

A Thoughtful Examination of No Child Left Behind

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Many Children Left Behind by Deborah Meier, Alfie Kohn, Linda Darling-Hammond, TheodoreSizer, and George Wood would appear, based on the title, to be a book that makes nothing but deleterious comments about No Child Left Behind (NCLB). However, this 132-page book is a thoughtful, intelligent, honest, and provocative book.

The book is divided into three parts with a total of six chapters. The first part discusses NCLB's effects on America's classrooms and schools, part two examines the larger context of NCLB, and part three outlines positive and encouraging changes that could be made to NCLB.

Part one consists of two chapters, one written by Linda Darling-Hammond and the other written by George Wood. Both chapters examine the effects of NCLB on classrooms, students, and teachers. Linda Darling-Hammond refers to the goals of NCLB as "Alice in Wonderland Accountability." She makes a very strong argument that the manner in which schools are being measured does not ensure academic success or enhance equity for all students. Rather, NCLB does just the opposite and punishes the schools that are most in need of improvement. She demonstrates this by discussing in detail the manner in which scores are aggregated by subgroups and the negative impact this has on poor schools. She points to the fact that several states are now lowering their standards in order to prevent their schools from being targeted as failing.

In his chapter, George Wood, through various poignant stories of actual schools for which NCLB's method of determining success or failure has negatively impacted the classroom, enunciates what Linda Darling-Hammond states in her chapter. He notes that in one school in Alabama, kindergarten children are no longer allowed a nap; Galveston, Texas schools have taken away all recess, and schools in Iowa have done away with field trips. Although both authors discuss the negative impact of the accountability and testing system, they do provide clear and excellent alternatives, for example, replace the rigid testing with more instructionally useful state systems, encourage diagnostic assessments and local performance assessment, include multiple measures of learning and progress, evaluate gains using value added approaches instead of average student scores, fully fund NCLB, have target intervention, and assess the overall health of the school.

Part two consists of a chapter written by Stan Karp, a chapter written by Deborah Meier, and one by Alfie Kohn. The chapters by Karp and Meier examine NCLB from the broader societal perspective. Both authors discuss the inequalities within our society as a whole and how NCLB's mandates to rid schools of these various inequalities is an impossible task when the issues of poverty, household income, health care insurance, home ownership, or school spending are not equalized within our democratic nation. Both authors point to various studies that indicate how the above factors influence academic achievement and success and that NCLB, as written, only punishes those schools where poverty, low household income, and lack of health care are primary issues for students and parents. Karp and Meier also examine the lack of funding and note that the goals of NCLB are "light years away" unless funding increases, schools become smaller, not larger, and the inequalities within our society are addressed in conjunction with improvement in our schools.

The chapter written by Alfie Kohn reflects on the political agenda of privatizing schools. Mr. Kohn discusses what he believes are the political undertones of NCLB, the demise of public education. He makes the argument that even if education was privatized, it would not cure the problems that exist. Mr. Kohn in his chapter strongly states that NCLB is damaging to public education and gives the reader evidence and information that is very thought-provoking. His arguments are solid and will make the reader ponder his statements carefully.

Part three has one well written, provocative chapter written by Monty Neill entitled "Leaving No Child Behind: Overhauling NCLB." Neill agrees with the critics of NCLB; however he states that specific, positive alternatives that are viable need to be presented. Neill makes the argument that the law needs to be used to develop a genuine system of accountability that will improve schools and learning. He begins by stating that a first level of acceptance is that we

cannot hold schools accountable for things they cannot control, such as poverty or racism. Schools should be held accountable for what they can control.

Neill details with a full discussion the areas he believes accountability should be based on: shared vision and goals, adequate resources, participation and democracy, prioritizing goals, multiple forms of evidence, inclusion, improvement, equity, balancing bottom-up and top-down, and interventions. Neill expounds on each of these in clearly written and succinct paragraphs. Following his discussion on the elements of accountability, Neill presents an alternative model to NCLB that is based on three elements: classroom-based information, limited standardized testing, and school quality reviews. His alternative model is holistic, comprehensive, and fair. In his conclusion he urges all educators, parents, community members, and civil rights activists to work toward pushing for reforms to NCLB.

The book *Many Children Left Behind* is not a compilation of complaints and criticisms but rather a though provoking critique of NCLB, including both pros and cons, that presents alternatives to the readers that make true educational sense.

Reference

Meier, D., & Wood, G. (Eds.). (2004). *Many Children Left Behind: How the No Child Left Behind Act is Damaging Our Children and Schools*. Boston: Beacon Press.

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