. Finally, a treatise on faculty and staff considering dropping out to be an option for underachieving students would be necessary to preclude any doubt the student has in his or her own ability.

The benefits of such an innovation in the evaluation process will far outweigh the costs to society that are caused by the high school dropout rates in terms of lost productivity and government assistance for a displaced workforce composed chiefly of high school dropouts. Ultimately, these issues will be addressed in the near future because President Barack Obama specifically stated in his State of the Union Address this year that the No Child Left Behind Act will be replaced by a new reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act such that the education system in the United States will undergo a dramatic reformation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bush, George W. United States Office of the President. *Selected Speeches of George W. Bush 2001-2008: State of the Union Address to the 108th Congress, Second Session* (pp. 197-213). White House Archives. Web. 22 May 2011. <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/documents/Selected_Speeches_George_W_Bush.pdf>.

Darling-Hammond, Linda. "Race, Inequality and Educational Accountability: The Irony of 'No Child Left Behind'" ERIC. Stanford University, School of Education, Sept. 2007. Web. 25 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/recordDetail?accno=EJ774902>>.

Hursh, David. "Assessing No Child Left Behind and the Rise of Neoliberal Education Policies." *American Educational Research Journal*. 03 Sept. 2007. Web. 25 Mar. 2011. <<http://aer.sagepub.com/content/44/3/493.abstract>>.

Lazear, Edward P. "Speeding, Terrorism, and Teaching to the Test." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 121.3 (2006): 1029-061. Oxford Journals. Web. 16 May 2011.

Linn, Robert L., Eva L. Baker, and Damian W. Betebenner. "Accountability Systems: Implications of Requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001." *Educational Researcher*. American Educational Research Association, Sept. 2002. Web. 25 Mar. 2011. <<http://edr.sagepub.com/content/31/6/3>>.

"No Child Left Behind" (NCLB). *U.S. Department of Education*. 2001. Web. 25 Mar. 2011. <<http://www2.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml>>.

Swanson, Christopher B. "The Real Truth about Low Graduation Rates, An Evidence-Based Commentary." The Urban Institute | Research of Record. Education Policy Center, 2004. Web. 22 May 2011. <<http://www.urban.org/publications/411050.html>>.

Thornburgh, Nathan. "Dropout Nation - TIME." *TIME.com*. 9 Apr. 2006. Web. 25 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1181646,00.html>>.

United States Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). *The Condition of Education 2010*. 2010. Web. 22 May 2011. <<http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=16>>.

*Jeremey Hays, Graduate Student
Department of Economics
College of Business
University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

If you need more specific information about the children and youth in your local area, contact Stephen P. A. Brown, PhD, Director of CBER and Executive Director of Nevada KIDS COUNT or Rennae Daneshvary, PhD, Associate Director of Research and Administration and Nevada KIDS COUNT Director.

Phone: (702) 895-3191

Fax: (702) 895-3606

E-mail: rennae.daneshvary@unlv.edu

The Center for Business and Economic Research
Box 456002, 4505 S. Maryland Parkway
Las Vegas, Nevada 89154-6002

UNLV

CENTER FOR BUSINESS &
ECONOMIC RESEARCH

COLLEGE OF BUSINESS