More Children Left Behind

Oct. 29, 2003

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A gaudy sign reading No Child Left Behind, the education slogan of the Bush Administration, guards the entrance to the U.S. Department of Education in Washington, D.C. The more-than-a-thousand-page NCLB education law, enacted at the beginning of last year with bipartisan flourish, combined a big increase in spending to please the Democrats with conservative buzzwords to please Republicans such as "standards," "tests," and "accountability."
If no child is to be left behind, why are so many students flunking and being left behind in failing schools? Why are schools in an uproar all over the country, with complaints coming from parents, teachers and students?

The answer is plain for anyone to see. The mandated tests reveal the painful truth that the nation's schools are not providing a quality education, even though the taxpayers are paying a per-child rate that rivals expensive private schools.

Since the penalties for not complying with NCLB requirements are severe, states and school districts have devised ingenious methods to avoid the sanctions. The Texas State Board of Education reduced the number of questions students must answer correctly to pass the third- grade reading test from 24 to 20 out of 36.

Michigan officials lowered from 75 to 46 the percentage of students who must pass statewide high school English tests in order to certify a school as making adequate progress. Colorado restructured its grading system, lumping "partially proficient" with "proficient" students.

It's not only students who are judged by test scores; it's the schools, too. The No Child Left Behind Act requires schools to score higher on standardized tests each year, and also requires every racial and demographic group to show improvement.

If any group fails to report higher scores for two consecutive years, a school is labeled "needing improvement." A school that does not improve its scores after being so labeled can have its principal and teachers replaced or even be closed by the state.

Parents, teachers and taxpayers are shocked to learn that the first year's results are showing an extraordinarily high percentage of schools to be so labeled. At least 60 percent of North Carolina schools and 75 percent of Louisiana schools are expected to be so labeled.

One of the sanctions imposed on failing schools is to give students the option of transferring to another school. Los Angeles and Chicago officials are meeting this challenge by approving very few transfers, citing overcrowding concerns. New York City went ahead and approved 8,000 transfer requests, but a third of the students have been moved from one "failing" school to another.

Under the NCLB law, schools with low graduation rates risk being designated as "failing." Schools can manipulate the figures with "pushouts," students who are pressured to leave school long before graduation in order to improve its statistics.

During the 2000-2001 year, New York City schools graduated 34,000 students, while discharging 55,000 high school students. The discharges included students who moved away or transferred to private schools, but it is easy to hide thousands of "pushouts" in the "transfer" category.

The NCLB law allows transfers from schools designated as "persistently dangerous." The states can set the threshold for this label, but 44 states plus the District of Columbia have set the threshold so high that none of their schools fits the definition.

The six other states (New Jersey, New York, Nevada, Oregon, Pennsylvania and Texas) have identified 52 schools as dangerous. That's just 52 out of the 90,000 U.S. public schools where 700,000 violent crimes took place in 2000 (the last year for which government statistics are available).

The vision of No Child Left Behind is to close the gap between higher-achieving students and minorities. It's a noble goal, in President Bush's words, to end the "soft bigotry" of low expectations.

Yet it appears that no strategies introduced so far have done much to close that gap. The liberals' solution is always to throw more money at the problem, and billions of dollars have been spent through the Title I program.

A new study by the American Enterprise Institute called "Closing the Education Gap: Is Title I Working?" compared the scores of individual Title I students with the scores of similar students who did not receive Title I benefits. The researchers found no evidence that Title I programs had improved the recipients' academic performance.

Of course, despite a 20-year record of failure, Title I funding was reauthorized in the NCLB Act. Federal spending on education has grown by $11 billion since President Bush took office.

The tests mandated by NCLB have ripped back the curtain and exposed a major national problem. How about trying some innovative solutions to introduce competition into the monopoly system, such as giving parents choice over which courses and which teachers they want for their children?