
The Impact of the Pressures to Make Adequate Yearly Progress on Teachers in a Midwest Urban School District: A Qualitative Analysis

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Introduction

The Urban Education Research Team at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville has been studying the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) since early 2006. This research has been largely supported by a grant from the Institute for Urban Research at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. The general research agenda of this team has been to focus specifically upon the academic and the job satisfaction implications of the failure of identified schools to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on both the teachers and administrators in those schools. The preliminary qualitative survey responses of teachers in four pilot schools are analyzed in this study with an eye toward addressing the issues of student academic achievement and educator job satisfaction. These four schools: two elementary schools; a middle school; and a high

school, are located in the metro-East area of Illinois, near St Louis, Missouri. The middle school and senior high school included in the current study have not made AYP for four consecutive years. The four schools are located in the same school district, which educates nearly 4,400 students. The district has a large minority population and a very significant low-income count. For example, the percentage of African-American students in the pilot district is 87.9%, compared with a statewide average of 19.9%. Conversely, the percentage of White students is 11%, as opposed to an Illinois average of 55.7%. The percentage of low-income students is 83.1%, compared with a statewide average of 40%. These figures are taken from the 2006 Illinois School Report Card.

Background

The No Child Left Behind Act was signed into law by President George W. Bush on January 8, 2002. While this legislation contains many provisions with serious implications for the nation's public schools, one of the best known requirements of the law is that 100 % of all public school students must make AYP in their academic studies by the year 2014. Student performance is measured on a school-by-school basis, and if an insufficient percentage of students fail to make adequate progress, then the school fails to make AYP. It is also possible for entire school districts to fail to make AYP.

One of the unusual aspects of this federal act is that each state has been given the authority to develop its own assessment standards and instruments to determine whether students are making AYP. Thus, it is possible, and quite likely, that the hurdles that students must clear in order to make AYP will vary from state-to-state. The actual instruments used to test students also differ among the states. The current subgroups under NCLB are students from racial/ethnic groups (White, Black, Hispanic, Native American, Asian-Pacific Islander, and multi-ethnic), economically disadvantaged students (free and reduced lunch), students with disabilities, limited English proficient (L.E.P.) students, and male and female.

While failure to make AYP under NCLB has already become an issue in all types of school districts throughout the nation, this effect has been felt the earliest and perhaps the most strongly in many of the nation's urban schools. Urban schools tend to educate a disparate number of the nation's ethnic minorities, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities. At the same time, these same schools are often those without the level of resources needed in order to address the academic issues brought to light under NCLB. Students, teachers,

and administrators alike suffer morale problems in lower-performing schools. One failure leads to another, and soon, those in the school are caught in a downward spiral of emotions. Nichols (2005) addresses this phenomenon by stating:

So, once a school has been labeled failing, the children of that school belong to a failure. Leaving that school may not be a real option for many of the children, so they are stuck in an inferior school. Further, each such labeling depresses the job quality of the teachers and administrators in those schools. (p. 177)

Within this context, the Urban Education Research Team examined the attitudes and beliefs of educators in four pilot schools.

Literature Review

The U. S. Department of Education (2007) concluded that high standards, accountability, more choices for parents, and sound, proven methods of instruction have yielded real and sustainable results. The Center on Educational Policy (2006) published a comprehensive and thorough study of the results of state tests. The study was based on testing data from all 50 states and addressed two key questions concerning NCLB: (1) Has student achievement increased, and (2) Have achievement gaps narrowed since NCLB was enacted in 2002? The report concluded that student achievement in reading and mathematics has increased since NCLB and the number of states in which achievement gaps among groups of students narrowed far exceeds the number of states where gaps widened since 2002. The rationale for the results was attributed to several reasons: (a) increased learning, (b) teaching to the test, (c) more lenient tests, (d) scoring or data analyses, and (e) changes in the populations tested. Using the percentage of students considered proficient and effect sizes as the two methods for evaluating achievement, researchers could not link the gains directly to NCLB.

A report commissioned by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University (Owens & Sunderman, 2006) concerning the effects of NCLB compared scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) with state assessment results. The study found that state assessment results show improvements in mathematics and reading, but students are not showing similar gains on the NAEP. The study also determined that the federal accountability rules have little or no impact on racial and poverty gaps. It reviewed state progress towards meeting NCLB accountability requirements and concluded that states are not moving out of improvement status. Among the findings: (a) schools most likely to be identified as needing improvement are highly segregated

and enroll a disproportionate share of a state's minority and low income students, (b) many schools are not moving out of improvement status but instead moving into the fourth or fifth year of school improvement, (c) NCLB concentrates sanctions in schools serving disadvantaged and minority students, and (d) new schools continue to be added to the list of schools needing improvement.

Earlier studies confirmed, through surveys of educators, that the NCLB model promotes teaching to the test and narrowing the curriculum. Pedulla, Abrams, Madaus, Russell, Ramos, and Miao (2003) conducted a national survey of teachers on the perceived effects of state mandated testing on teaching and learning. Study results showed that the severity of consequences attached to state tests affects the instruction students receive; as the stakes increased the influence of the tests increased. Also of significance, teachers in high-stakes situations reported feeling more pressure to have their students do well on the test and to align their instruction with the test and to engage in more test preparation. In an earlier study, Clarke, Shore, Rhoades, Abrams, Miao, and Lie (2002) conducted a National Board study to identify the effects of state-level standards-based reform on teaching and learning. This was a qualitative study where on-site interviews were conducted with 360 teachers in three states in the following areas: (a) the effects of the state standards on classroom practice, (b) the effects of the state test on classroom practice, and (c) the effects of the state test on students. The authors concluded that a one-size-fits all model of standards, tests, and accountability is unlikely to bring about the greatest motivation and learning for all students.

Mintrop and Trujillo (2005) examined lessons learned from studying experiences of states that instituted accountability systems prior to 2001. Among other conclusions, they found that the pressure strategies of high-stakes accountability systems decreases teacher commitment, particularly in low-performing schools, and those systems can result in de-motivating those teachers. In a qualitative case study of a high poverty school in the northeast, Gersti-Pepin and Woodside-Jiron (2005) found that NCLB creates a disconnect between the lived culture of high poverty schools and the inflexible mandates. Guisbond and Neill (2004) concluded that "for the federal government to truly contribute to enhancing the quality of education for low-income and minority group students, NCLB must be overhauled" (p. 12).

Methodology

This qualitative study was guided by Fishbein's theory of attitude formation and change (Fishbein, 1963). Essentially, the theory posits

that attitude toward an object (such as one's current position) is formed by a set of beliefs about attributes of the object (e.g., "my work is often fulfilling," "my work drains me emotionally"). The researchers operationalized teachers' job satisfaction as attitude toward their work (current positions) and investigated their beliefs about their work using methods suggested by Pryor and Pryor (2005). Participants were 42 teachers; six of these elementary, 23 middle school, and 13 high school, as well as one high school principal, one middle school principal, and two elementary school principals.

The beliefs of the 46 participants about what they liked and disliked about their work were elicited by open-ended response format questions in a questionnaire format. The questions asked of the teachers were the following:

1. When you think about your *current* work as an educator, what are the things you *like* about your work? (Please number each *different* thing);
2. When you think about your *current* work as an educator, what are the things you *dislike* about your work? (Please number each *different* thing); and
3. What instructional practices have you changed in the past five years? (Please number each *different* thing, but if you have not been teaching for five years, please skip this item).

Administrators were asked exactly the same three questions with only one difference in wording on the third question:

3. What *administrative* practices have you changed in the past five years?

These qualitative data were content analyzed into a set of modally salient attribute belief statements.

Results

In response to the first research question regarding the positives that teachers enjoy in the pilot schools, there were many items listed. These positive citations and comments tended to fall into similar thematic areas, regardless of the grade levels represented by the respondents. Many teachers, in all four schools, mentioned their joy in working with students. Teachers were generally positive about their students and often mentioned the enthusiasm exhibited by those in their classes. Several teachers specifically commented upon those "aha" moments, or

those moments when the “light bulb” came on for specific students. In the words of one elementary teacher (Elementary School 1, Teacher 3, May 12, 2006), “I love watching children grow and seeing the light turn on when they achieve academic goals.” A middle school teacher (Middle School, Teacher 2, May 12, 2006) mentioned, “seeing a student’s eyes brighten when a concept is fully understood.” A high school teacher (High School, Teacher 2, May 12, 2006) weighed in by stating, “I enjoy the daily interaction with students. I even enjoy the struggles because it makes me smile to see the metaphoric light bulb go on inside their brains.”

In a similar vein, teachers in all four buildings frequently mentioned their excellent professional colleagues. When reading the comments of teachers regarding their co-workers, it was not unusual to see terms such as “inspiring, excellent, and fantastic.”

There were positive comments that were somewhat unique to each of the levels surveyed, however. At the elementary level, there seemed to be a real appreciation for curriculum guides that had been developed at each grade level. Several references were made to the curriculum guides in the written comments of the elementary teachers. Illustrative of this are the comments of one teacher (Elementary School 1, Teacher 1, May 12, 2006) who stated, “Curriculum guides for the grade levels are a great help to new teachers.” In a similar fashion, an elementary teacher in another building (Elementary School 2, Teacher 5, May 12, 2006) applauded the “...definite curriculum guide with a timeline that tells you what to teach, and when.” In a related fashion, mention was made of goals that made it easier to guide teaching practices, as well as state frameworks. Another theme enunciated at the elementary level was the amount of staff development opportunities made available for staff.

In a similar fashion to the elementary, the middle school teachers also focused upon specific positive themes in their comments. The most commonly cited topic was that of flexibility in the area of teaching strategies. A representative example of this theme can be found in the words of a middle school teacher’s (Middle School, Teacher 7, May 12, 2006) appreciation for being able to “... use new strategies from a variety of sources to enhance instruction.” It was obvious that a number of middle school teachers felt a sense of academic freedom, and even encouragement, in the area of teaching strategies. It was clear that teachers felt free to use new strategies from a variety of sources to enhance the curriculum in their respective areas. Another area in which the middle level teachers were more positive than their elementary counterparts was in the availability and use of technology as a teaching tool. There were multiple positive comments regarding technology among the middle school teachers’ comments.

While a positive regard for students was mentioned at all three levels, the level and depth of such comments was remarkably higher at the high school level. It was clear that a preponderance of the teachers surveyed at the high school level held very positive attitudes about their students, in general. Several expressed the joy and pleasure that they received by working with these young adults. An excellent example of this feeling can be found in the statement of the following high school teacher (High School, Teacher 5, May 12, 2008) who stated, "I love the students and reaching out to teach them." Another area somewhat unique at the high school level was the concept of working in departments. While there are departments at the middle school level, the practice seemed to be much more important to teachers at the high school level.

Antithetically, there were certainly negative comments made in response to the question pertaining to those things that teachers disliked about their work. The negatives outlined were much more similar among the three schools than were the positives. For example, at the elementary school, the following common thoughts emerged. In discussing the state test required for AYP purposes, one teacher (Elementary School 1, Teacher 2, May 12, 2006) lamented, "Testing standards do not take into consideration where a child was at the beginning of the year. They are only concerned with the child's current grade level." Another common sentiment was that instruction has become much more "test driven" and that it is much more difficult to motivate students under this type of scenario. Also frequently mentioned was the compacting of time available for teaching the curriculum, with the necessity of spending time on test preparation always looming. There were multiple mentions of pushing aside topics and subjects not covered on the state test. One representative example was the following statement made by an elementary teacher (Elementary School 2, Teacher 6, May 12, 2006), "Most of the day is focused on reading and math, and I have cut out a bit of time working with science and social studies." This statement certainly aligns with a major finding of research conducted by the Center on Educational Policy (2006), which found that 71% of the elementary schools in the 299 districts surveyed had reduced instruction time in areas other than reading and mathematics in response to NCLB.

Similar responses were given by middle school teachers. Echoing a specific comment mentioned above, one middle school teacher (Middle School, Teacher 1, May 12, 2006) complained that, "I forgo teaching things not directly related to ISAT for fear that I'll use test preparation time." The ISAT (Illinois Standards Achievement Test) is the instrument used to determine progress toward achieving AYP at both the elementary and middle school level in Illinois. A related sentiment was voiced by

another teacher (Middle School, Teacher 5, May 12, 2006) who stated, "We have a fast paced curriculum. I feel rushed to teach everything before the ISAT testing." Multiple middle school teachers commented upon "teaching to the test." Expanding upon this statement, another teacher (Middle School, Teacher 16, May 12, 2006) went on to say, "Teaching to the test, and not so much to the curriculum, means that some interesting and fun concepts are left out." Continuing along this line, teachers also decried the diminution of creative and artistic learning opportunities, as well as fewer project-oriented assignments. At this level, there was also more mention of the issues related to special needs students. Multiple teachers stated the need for more support and assistance when dealing with "resource students." This common frustration is not unusual, or unique, at least in Illinois. In a survey of 63 Illinois school districts (Hunt, 2006) that had failed to make AYP for two or more consecutive years, it was found that 69.8% of the failures were attributable to the subgroup of students with IEPs (Individualized Educational Programs), leading to a significant level of frustration in those districts.

Teachers at the high school level voiced many of the same lamentations as their elementary and middle school colleagues. Frustration regarding the requirement for special needs students to succeed at the same level and pace as other students was evidenced by the following statement (High School, Teacher 1, May 12, 2006), "Students with handicaps are expected to achieve at the exact same rate and level as regular education students." Also in the special education mode, an educator (High School, Teacher 6, May 12, 2006) stated, "I dislike the paperwork. We have too much paperwork related to the legalities of IEPs, REI, etc. It makes my life crazy."

There were multiple comments regarding the types and amounts of testing required under NCLB. For example, one teacher (High School, Teacher 3, May 12, 2006) addressed the situation with the following comment, "We cannot enrich. Everything is judged as to how it applies to the test." In a very similar vein, another high school teacher (High School, Teacher 1, May 12, 2006) reported, "We cannot go more in depth with a subject or remediate. We have a schedule we are to stick to so everyone teaching the same class is supposed to be teaching the same lesson at the same time." In Illinois, the high school level test used to judge progress toward making AYP is called the Prairie State Achievement Examination (PSAE) The ACT examination is now one element of the PSAE, as well. Another teacher (High School, Teacher 3, May 12, 2006) stated, "ACT/PSAE. The way it is handled by the government is that all students, even non-college bound, should take the test as college bound." Yet another teacher (High School, Teacher 4, May 12, 2006)

stated, "We spend much more class time preparing for the ACT/PSAE." Perhaps the testing sentiment was best summed up by the following statement (High School, Teacher 6, May 12, 2006), "I feel like we cater to the state tests too much. If I have students in my classes who need remediation, I struggle to find time and still cover what I need to do. State goals and tests seem to be the driving force, not student needs. We are losing the things that make learning fun and interesting."

The administrative comments, from all four buildings, were fairly similar to one another, and not that different from the thoughts voiced by the teachers in the four buildings. Each of the administrators, in some fashion, talked about the positive elements of working with the teaching staff. At the high school level, however, an administrator (High School, Administrator 1, May 12, 2006) stated the need to tackle the following goal, which was, "Increase the belief of staff that all students can learn, if taught."

Discussion

The educators' comments elicited via the surveys in this pilot study represented a blend of optimism and pessimism. It was clear that many of the respondents were committed to their students in this low-income, high minority, urban school district. Positive comments were made by teachers at all four schools surveyed. As one elementary teacher proclaimed (Elementary School 2, Teacher 4, May 12, 2006), "I like the support of my principal, and other teachers." In a more expansive comment, another elementary teacher (Elementary School 2, Teacher 6, May 12, 2006) stated, "I like that we get in-district training on how and what to teach so that our students can be successful on the ISAT and local test. We just had training on writing because writing is coming back to the test." This positive attitude was not confined to the elementary level. A middle school teacher (Middle School, Teacher 13, May 12, 2006) was happy about "...support from teachers and administrators." In a somewhat common sentiment, a high school teacher (High School, Teacher 5, May 12, 2006) shared, "I love the people I work with. They inspire me." It was evident that the teachers were collegial in nature and typically held their teaching peers in high regard.

Antithetically, a number of common negative threads emerged in this pilot study. Teachers were frustrated, at all levels, by what they perceived to be the unfairness of holding special needs students to the same criteria as regular education students, both in terms of academic levels of achievement as well as the timeframe in which special education youngsters were expected to meet standards. Another common theme

was the amount of time that teachers felt compelled to devote to the NCLB testing process. Specifically, educators were miffed by the time allocated to the testing and the entire test preparation process. Teachers clearly indicated that the increasing amount of time devoted to the testing processes had led to a decrease in the amount of time devoted to hands-on activities as well as the amount of time spent in non-tested subject areas. In the words of a middle school teacher (Middle School, Teacher 1, May 12, 2006), "We do not give our students any creative or artistic learning opportunities."

In summary, the responses were replete with comments regarding the impact of NCLB on the working conditions and job satisfaction of educators. Teachers in all four schools made multiple comments regarding the pressure of testing. A high school teacher (High School, Teacher 8, May 12, 2006) vocalized an underlying fear held by many teachers by stating, "We are constantly threatened by a state takeover because of the performance of our students on one test." The pressure to hurry instruction and to truncate non-tested curricula was also frequently cited as a drag upon teacher job satisfaction. The educational challenges faced by struggling students also translated into a dampening of the enthusiasm of the professional educators in the district.

Present and Future Implications

One of the purposes of this study has been to attempt to place a human face on the struggles being faced by educators dealing with NCLB in urban school districts. Essentially, by sharing the voices of educators on the front lines of the NCLB battle, a picture of some of the unintended consequences of this piece of legislation begins to emerge. While the teachers surveyed in this pilot project retain some degree of enthusiasm and optimism, both seem to be fading rapidly. One clear question for future research is whether the teachers in the urban district studied constitute an anomaly, or do they represent the norm among those urban districts facing AYP challenges? Are teachers in other urban districts frustrated by the amount of time devoted to the testing issues required by NCLB? Do they share the same sense of unfairness pertaining to the treatment of special needs students as they attempt to meet increasingly rigorous standards, all within rigid and prescribed timelines? Do significant numbers of urban teachers in other locations throughout Illinois, and nationally, believe that their control over the scope and depth of curricular decision-making is beginning to move beyond their grasp?

Anecdotal evidence gathered by the authors of this article by ques-

tioning urban teachers and administrators in the graduate education classes that they teach would indicate that the answers to the above questions are all affirmative. The conditions of poverty, the work conditions in urban schools, and the need to maintain the spirit of teachers and administrators in such settings seems to be particularly acute. Accepting the premise that urban educators are faced with unique circumstances; the larger question becomes what are the implications for future educational practice in urban districts?

The United States is in imminent danger of truly becoming a two-class society. If our urban schools are not rescued and revitalized, this is an almost a certainty. Rather than punishing struggling urban schools with increasingly severe sanctions, the federal government should be seeking ways to guarantee the success of these institutions. If the narrowing of curriculum and the reduction in focus in non-tested areas is leading to increases in mathematics and reading scores, is that a good trade-off for our urban schools? Do such approaches truly lead to improved schools, or does this tactic simply improve the test scores of “bubble kids” with some chance of eventually meeting prescribed standards, while ignoring the needs those struggling the most academically?

A first step in improving urban schools will be to ensure that the very best teachers and administrators are assigned to those schools. This will require both vision and resources. It will take leadership on a national level that is committed to the concept of a public system of education, and an understanding that the only way to prevent a two-class society is to reinvigorate the public school system. It will require a reversal in the current practice of sending our newest and least prepared teachers into urban settings. It will demand an elimination of the view that urban schools are only a stepping stones to better jobs in more desirable suburban settings. Frankly, it will require a national effort of the same scale as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Peace Corps, or the space program. Anything less will just be another band-aid on a festering wound.

This revised approach will require additional resources, or at least a redistribution of resources. The highest pay must be reserved for those educators willing and prepared to face the special requirements of working in urban settings. These pay differentials must be significant, with bonuses for excellent performance. There are a limited number of very successful urban school districts whose students are achieving academic success. Universities must work in concert with these successful urban school districts to prepare candidates to work successfully in urban settings. The same consortia must also devise staff development programs that will enable practicing teachers and administrators to successfully step into urban school settings.

In previously cited research by Hunt (2006), it was found that all types of school districts in Illinois were struggling with AYP issues. However, the issues are much more acute in urban schools, both in Illinois and nationally. NCLB was instituted because it was clear that the educational establishment had been ignoring a number of the subgroups in our society; the types of subgroups typically found in urban schools. While NCLB may have initially been well-intentioned, it has lost its focus through legislative rule-making and state-by-state implementation. At the current time, the No Child Left Behind Act is up for congressional reauthorization. The conditions which brought about NCLB still exist. Whether a reauthorization of NCLB without major structural changes can effectuate the improvements needed in the nation's urban schools is, at best, doubtful. It is ironic that twenty-five years after the release of *A Nation at Risk*, our country is at greater educational risk than at any time in its history.

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