

No Child Left Behind

By Wes Brownfield

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In 2001 congress passed legislation leading to the most sweeping changes in public education in over 100 years possibly in U. S. History.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was enacted with wide bi-partisan support. Indeed this legislation was co-sponsored by Senator Ted Kennedy and President George W. Bush—a very clear example of the broad support for this legislation regardless of party affiliation.



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It is clear now, some six years after passage, that if the intent was to profoundly change American public education that has without doubt been the result. For the first time American national education policy explicitly requires that public schools address the educational needs of all students and holds schools responsible for that growth. All public schools are required to test all students in grades 3 through 10 and report the results to parents and community, and states are now required to set national standards for teacher and para-professional qualifications.

The act requires a good many other things from public education but the mandates regarding state academic standards, teacher qualifications, and demonstrated student growth alone have changed the face and direction of all American public

schools.

NCLB requires all states to set academic standards in reading and mathematics and to assess all students, third grade through tenth grade, on those standards. The assessment Arizona has chosen is the AIMS (Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards). Unlike many standardized tests, AIMS does not compare students from Arizona with students from other states. AIMS assess Arizona students solely on their level of mastery of the Arizona academic standards. AIMS results are reported at four different performance levels: meets or exceeds (which are essentially passing) and approaches or falls far below (which are not passing). The state is required to report the individual student scores to parents and a school's over-all performance to the community. These scores are used to determine whether a school has made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Schools who consistently fail to make AYP are subject to serious sanctions including state takeover.

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The real impact of this process is that students in one of several sub-groups of students—English Language Learners, Special Education, and ethnic groups—must make AYP if there are more than forty of these students in any given grade level or the school may not make AYP. The AYP formulas are very complex; indeed there are over 100 ways a school can fail to make AYP from student performance and attendance rates to graduation rates.

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Another major change brought about by No Child Left Behind is teacher qualification. The law requires all teachers to be “Highly Qualified” as well as para-professionals. One of the greatest complaints school districts have had about NCLB is over the issue of local control over establishing teacher qualifications. Teacher qualifications being established by the government is one of the most controversial aspects of this law. Most teaching professionals agree that setting high academic standards for all students is a noble goal, but taking away the right of local school districts to decide teacher and para-professional qualifications troubles most educators. The impact of this provision has been to make it even more difficult for Arizona school districts to recruit teachers in a time of serious teacher shortage. This also makes it more difficult and expensive for teacher education students to get their educations.

handicap, poverty, and ethnicity has changed my profession profoundly for the better.

While I have some professional reservations about aspects of No Child Left Behind, such as federally mandated teacher qualifications and AYP labeling, I also believe that this law has been a powerful force for change in my profession. This law has driven an extraordinary level of positive change. Schools now focus on the individual student as never before, we are diagnostically assessing students so we can meet their individual needs. We are also designing curriculum which can meet the needs of all our learners in a way we’ve not done before. NCLB has required public education to design educational services to meet the needs of all students, assess the progress of all students, and adjust our instruction to meet those needs. Like so many federal mandates, NCLB, is grossly underfunded by the federal government, but the motive to ensure that all students succeed regardless of