NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND: ARE IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED?

A PUBLIC AGENDA
CITIZEN CHOICEWORK GUIDE

FOR COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS,
CLASSROOMS, STUDY GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS
A Note on Public Agenda’s Choicework Guides

Public Agenda Choicework Guides support dialogue and deliberation on a wide variety of issues. They have been used in thousands of community conversations and classrooms, by journalists and researchers, and by individual citizens looking to gain perspective on public issues.

Each guide is organized around several alternative ways of thinking about an issue, each with its own set of values, priorities, pros, cons and tradeoffs. The different perspectives are drawn both from what the public thinks about an issue, based on surveys and focus groups, as well as what experts and leaders say about it in policy debates.

Customizing to fit your situation

Note that the Choicework Guides are meant to help people start thinking and talking about an issue in productive ways— they are not meant to rigidly restrict thinking or dialogue. The perspectives described are not the only ways of dealing with the problem, nor are the viewpoints necessarily mutually exclusive in every respect. Many people would mix and match from different perspectives, or add additional related ideas.

Additionally, users of these guides have the option of providing various kinds of nonpartisan information along with them as context for a conversation. For instance, for a guide on an education topic, a few well-chosen facts about local schools might be a useful adjunct to the guide if you are using it in a group setting.

Public Agenda’s Community Conversations Model

Public Agenda often uses these guides (and, when available, their video counterparts) as discussion starters for community conversations as part of a larger program of community dialogue and action. Such conversations are frequently a solid first step toward new partnerships and initiatives.

Public Agenda’s approach to community conversations involves several principles and guidelines that can be flexibly applied to different settings:

- Local, nonpartisan sponsors/organizers
- Diverse cross-section of participants, “beyond the usual suspects”
- Small, diverse dialogue groups with trained moderators and recorders
- Nonpartisan discussion materials that help citizens weigh alternatives (Choicework)
- Strategic follow-up to connect dialogue to action

If you would like to learn more about Public Agenda’s approach to public engagement, or to see a full list of our Choicework Guides (including print and video versions), please visit our website www.publicagenda.org and click on “Public Engagement.”

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Will the *No Child Left Behind* Act Help All Students Succeed, Or are Improvements Needed?

**Introduction**

The national school reform legislation known as No Child Left Behind (or NCLB) was signed into law in January 2002 with bipartisan support, and applies to every public school in the nation. Its stated purpose is an ambitious one: To make sure that every student in every public school is learning at grade level by the year 2014.

To do this, NCLB requires that all teachers in core academic subjects be highly qualified, and that schools take measures to increase parent involvement. But perhaps its central mechanism for improving education is its approach to *school accountability*.

Under NCLB, students are tested frequently, and schools and districts are held accountable if they are too slow to improve results for their lower performing students. More specifically, under NCLB:

**Academic Standards**

Each state must develop clearly defined learning goals (called “academic standards”) for student achievement in reading and math that spell out what students should know and be able to do in each grade in these two fundamental areas.

**Testing**

Each state must also develop tests to determine if students are reaching these academic standards. These statewide tests must be given to virtually every student each year between the 3rd and 8th grades, and at least once in high school.

**District Report Cards**

The test data must be distributed widely through annual report cards that tell how many students are performing in each school at each of three levels: *basic*, *proficient* and *advanced*. 
“Disaggregating” the Data
The test data also must be “disaggregated”—that is, broken out—to show how
different kinds of students are doing. Under NCLB, test data is broken out by race,
gender, English language proficiency, migrant status, disability status, low-income
status, etc. This helps identify any achievement gaps that might exist between
different groups of students.

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)
The law requires that schools make “adequate yearly progress” or “AYP.” One thing
this means is that schools must significantly improve test scores each year for their
lowest performing students in each and every subgroup. They must make enough
progress that by the year 2014 virtually every student will be scoring at the
“proficiency” level or higher on the achievement tests.

Consequences
If a school fails to make adequate yearly progress for too long, various
consequences come into play. For example:

- After two years of failing to make AYP, a school is labeled “in need of
  improvement,” and parents must be allowed to transfer their children to a
  higher performing public school in the district at the district’s expense.
- After three years of failing to make AYP, low-income students must be offered
  out-of-school tutoring services, also at district expense.
- And after five years, a district must “restructure” the school, which could mean
  replacing most or all of the staff or turning the school over to a management
  company to run.

Meanwhile, schools that achieve at high levels, or make especially strong progress
in closing achievement gaps, can receive special recognition and awards.

Funding
Historically, federal funding from Washington covers only a small percentage of a
school’s budget, which mostly comes from local and state taxes. NCLB does not
significantly change this, although there have been funding increases in several
federal education programs and less regulation of how federal education dollars are
spent. Essentially, then, the law challenges schools to work more effectively with the
resources they have, on the assumption that increased accountability will achieve
NCLB’s goals.
What do you think?

Will NCLB’s accountability system lead to higher achievement for all students? Or, are changes needed to meet the goal of leaving no student behind? To help you and your neighbors decide for yourselves, we’ve created a discussion guide with three different approaches to NCLB. Which makes the most sense to you, and why?

Choicework

Approach A: Stay the course and give accountability under NCLB time to work

According to this approach, NCLB’s core concept—“If you expect more, you get more”—is the key to improving education. By expecting more of schools and educators, and by requiring that they expect more from all of their students—including those from so-called “disadvantaged” backgrounds—great strides will be made for virtually all children. As the Department of Education explains:

No Child Left Behind is designed to change the culture of America’s schools…Under the act’s accountability provisions, states must describe how they will close the achievement gap and make sure all students, including those who are disadvantaged, achieve academic proficiency.

Of course there is some the anxiety about NCLB and its accountability measures—but isn’t there always when dramatic change is afoot?—and NCLB is, more than anything else, pushing for strong change on behalf of all students. In fact, many of the complaints one hears about NCLB result from misperceptions about the law, or from fear by some that it might make their lives harder by demanding better results. But we should not let fear of change undermine NCLB. Failing to hold schools accountable permits too many students to fall through the cracks.

Too often in the past, school improvement initiatives have changed whenever the road gets rough, creating a seemingly endless string of “reforms du jour.” We should stay the course, and give NCLB the time it needs to accomplish its goals.
Those who like this approach say things like, “We can’t afford to go back to leaving schools unaccountable for results when so many students fail to learn at adequate levels.”

Those who disagree with this approach say things like, “It is already clear that there are too many problems with the law to just sit back and see what happens.”

Questions to consider about this approach:

- What are the downsides to this approach? What are the upsides to the others?
- How long should we wait before we decide if NCLB is the right approach or not?
- What are the indicators that it’s starting to work—or that it’s failing to have a positive impact?
- This approach seems to say we need to stick with NCLB exactly as it is or we’re giving up on accountability. Isn’t it possible to make refinements as we go without losing our commitment to accountability?
Approach B: Increase needed resources so schools have a realistic chance to succeed under NCLB

NCLB says that schools are going to be held responsible for increasing student achievement to levels never before seen—and not just for some students, but for virtually all of them. And we would all certainly like to see that happen. But it’s unrealistic and unfair to demand that level of performance when too many schools lack the resources they need to do the job.

In most places, most school funding comes from local property taxes. The result is that districts vary widely in the resources they can bring to their classrooms. Class size, computers, up-to-date textbooks, after-school programs—these and other critical educational programs and supports can vary drastically from district to district and school to school. The fact that NCLB gives districts more flexibility in how they spend federal education dollars they might receive is a step in the right direction. But it does almost nothing about there being too little funding in too many instances in the first place—especially because many NCLB requirements impose new costs on states and schools.

If we really want to reach the goals that NCLB sets, we’re going to have to put our money where our mouths are, and make sure that every school has the resources needed to achieve higher levels of performance.

Those who like this approach say things like, “Changing the accountability system needs to go hand-in-hand with increasing school funding for low-income school districts, or we're just setting ourselves—and our children—up to fail.”

Those who disagree with this approach say things like, “Waiting around for more money for schools is not only unrealistic, it is much less important in terms of getting results for our students than improving our approach to accountability.”

Questions to consider about this approach:

- What are the downsides to this approach? What are the upsides to the others?
- Aren’t there examples of schools that get lots of extra money but don’t make much progress, and other schools that make lots of progress without getting a lot of money at all? Doesn’t this mean that money is not the main thing?
- What about the argument in the video that, with all the budget problems we’re facing these days, we can’t wait around for more money before we start improving our schools?
- If our schools were to get more money, what would be the most important way to invest it in order to make sure that we “leave no student behind?”
**Approach C: Change NCLB’s approach to accountability to make it more flexible and constructive**

In this view, NCLB is correct that accountability is the single most important thing to focus on in order to improve student achievement, but it’s got to be the right kind of accountability or it will end up doing more harm than good.

Right now, NCLB relies too heavily on rigidly applied standardized tests, and on creating negative consequences when unrealistic goals cannot be reached. The upshot is a system that attempts to shame and blame schools into improving, instead of one that creates a positive attitude and builds up the skills and strategies needed to educate the wide range of students in America’s schools.

For instance, instead of relying solely on standardized tests, we should employ a variety of measures of student achievement, such as “portfolios” of student work that show their development over time. And the law should not be so rigid that it penalizes a school just because, for instance, several students who just transferred to the district three weeks before the state test fail to pass, even though they were educated in an entirely different district. Finally, rather than focusing almost solely on negative consequences for schools that do not make “adequate yearly progress,” the law should do more to ensure that teachers, administrators and parents have the skills and strategies they need to help all students meet NCLB’s goals.

*Those who like this approach* say things like, “Accountability is important, but it needs to be realistic, flexible and constructive if we want to make sure all students succeed.”

*Those who disagree with this approach* say things like, “‘Flexibility’ sounds good, but in practice it allows low expectations for this or that group of students to creep back into our schools. To be effective, accountability has to send a strong, clear message that all students can and must learn.”

**Questions to consider about this approach:**

- What are the downsides to this approach? What are the upsides to the others?
- What about those who call this a slippery slope to lower expectations for this or that group of students? Don’t all students deserve high expectations and equal treatment in our schools?
- Isn’t this an awfully complicated approach to school reform? Can we expect each school and teacher to figure it out for themselves, without a standardized approach guiding the effort?
- Standardized tests may not be perfect, but some people do argue they are an efficient and cost-effective way to track how well schools are doing. Is there really anything wrong with using standardized tests, as long as they are well designed?
Using the guide in a community conversation, discussion group or classroom setting

After discussing the choices on the previous pages, you may wish to consider and talk through the following questions.

Summarizing a Choicework Conversation
These questions are a good way to summarize a choicework dialogue, prior to considering more action-oriented questions.

1. In our conversation so far, have we discovered any common ground? What do we agree on or have in common?

2. What were our important areas of disagreement—the issues we may have to keep talking about in the future?

3. What are the questions and concerns that need more attention? Are there things we need more information about?

Bridging from Dialogue to Action
These questions can help you move from deliberation and dialogue about the issue at hand to actions that can help address the issue.

1. How can we work together to make a difference in our community on the issues we discussed today?

   Note: If this question generates a long list of potential actions, they can be prioritized by asking each person to list his or her top three ideas.

2. Is there anything that you, as individuals, might do, or do differently, as a result of today’s conversation?

3. What would you like to see happen to follow up on today’s conversation? What should the immediate follow-up steps be?