
What's Missing from No Child Left Behind? A Policy Analysis from a Social Work Perspective

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The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) initiated sweeping changes to the U.S. educational system. However, many have argued that NCLB is not accomplishing its stated purposes of improving education for disadvantaged students and closing the achievement gap. This policy analysis sheds light on the social and emotional risk factors that prevent students from succeeding in school but are missing from NCLB and contributing to its lack of effectiveness. Moreover, this article suggests that school social workers can alleviate these barriers to academic success by implementing school-based interventions to address the psychosocial factors that underlie differential achievement in school. School social workers can also advocate for changes in education policy to ensure that vulnerable students are not left behind.

KEY WORDS: *at-risk students; education policy; No Child Left Behind; school; school social work*

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is one of the most complex federal education policies in the history of the United States. One of the goals of NCLB is to close the achievement gap between white, economically advantaged students and those considered at risk for school failure (Orlich, 2004). Research shows that in addition to poor academic performance, the risk factors for school failure are overwhelmingly social factors (Frymier, 1992). However, NCLB primarily addresses academic failure, leaving many children at risk for poor school performance.

Although NCLB seeks to address school failure as an academic problem with academic interventions, a social work perspective considers other risk factors associated with school failure. For instance, school social workers often rely on the ecological perspective—the interaction between person and environment—when assessing problems in school (Germain, 1999). From the ecological perspective, risk factors for poor school performance are linked not only to school factors, but also to factors within the community, neighborhood, family, home, and personal characteristics of a student. Although NCLB has been the subject of a great deal of scholarly debate in education journals, it has

received only sporadic attention in the school social work literature. This article reviews a body of scholarly literature to show that the NCLB policy, which was intended to help at-risk students, does not address many of the social problems that contribute to the achievement gap. This article describes the achievement gap, highlights the components of NCLB meant to address the gap, addresses implications for social work, and suggests roles that social workers can play in eliminating the achievement gap.

THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP AND U.S. STUDENTS

In recent years, the achievement gap between white, economically advantaged students and students at risk of school failure—for instance, minority students and those of lower socioeconomic status—has become a primary concern in U.S. education (Shavelson & Huang, 2003). Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2007 reveal large gaps between reading and math scores for African American, Hispanic, and low-income students and those of white peers and students of higher socioeconomic status. For instance, African American, Hispanic, and low-income fourth-graders all scored an average of 26

points or more below their white peers on the NAEP reading assessment (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). Students of color and those with lower incomes are also more likely to drop out of school. In 2006, the percentage of young people ages 16 to 24 who had dropped out of high school was higher for African American students (10.7 percent) and Hispanic students (22.1 percent) than it was for white students (5.8 percent) (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics [ED, NCES], 2008). Similarly, the dropout rate for young people with family incomes in the lowest quartile range (17.9 percent) was substantially higher than that for young people with family incomes in the low middle (11.5 percent), high middle (7.1 percent), or upper quartile income ranges (2.7 percent) (ED, NCES, 2007).

OVERVIEW OF NCLB

NCLB is the most recent authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (P.L. 89-10). Although NCLB is a far-reaching policy with implications for many educational issues, this article focuses specifically on its impact on the achievement gap. NCLB aims to decrease the achievement gap and improve student performance so that 100 percent of U.S. students will meet predetermined standards in reading and math by the 2013–2014 school year (Hursh, 2005; Orlich, 2004). NCLB has three major requirements: that all states (1) develop content standards to determine what students should know, (2) administer assessments to measure whether students are meeting those standards, and (3) institute accountability mechanisms to ensure that all students attain the proficiency standards. States are required to test students regularly and report on their progress, which is measured by the percentage of students who make *adequate yearly progress* (AYP) by scoring at least at the “proficient” level (Hursh, 2005). At-risk students are also classified into several subgroups—including low-income students, minority students, students with disabilities, and students for whom English is a second language—so that their performance can be compared with that of their peers. Schools that fail to make AYP for their student population as

a whole or for any subgroup for two consecutive years are subject to monetary and organizational sanctions (Hursh, 2005). In addition, NCLB has requirements regarding use of scientifically based research, teacher quality, charter schools, student rights to academic support services, and development of parental involvement plans, among many other areas.

A stated purpose of NCLB is to “improve the academic achievement of the disadvantaged” by ensuring “that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (ED, 2002, 115 Stat 1439). Many believe that instead of being motivated by a desire to improve educational equity for disadvantaged students, NCLB was instead fueled by a fear that U.S. students were falling behind those of other industrialized nations and that this would lead to negative economic consequences for the United States (Shaker & Heliman, 2004). The use of technical requirements and the threat of sanctions are the driving forces motivating schools to use the resources that they have, forcing competition between schools to improve test scores and, thereby, improving educational quality for students (Herman, Baker, & Linn, 2004).

CONSEQUENCES OF NCLB

Intended Consequences of NCLB

Many authors have pointed out that NCLB has forced schools to address the education of traditionally underserved and underachieving students (Dworkin, 2005; Fusarelli, 2004). Schools must now turn their attention to at-risk students because, due to NCLB subgroup requirements, they cannot hide low scores for subgroups within school or district averages (Fusarelli, 2004). Even more important, accountability policies such as those included in NCLB have ensured that each state tests its students uniformly, regardless of school location, student demographics, or student disabilities. Similarly, NCLB has helped every state to expand and improve its data collection system. We now have more public information about student, school, and district academic achievement available to

parents and community members than ever before (Cizek, 2001).

In addition, NCLB has helped to improve the quality of leadership in some schools. Diamond and Spillane (2004) found that school leaders are highly responsive to high-stakes accountability policies, which can create a drive to improve instructional practices and student performance. In high-performing schools, test scores can be used to motivate staff and target specific skills for improvement (Diamond & Spillane, 2004). Some researchers have found that NCLB has contributed to new school leadership structures and creative instructional responses that benefit students (Fusarelli, 2004).

There have also been promising increases in standardized test scores in some states (Kober, Chudowsky, & Chudowsky, 2008), and some have reported a reduction in the achievement gap for minority and low-income students since the advent of NCLB (Belfiore, Auld, & Lee, 2005; Booher-Jennings, 2005; Haney, 2000). In an analysis of the four at-risk subgroups across all states with sufficient data, Kober et al. (2008) found that achievement gap effect sizes had narrowed in 184 instances, increased in 56 instances, and remained about the same in 30 instances. Therefore, although the achievement gap has narrowed in some states and increased in others, it has narrowed more than it has increased overall (Kober et al., 2008).

Unintended Consequences of NCLB

Although the data produced in response to NCLB show some state-by-state decreases in the achievement gap (Kober et al., 2008; Planty et al., 2008), national indicators reveal that poor urban schools and children in at-risk subgroups continue to severely underperform in comparison both with national averages and with their white and affluent counterparts (Belfiore et al., 2005; Planty et al., 2008). More important, some studies have found that the new accountability demands imposed by NCLB may be widening the achievement gap for at-risk students (Guisbond & Neill, 2004; Haney, 2000; K. Jones, 2004). For instance, accountability mechanisms based on test scores can have a disparate impact on schools with larger populations of minority and

low-income students (Dworkin, 2005; Guisbond & Neill, 2004; Koski & Weis, 2004). Small schools and those with highly concentrated at-risk and mobile populations, such as schools in urban and rural areas, are also more likely to fail to make AYP (Dworkin, 2005).

In addition, many schools do not start with a level playing field because of scarcity of resources, lack of qualified teachers, and lack of technical ability to fulfill accountability requirements (Guisbond & Neill, 2004; Koski & Weis, 2004). These schools are more likely to be subjected to financial and organizational sanctions, further depleting their usually limited resources and decreasing their ability to improve student achievement (Shavelson & Huang, 2003). This begins a cycle of failure in which schools are repeatedly punished for being unable to meet unreasonable standards (Orlich, 2004).

Even more concerning is the evidence that accountability systems are exacerbating problems such as grade retention rates and dropout rates for minority and low-income students, even in states that claim that the achievement gap is closing (Dworkin, 2005; Haney, 2000; Lipman, 2002; Urrieta, 2004). These phenomena have been linked to the intentional or unintentional retention of minority students in grades immediately preceding a "testing grade" and the "pushing out" of minority students who seem likely to negatively influence school test scores (Haney, 2000). This is especially concerning because students who have been retained are more likely to eventually drop out of school (Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 1997; Rumberger, 1995).

IMPLEMENTATION PROBLEMS

From its inception, NCLB has suffered from a host of implementation problems that have likely limited its effectiveness. NCLB is a federal policy that mandates performance requirements and a timeline that each state must meet. However, each state individually decides how it will meet these requirements on the basis of its own complex educational system. Consequently, NCLB is implemented differently across all 50 states, with varying content and performance standards, assessments, and sanctions (Lane, 2004; Linn, Baker,

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& Betebenner, 2002). This makes it difficult to compare NCLB test results across states. In addition, NCLB was severely underfunded from the start, forcing states to absorb the tremendous costs of the requirements largely with their own resources (Mathis, 2004).

Since the passage of NCLB, the research literature has pointed out substantial flaws in state implementation of accountability mechanisms. For instance, there are serious concerns about the use of standardized tests and whether these tests are reliable and valid indicators of student learning (Fuller, Wright, Gesicki, & Kang, 2007; Kirby et al., 2002). Similarly, because each state sets its own performance standards and cut points for adequate progress, both of which can change from year to year, it is difficult to tell whether students have improved in a given time frame or the standards and cut points were simply altered during that time (Fuller et al., 2007; Hursh, 2005; Lane, 2004). In many cases, state data have shown large increases in student performance, whereas nationwide exams assessing the same constructs show no improvement in student performance (Fuller et al., 2007; Haney, 2000; Linn, 2000, 2005; Moss, Pullin, Gee, & Haertel, 2005). These policy concerns, among others, may account for a large part of NCLB's failure to adequately close the achievement gap. Although the spirit of the legislation is laudable, the policy mechanisms implemented to achieve its goals have hampered its effectiveness. As social workers, however, we must also examine NCLB's failure to significantly decrease the achievement gap in terms of what is missing from the policy altogether.

WHAT IS NCLB MISSING?

If NCLB does not seem to be narrowing the achievement gap or adequately increasing the

achievement of the disadvantaged students that it targets, the question becomes this: What is NCLB missing? From a social work perspective, academic problems are often accompanied by larger emotional and social risk factors in a student's life, which can involve multiple systems (Frymier, 1992). To address academic concerns, social workers must target not only the academic indicators that NCLB focuses on, but also the other social systems that touch the lives of children. Although NCLB briefly touches on some social factors, such as the importance of parental support, it largely relies on high standards and testing to "fix" the achievement gap. The following sections explore both the barriers that NCLB seems to discount in relation to academic success and the literature that highlights the importance of alleviating these barriers for at-risk students.

Ethnicity, Poverty, and Inadequate School Resources

Although NCLB acknowledges and seeks to close the achievement gap, it does not address the systemic barriers that children face when they live in poverty or oppression. The solutions to differential achievement put in place by NCLB do not address the "roots of inequality" (Shealey, 2006). Urrieta (2004) stated that the policy creates an "assistencialist" education system in which education policy attacks the symptoms, but not the causes, of the problems it seeks to solve.

In the past, school reform efforts drew attention to the harmful effect of racial segregation in schools. Current NCLB legislation, however, has diverted the focus of education reform to holding all schools accountable to the same high standards (Borman et al., 2004). From a social work perspective, high student expectations are essential for academic success, but failure to account for segregation and structural inequalities sets up already disadvantaged schools to fail. It is clear that students from different communities respond to educational resources in different ways (Tuerk, 2005). However, NCLB does not take community differences or issues of multiculturalism and diversity into account (H. Jones, 2004). If NCLB continues to

neglect to consider the impact of community and, more broadly speaking, place on academic success, it is likely to fail in its goal to improve learning for all students (Gruenwald, 2003; Tuerk, 2005).

Gerstl-Pepin (2006) pointed out that in NCLB legislation, "race is emphasized to the point that poverty almost disappears" (p. 148). In her case study of a high-poverty school in which 100 percent of the students received free and reduced-price lunch, Gerstl-Pepin found that changes in curriculum and teaching were not enough to bring about improved learning. Instead, test scores were dramatically improved by directly addressing the effects of poverty. The staff at the school learned about, discussed, and targeted poverty and the way that it manifested in the behavior and learning of the students. Consequently, academic achievement improved only when the school used focused social and emotional interventions rather than academic interventions alone.

Similarly, Powers (2004) found that 78 percent of the statewide test scores in California could be explained by student background—for example, socioeconomic status, student mobility, and the percentage of students for whom English was a second language. She concluded that student success and failure continued to be based on student background characteristics, despite changes made to comply with accountability policies. To judge the academic progress of individuals, NCLB relies on test score data and psychometrics rather than exploring the educational impact of the relationships between student characteristics and available resources (Moss et al., 2005).

NCLB attempts to hold all schools to the same standards despite gross inequalities in the resources that schools have at their disposal (Borman et al., 2004). Although school social workers often assess the impact of structural and resource-based inequalities on students' ability to succeed, NCLB does not account for these differences. Schools with adequate resources tend to score better on academic indicators. However, per pupil spending at the school level is positively correlated with student achievement and test scores in reading (Archibald, 2006).

Resources such as participation in special programs, an abundance of extracurricular choices, the presence of summer programs, and the availability of challenging advanced classes all serve as protective factors that foster resilience in talented high school students (Reis, Colbert, & Hebert, 2005).

Poor schools, however, have fewer qualified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Tuerk, 2005), which is correlated with lower test scores (Powers, 2004). Lack of resources—for instance, the absence of challenging classes—is a risk factor for failure for even the most talented students (Reis et al., 2005). These facts are particularly problematic because funding disparities are often related to the socioeconomic status, racial composition, and geographic location of schools (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Schools that are poorer, have fewer resources, and employ fewer qualified teachers are simply unable to meet the standards set for schools that do possess these resources (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Lipman, 2002; Powers, 2004; Tuerk, 2005). Exacerbating this problem is the fact that NCLB is a federal policy that is unprecedented in the scope of its expectations for schools, especially given that education has historically been a state and local issue. Consequently, every local school system has its own policies and funding revenues with which to accomplish not only local goals but, now, federal goals as well. Addressing family and school inequities would mean addressing these local policies and funding efforts, which is problematic on a federal level. Nevertheless, NCLB offers few resources to schools that are failing, even when one of the causes of the failure seems to be a lack of funding (Dworkin, 2005).

Personal and Family Characteristics

Even though the research literature in education has long identified personal and family characteristics as risk factors regarding academic achievement, NCLB does not adequately take these factors into account. For instance, policy stipulations do not address the impact of nutrition, adequate housing, safe communities, or adequate health care on a child's ability to attend and excel in school beyond implying that even students in difficult situations should

be expected to perform academically. When families do not have access to such services and conditions, children are more likely to struggle academically (Gerstl-Pepin, 2006; Mathis, 2004). Personal and family problems such as abuse and a lack of parental supervision are risk factors for underachievement (Price, Pepper, & Brocato, 2006). In addition, family mobility, often a result of lack of steady housing or employment, is negatively correlated with school success (Borman et al., 2004).

The presence of a mental health problem also makes students more likely to underachieve. It is estimated that 20 percent of children have mental health problems severe enough to impede their learning, but only one-fifth of these children receive the services that they need (Prodent, Sander, & Weist, 2002; Repie, 2005). NCLB does little to address student mental health and its influence on academic success, with the exception of stating that states can apply for federal funds to address student mental health concerns (ED, 2002). Consequently, some scholars have argued that NCLB overlooks the overall well-being of children in schools (Price et al., 2006).

Research on academic achievement has identified protective factors that promote educational success. Characteristics such as belief in self, determination, independence, and cultural appreciation all help students from poor, urban settings to excel (Reis et al., 2005). However, when schools are focused on test scores and a narrow curriculum, it is difficult to summon the creativity and effort needed to assist students in developing these traits. As a result, students are not able to tap into resiliency-promoting traits that make them less likely to lag behind academically or to drop out of school. Overall, NCLB is not contextualized by student situation and family characteristics, and test scores are not interpreted with these important factors in mind (Grobe & McCall, 2004).

Quality of the School Environment

The quality of the school environment is recognized as a major contributor to student learning, yet it is not addressed in NCLB (Urrieta, 2004). Positive school environments are those in which students feel supported by adults, have positive

peer networks, and feel safe (Patton et al., 2000). Supportive peers and caring adults can help students to succeed in school, and they have a positive effect on students who are struggling academically (Brooks, 2006; Reis et al., 2005). Conversely, lack of positive peer networks is a risk factor for academic underachievement (Reis et al., 2005). When schools foster feelings of connectedness, students experience less emotional distress, exhibit fewer violent behaviors, are less likely to use alcohol and other substances, and have a later age at sexual debut (Resnick et al., 1997). Conversely, feelings of alienation and disengagement in middle and high school students leave them at risk for increased truancy, absenteeism, and dropout (Patton et al., 2000).

Teacher attitudes and beliefs contribute to the positive or negative atmosphere of a school environment. For instance, teachers' beliefs about student abilities often contribute to students' likelihood of succeeding in school (Ferri & Connor, 2005). Poor interactions with teachers are a risk factor for student failure (Reis et al., 2005). NCLB has the potential to improve teacher attitudes toward and relationships with at-risk students by requiring teachers to raise their expectations for these students. Many authors agree that one of the major strengths of NCLB is that it forces schools and teachers to find new ways to help at-risk students to succeed in the classroom (Dworkin, 2005; Fusarelli, 2004). However, studies have found that NCLB has contributed to significant increases in job stress for teachers (Valli & Buese, 2007). This job stress, combined with the threat of professional penalties if their students do not perform, has negatively influenced teachers' professional motivation (Finnigan & Gross, 2007), and it can even hurt their relationships with students (Valli & Buese, 2007). These negative consequences are exacerbated in schools that struggle to achieve AYP (Finnigan & Gross, 2007).

When teachers believe that student underachievement results from factors that cannot be overcome in the school environment (for example, poverty, students being already too far behind grade level), it can have a negative effect on their behavior toward and expectations for

individual students (Belfiore et al., 2005). In Booher-Jennings's (2005) study, for instance, teachers classified some students as "hopeless" and directed their attention and efforts toward others who were more likely to pass the state assessment. This phenomenon is likely a result of the strain that high-stakes testing places on teachers as they attempt to prove their effectiveness through student test scores (Booher-Jennings, 2005). Similarly, teachers tend to leave schools that have larger proportions of under-achieving students for schools that have larger proportions of higher achieving students (Rice & Malen, 2003). Thus, NCLB may be reinforcing negative expectations for some students rather than encouraging the same high standards for all students, as is its intent.

WHAT CAN SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS DO?

Scholars and taxpayers have long argued that schools should not be solely responsible for addressing social problems. Berliner (2006) has even pointed out that the alleviation of family poverty through larger societal means is a more realistic mechanism for narrowing the achievement gap and improving school performance than are education policies. However, the social and emotional risk factors outlined in this article pose a large enough threat to student achievement that policies such as NCLB cannot be expected to succeed unless these conditions are adequately addressed. Focusing federal education policies on both academic interventions and interventions that address these risk factors could be a more effective means for closing the achievement gap.

School social workers are often assigned to work with students in the at-risk subgroups defined by NCLB. Research demonstrates that alleviating the social and emotional barriers that at-risk students face increases their likelihood of achieving in school (Brooks, 2006; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Gerstl-Pepin, 2006; Reis et al., 2005). NCLB does not mandate interventions to address the many additional barriers to learning that students in at-risk subgroups are likely to face and that contribute to the educational achievement gap. However, school social work-

ers can take a lead role in helping students to overcome these obstacles and in bringing these policy issues to the forefront. School social workers are in a unique position to intervene on behalf of students at risk and, thus, to help ensure their academic success. School social workers are equipped with knowledge of the structural, social, and emotional barriers to learning, especially for vulnerable students.

Ethnicity, Poverty, and Inadequate School Resources

School social workers can help to alleviate the achievement gap by working within the current system of educational reform. They can educate school staff members about the impact of poverty and racism on students' ability to perform in the classroom. By teaching schools how to address poverty and racism head-on, school social workers can help schools to improve both educational achievement and quality of life for their students. Examples of ways that poverty could be addressed directly in schools include holding regular in-service sessions for teachers on how poverty may affect student behavior; establishing a committee to address the physical needs of students (for example, school supplies, nutritious foods, seasonally appropriate clothing); making connections with local social services agencies to help families in need of employment, health care, or housing; and adapting the curriculum to include themes relevant to students' lives.

Similarly, school social workers can help schools to become culturally competent in their interactions with students. Social workers can assist schools in broadening the multicultural education they offer to students beyond pro forma "cultural appreciation" weeks or celebrations of Black History Month. Social workers can show teachers how to develop multicultural themes that extend to every classroom throughout the school year.

Finally, school social workers can address resource inequalities, school segregation, and the impact of NCLB at the macro level. Because NCLB is not working, social workers need to have a voice in how the policy might be improved by addressing the impact that ethnicity,

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poverty, and inadequate school resources have on academic achievement. As members of a profession that focuses on social and emotional barriers to change, social workers have a unique perspective to lend to policymakers regarding both the successes of and the flaws in NCLB.

Personal and Family Characteristics

School social workers can identify students with personal and family problems that interfere with their ability to do well in school, and they can assist these students in accessing the support services they need. Social workers can assess students for mental health problems, substance abuse problems, and problems in the home environment. They can offer school-based interventions to begin to overcome these obstacles. For example, research has described successful school-based interventions that improve behavior and social functioning for at-risk students (Newsome, 2005) and facilitate meaningful mentoring relationships between adults and low-income students to increase attendance (Volkman & Bye, 2006). The creation of school-based health and mental health centers can help students and their families receive comprehensive health care, individual or family counseling, or other vital services that may improve academic performance.

More important, school social workers must monitor the impact of their services on academic achievement. Evidence that school social work services improve academic functioning and decrease the risk of dropout for at-risk students will give weight and value to those services. It will also show teachers, administrators, and policymakers how social and emotional problems contribute to the achievement gap and how social interventions can help to ameliorate this problem. If school social workers fail to tie their

interventions to academic indicators, they run the risk of being seen as inessential in the school setting. More important, if the goal of most schools is to ensure that students live up to their full academic potential, it is the responsibility of school social workers to prove that they are helping schools to accomplish this goal.

Quality of the School Environment

School social workers can have a major impact on the quality of the school environment. They can help students form positive peer relationships and help teachers understand the impact that their attitudes have on student achievement. Instituting schoolwide character education programs can teach students to have respect for one another. Peer mediation programs, friendship groups, and bullying prevention programs are all interventions that can teach students to tolerate differences and encourage positive interactions. In addition, it is important for school social workers to understand the amount of stress that policies such as NCLB place on teachers. School social workers should offer support to teachers and help them to address their classroom concerns, especially for at-risk students. When social workers help to alleviate behavior problems in the classroom, students are better able to focus on instruction, and teachers have more time to focus on academics and may have more positive interactions with students.

Finally, school social workers need to enter the discourse on education policy and reform on behalf of vulnerable student populations. Although there are decades' worth of research on psychosocial interventions that help remove barriers to academic success, this knowledge is not widely available in the field of education. The social work literature lacks information about how NCLB has affected or changed the provision of school social work services, and it has not addressed the social impact of NCLB on students' attitudes toward school or their relationships with teachers. In addition, there has been little research on the effect that school social work interventions have in helping students to meet the testing requirements of NCLB. School failure and the achievement gap are multifaceted problems that will likely require solutions that

address both academic and social factors. Social workers should advocate for education policy change that looks beyond test scores to the multidisciplinary best practices that help at-risk students succeed in school. **CS**

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