How Bush Education Law Has Changed Our Schools

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Monday, 08 January 2007

By Greg Toppo, USA TODAYIt's driving teachers crazyIt's narrowing what many schools teach'Invisible' students get attentionIt's making the school day longerIt's changing how reading is taught

The walls are speaking these days at Stanton Elementary School in Philadelphia, and they're talking about test scores. Post-It notes with children's names tell the story of how, in just five years, a federal law with a funny name has changed school for everyone. "We spend most of our days talking about or looking at data," principal Barbara Adderley says. Test scores run her week. She meets with kindergarten teachers on Monday, first-grade teachers on Tuesday and so on. The meetings begin with a look at each teacher's "assessment wall," filled with color-coded Post-Its representing each pupil and whether he or she is making steady progress in basic skills. Once students master a skill, the Post-Its move up the wall. "If they don't move, then we have to talk about what's happening," Adderley says. What's driving the talk? President Bush's landmark education law, dubbed No Child Left Behind. A cornerstone of Bush's domestic agenda and one of his few truly bipartisan successes, it took what was once a fairly low-key funding vehicle (it was known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act before Bush borrowed the catchy name from the Children's Defense Fund) and turned it into a vast — and contentious — book of federal mandates. At its simplest, the law aims to improve the basic skills of the nation's public school children, particularly poor and minority students. At Stanton, it seems to have made a difference. In 2003, fewer than two in 10 kids here met state reading standards; by 2005, about seven in 10 did. The law turns 5 years old today. It faces a tough future as Congress prepares to reauthorize it — a group of 100 education, religion and civil rights leaders today announces an effort calling for "major changes." Is it improving education nationwide? It's too early to tell — many schools didn't get around to enacting most of its more than 1,000 pages of regulations until two or three years ago. U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings says the law wasn't being fully implemented in all 50 states until 2006. But one thing is certain: No Child Left Behind has had a major influence on the daily experience of school for millions of kids. Here are five big ways it's changing schools.

{mospagebreak title=It is driving teachers crazy}It's driving teachers crazy Here's a pretty safe rule of thumb: Start in the classroom and travel up the educational food chain. The further you travel, the more you'll find that people like the law. Mention it to most teachers and they'll just roll their eyes. Many principals tolerate it. Ask a local superintendent, a state superintendent or a governor and the assessment gets rosier as their suit gets more expensive. Carmen Meléndez quit her job as a bilingual language arts teacher at an elementary school last spring in Orange County, Fla., after the law prompted her principal to institute 90-minute reading blocks and a scripted curriculum — in the process making individualized instruction impossible. Meléndez also found that she couldn't teach poetry anymore. "It was insane," she says. "The kids were all jaded. They were tired — they hated school." Most of the frustration, teachers will tell you, comes from the stress of mandated math and reading tests. The law requires that virtually all children be tested each year starting in third grade — and it doles out growing penalties if schools don't raise scores each year. Naturally, test day in most schools is fraught with tension. "They're 8 years old, and they're so worried about a passing score," Meléndez says. "I think that's inhumane." Dianne Campbell, director of testing and accountability in Rockingham County, N.C., told the American School Board Journal in 2003 that administrators discard as many as 20 test booklets on exam days because children vomit on them. Also, many state rating systems (which often predated No Child Left Behind) now end up celebrating the same schools the federal law slams. Longstreet Elementary School in Daytona Beach, Fla., has scored high on the state ratings for five years, but Longstreet is one of 21 Volusia County schools due for "corrective action" this year under the law. "Our parents are thrilled at what happens at our school — and a lot of what happens at our school has nothing to do with No Child Left Behind," says counselor Bill Archer. Jack Jennings of the Center on Education Policy, a Washington education research group, says some of the testing actually helps drive better instructional strategies and, in that respect, is helpful. But he says teachers tell him they're overwhelmed by the sheer volume of testing, which can last six weeks in some schools. "I don't think you can go into a teacher meeting in the country without somebody bringing up No Child Left Behind," he says. After five years, the law has even spawned an online petition that, as of Sunday, had about 22,500 signatures of people urging Congress to repeal it. Along with his signature, teacher Mark Quig-Hartman of Vallejo, Calif., said: "I am well on my way to becoming an embittered and mediocre teacher who heretofore considered teaching to be a profession, not a job. I once loved what I did. I do not now, nor do my students; school has become a rather grim and joyless place for all." Teachers' unions have often been the law's loudest critics. One top National Education Association official even entertained the NEA's 2004 conference in Washington by appearing onstage with an acoustic guitar and singing a protest song with this unforgettable hook: "If we have to test their butts off, there'll be no child's behind left." And if you think it's just teachers who complain, think again: 2006 saw even the law's most ardent supporters complaining, but for a very different reason: They say states and school districts game the system by lowering their standards. Because the law allows each state to set its own pass/fail bar on skills tests, "proficient" means something different depending on which state you live in. The percentage of Missouri fourth-graders at or above "proficient" in English is only 35%, but 89% of Mississippi fourth-graders meet that state's standards. In math, only 39% of Maine fourth-graders are proficient or better; in North Carolina, 92% are. Philadelphia Public Schools CEO Paul Vallas jokes that to really improve scores in his city, he could make classes smaller and modernize buildings. "Or we can give everyone the Illinois test," he says.

{mospagebreak title=It is narrowing what many schools teach}It's narrowing what many schools teach If nothing else, the

law's first five years have proved the maxim "What gets tested gets taught." The law's annual testing requirements in math and reading have led many schools to pump up the amount of time they spend teaching these two staples — often at the expense of other subjects, such as history, art or science. Jennings found that 71% of districts are reducing time on other subjects in elementary school. "What we're getting under (the law) is a very strong emphasis on building skills at the expense of history and literature and science," says researcher Thomas Toch of the Education Sector, a Washington think tank. Other critics say the law has created a "complexity gap." Children in lower grades have made improvements — some impressive — in basic skills, but the improvements vanish in middle school and beyond, when kids are tested on more complex conceptual thinking. Brown University researcher Martin West this fall compared federal data from 2000 and 2004, and found that since No Child Left Behind, elementary schools have spent, on average, 23 fewer minutes a week on science and 17 fewer minutes on history. He also found that in states that test history and science each spring, teachers spend about half an hour more a week on each subject. He also found, oddly, that after a large jump in the 1990s, schools actually spend a few minutes less a week on math — but they still spend more than twice as much time on math than on either history or science. And they spend more than twice as much time on reading and language as on math. "Schools really do respond to the incentives that are provided to them," West says. "That places a huge premium on getting the incentives correct." But he and others aren't quite ready to say the law is dumbing down school. Researcher Jane Hannaway of the Urban Institute theorizes that improved reading skills may help children understand other topics, even if they're spending less class time on them. She recently looked at Texas fourth-graders' standardized test scores and found that they had some of the nation's highest marks in science — even though they don't tackle science until fifth grade. One possible theory? The children in Texas were simply able to read the test questions better.

{mospagebreak title=Invisable students getting attention}'Invisible' students get attention Even opponents of No Child Left Behind grudgingly concede that, five years out, the law has revolutionized how schools look at poor, minority and disabled children in big cities, who often find themselves struggling academically. It forces schools to look at test score data in a whole new light, breaking out the scores into 35 or more "subgroups." If even one group fails to make "Adequate Yearly Progress," or AYP, in a year, the whole school is labeled as "in need of improvement." Perhaps most significant, the law has given a handful of big-city superintendents the political leverage to make radical changes — they can now make the case that "federal requirements" make them necessary. In Philadelphia, public schools CEO Paul Vallas invoked the law when, in one school year, 2002-03, he replaced all of the city's elementary and middle school math and language arts textbooks and hired Kaplan, the test-prep company, to write a standardized core curriculum. He pumped up full-day kindergarten and preschool — Philly students are now 50% more likely to have attended preschool than before the law — and instituted extended-day math and reading programs for struggling students. "No Child Left Behind gave us the cover to do it," he says. In the past three years, he also has dismissed 750 teachers who didn't meet minimum standards the law put in place. "We would have never been able to do that without the federal (Sword of) Damocles hanging over our head," he says. Superintendents in New York City, Chicago, San Diego and elsewhere have made similar — and sometimes bigger — changes under the cover of No Child Left Behind. Spellings says the law has had similar effects nationwide. "It has built an appetite to pay attention to kids who have been overlooked previously," she says. A few observers, such as Mike Petrilli, a former top Bush administration official, say the law has been felt most keenly by suburban school districts, where for years low achievers weren't a priority because high-achieving kids could bring up the district average. Petrilli, who now works for the Fordham Foundation, a conservative Washington think tank, says the idea of breaking out poor and minority kids' scores was "really revolutionary" in most suburbs. It has prompted many suburban districts in places such as Montclair, N.J.; Shaker Heights, Ohio; and Evanston, Ill., to form a co-op that shares ways to help once-neglected minority kids. "There's general agreement that (the law) has created more of a sense of urgency," says education blogger and Virginia State Board of Education member Andrew Rotherham. What that looks like in individual schools varies, but in many, "urgency" is not pretty. "It really has brought the Hounds of Hell down on the schools of Prince William County," says Betsie Fobes, a recently retired eighth-grade algebra and pre-algebra teacher at Parkside Middle School in Manassas, Va. "This AYP business is just killing us — absolutely killing us." Parkside, which has seen a large Latino influx, didn't meet its goals two years in a row — so now teachers must attend twice-weekly meetings, often focused on testing. They've built in a tutorial period, and even secretaries do their share of tutoring. "The entire school is revolving pretty much around these kids who fit into these subgroups," Fobes says.{mospagebreak title=It is Making the day longer} It's making the school day longer If a restaurant takes 12 eggs and makes a lousy omelette, will adding another two eggs make it better? If a school can't teach a child to read in seven hours, will eight do the trick? Under No Child Left Behind, the answer is: Probably yes. The law requires schools that don't make adequate yearly progress to offer free transfers to a better-performing public school. If results don't improve the next year, the school must begin offering free after-school tutoring — in many cases with classes taught by the school's own teachers with whom the kids were failing during the school day. William Bennett, Ronald Reagan's education secretary, invoked the egg metaphor, and as it turns out, a lot of families — and teachers — are willing to try the omelette. In the 2004-05 school year, 1.4 million students were eligible for the tutoring, and about 17% took advantage of it. Spellings says the tutoring is often provided by different teachers from the ones a kid sees during the regular day. Perhaps more important, she says, the law is forcing large districts such as Los Angeles to figure out how to keep kids from needing tutoring in the first place. "They're … sitting there thinking, 'What the heck? How can we have so many kids who can't get to grade level in the course of the school day? What needs to happen in the school day different?' "{mospagebreak title= It is Changing How Reading is Taught} It's changing how reading is taught Forget everything else No Child Left Behind stands for. If it does nothing else, advocates say, it will have improved poor kids' reading in unprecedented ways. A few say it already has. The law

gives schools $1 billion a year to spend on reading and focuses it, laser-like, on 5,600 schools that serve the nation's poorest 1.8 million kids. It starts with kids as soon as they enter school and, so far, has trained 103,000 teachers on "scientifically based" reading strategies heavy in phonics, step-by-step lessons and practice, practice, practice. And because many schools build their reading programs around what primary grades do, it could affect millions more students' reading skills. How could it fail? Easily, say critics such as Susan Ohanian. She points to overly scripted reading curricula and a curious little reading test called DIBELS, which makes it easy to rate children's reading skills, in part by asking them to look at nonsense words; it then rates them on their ability to read the words aloud — very quickly. "I have never seen anything like this," says Ohanian, a former New York teacher who blogs about education in general and No Child Left Behind in particular. She bemoans the loss of teacher autonomy and says DIBELS is one of its worst symptoms. "I don't dispute that it's quick and easy and it's a tool — and if you just used it that way, I probably wouldn't have a problem with it," she says. But she adds: "They're using DIBELS to hold kids back in kindergarten. And that's where it becomes really evil. Some kids are just not ready for that skills stuff."{mospagebreak title=What Did Not Change} P.S. WHAT DIDN'T CHANGE?

• Most students still attend their neighborhood schools. One of the law's edgier proposals gives parents the chance to send their kids to a better-performing or in some cases safer public school. Free-market reformers predicted this would improve all schools by making them compete head-to-head. That hasn't happened. Fewer than 1% of eligible students last year took the chance to transfer to a new school more than 5 million were eligible, but only 47,543 did, the Education Department says.

• Teachers complain, but they still love their jobs. In fact, there's reason to believe they love their jobs more. An October survey by MetLife found that 90% of teachers were "very satisfied" or "somewhat satisfied" with teaching as a career. While that's a shade lower than in 2001 (when it was 92%), this year 56% were "very satisfied" with teaching, up from only 52% in 2001.

Fears that No Child Left Behind would turn young people off to teaching also may be unfounded: Teach for America, the alternative training program that sends new college grads to teach in urban and rural schools, just had its best year, with 18,968 applications.

• The public still loves its schools. Critics worried that the law's gadfly approach to schools that aren't getting the job done would turn the public against public schools. But the law has had virtually no effect: A 2006 Educational Testing Service survey found that 66% of parents gave their kids' school an "A" or "B." In 2001, before President Bush signed the law, the figure was 65%. {mospagebreak title=4th Grade Reading Scores State and Federal} 4TH GRADE READING: A STATE/FEDERAL COMPARISON

No Child Left Behind requires virtually all students to improve their reading and math skills but allows states to set their own academic standards. Here is how states fare when comparing their fourth-graders' performances on state reading tests with those on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a federally required test. (Figures are for the percentage of fourth-graders "proficient" or better on state and NAEP tests in 2005.) State State results Federal results Alabama 83% 22% Alaska 78% 27% Arizona 68% 24% Arkansas 52% 30% California 47% 21% Colorado 64% 37% Connecticut 67% 38% Delaware 85% 34% D.C. 24%{+3} 11% Florida 71% 30% Georgia 87% 26% Hawaii 56% 23% Idaho 87% 33% Illinois 60% 29% Indiana 75% 30% Iowa 78% 33% Kansas 78% 32% Kentucky 68% 31% Louisiana 21% 20% Maine 53% 35% Maryland 74% 32% Massachusetts 50% 44% Michigan 82% 32% Minnesota 81% 38% Mississippi 89% 18% Missouri 35% 33% Montana 75% 36% Nebraska 79% 34% Nevada 43% 21% New Hampshire {+1} 39% New Jersey 82% 37% New Mexico 52% 20% New York 70% 33% North Carolina 83% 29% North Dakota {+1} 35% Ohio 77% 34% Oklahoma 83% 25% Oregon 81% 29% Pennsylvania 64% 36% Rhode Island 67% 30% South Carolina 36% 26% South Dakota 87% 33% Tennessee{+2} 27% Texas 79% 29% Utah{+1} 34% Vermont {+1} 39% Virginia 85% 37% Washington 80% 36% West Virginia 81% 26% Wisconsin 82% 33% Wyoming 47% 34%

1 2005 data not available
2 Tennessee does not report grade-specific results
3 Figures for fifth-graders' reading scores

Source: The Education Trust