



Critical Issue: NCLB Option—Choosing to Change Schools

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Pathways Home



ISSUE: One of the basic reform principles of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 is expanded options for parents. The NCLB Act holds educators accountable by giving parents more control over their children's education. When schools fail, the law gives parents a number of important options, including school choice.

Choice empowers parents, but parents must be adequately informed about their children's schools for reform to truly work. This Critical Issue offers information that can assist parents in exercising their choice to switch schools. It outlines some of the key considerations that research indicates should be addressed in order to make an effective decision.

Choosing a new school begins with looking at published standardized test results, but it doesn't end there. Many other important factors contribute to high-quality education. This Critical Issue examines key areas researchers have identified as especially significant: quality teachers, smaller classes, parent-teacher partnership, a challenging environment, and strong reading programs. It also examines the other side of the issue, which reflects the thinking of those who question whether choice delivers the effective results for which it is intended.

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OVERVIEW: The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 was signed into law by President Bush on January 8, 2002. The NCLB Act represents the most sweeping changes to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) since it was enacted in 1965.

Under the NCLB Act, each state must create standards for what every child should learn for all grades. Each school is expected to make adequate yearly progress toward meeting state standards. Progress will

be measured according to results of tests given to every child every year, which will be available to parents, citizens, educators, administrators, and policymakers in annual report cards. Report cards provide parents with important information about the quality of their child's school, teacher qualifications, and their child's progress in key subjects.

From the 2002–03 school year forward, the NCLB Act increases the choices of parents attending Title I schools that failed to meet state standards. A key provision allows parents to transfer their children out of schools that are not performing.

Parents with a child attending a school identified for improvement will have the option of transferring their child to a better public school within the school district, including a charter school. Options may include a neighboring school district, if all schools in a district are failing.

All children are eligible, with priority given to low-income students. The district must provide transportation to the new school, using Title I funds, if necessary. Students can continue to attend the school of their choice for the amount of time they would have attended the failing school or until the school is no longer considered failing.

Parents with children in schools that persistently fail (i.e., schools that have failed to meet state standards for at least three or four years) can take advantage of federal education funds to provide supplemental educational services—including tutoring, after-school services, and summer school programs—to their children (U.S. Department of Education, 2002a). The NCLB Act requires local educational agencies to spend up to 20 percent of Title I allocations for providing school choice and supplemental services to eligible students. In addition, schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress after five years risk reconstitution under a restructuring plan (U.S. Department of Education, 2002a).

Importance of School Choice

An important aim of the NCLB Act is to promote parental choice and influence. According to Title IV, "Parents, armed with data, are the best forces of accountability in education. And parents, armed with options and choice, can assure that their children get the best, most effective education possible" (The White House, n.d.).

Choice proponents believe parental choice creates competition, providing an incentive for schools to improve. To stay in business, the school must improve or parents will look elsewhere for a better education. This kind of competition will lead to increased accountability, which in turn encourages educators to try teaching methods that best meet the needs of their students (Raywid, 1992). Advocates of choice also believe parental choice discourages a one-size-fits-all educational approach, increases parental involvement in school, and helps low-income students (Ansell, 2003).

Key Considerations in Determining if a School Is Right for Your Child

Effective school choice depends on a number of factors, not all of which are easily measurable, and not all of which are equally important.

Test results are obviously one factor to consider. Beginning with the 2002–03 school year, NCLB legislation requires states and school districts to publish test results in an annual report card. The state report card includes student academic achievement on statewide tests and a comparison of students at basic, proficient, and advanced levels of achievement. School districts must publish annual reports on the academic achievement of all schools combined and of each school individually. This report includes the same information as the state report, as well as showing which individual schools have been identified for improvement and comparing how students performed against other students in the district

and the state as a whole (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b).

Parents interested in obtaining a report card about a school can contact the school, the local district office, or their state department of education to obtain a copy. They may also be able to locate this information at the state's Web site.

However, parents shouldn't rely on student test scores alone. While comparative test scores can provide information about a child's strengths and weaknesses, many other important factors contribute to the quality of a school.

The NCLB Act, along with national organizations such as the National Education Association (NEA) and the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) and its 34 partner organizations, have identified key areas parents can use to evaluate the quality of their child's education: high-quality, committed teachers; small class size; a challenging environment with high academic standards; strong partnerships among parents, teachers, and students; and strong reading programs (Independent School Advocacy Initiative, 2002; National Education Association [NEA], 2002b).

High-Quality Teachers

A basic principle of the NCLB Act is that teacher excellence is critical to improving student achievement. The underlying expectation of NCLB legislation is that the states will ensure that all children are taught by effective teachers. It strengthens teacher quality through the Improving Teacher Quality State Grants program, which gives states more flexibility to use federal funds to increase the number of quality teachers. The program encourages states to use practices grounded in scientifically based research to prepare, train, and recruit high-quality teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2002a).

By the end of the 2005–06 school year, all teachers in core content areas must be "highly qualified" (i.e., they are certified and have demonstrated proficiency) in their subject (Rebora, 2001). Professional qualifications of teachers will be reported in state report cards beginning with the 2002–03 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b).

Teacher quality is typically a measure of two elements: teacher preparation and qualifications, and teaching practices. High-quality teachers are well prepared, have strong teaching skills, and have a command of the material. Research by the National Center for Education Statistics (Lewis, Parsad, Carey, Bartfai, Farris, & Smerdon, 1999) indicates that high-quality teachers use knowledge of their students to better understand how students learn and what motivates them. They effectively employ multiple teaching methods to accommodate students who have different learning styles (Lewis et al., 1999). They also possess a thorough understanding of the child's cognitive, personal, and social development; know students as individuals; use data and assessments to guide instructional choices; and are committed to ongoing professional growth (Public Education Network, n.d.).

Research shows that strong teachers have a positive impact on learning. A study in Tennessee over three years revealed that students who had high-quality teachers scored approximately 50 percentile points higher on standardized tests than students with low-quality teachers (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Similar studies indicate that deep content knowledge and teaching experience have a positive impact on student achievement (Fetler, 1999; Monk, 1994; Murnane & Philips, 1981).

Reduced Class Size and Student-to-Teacher Ratio

Educators and policymakers have long argued that smaller classes are better. This strategy has gained prominence in recent years—40 states have initiated class-size reduction efforts ("Education Issues,"

2003). Reasons include fewer class disruptions, increased individualized attention for each student, more tailored teaching approaches, and increased student participation. In order for teachers to be most effective, they must have a better understanding of how each individual learns, so it's logical to assume that smaller classes would make this easier (Lewis et al., 1999).

In general, research on class size supports these assertions. The largest, most credible class-size study is Tennessee's statewide Student Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) project. Results indicated that students in smaller classes of 13–17 students outperformed students in larger classes of 22–25 students on mathematics and reading achievement tests, and that these learning gains persisted long after students returned to larger classrooms ("Education Issues," 2003; Lewis et al., 1999).

Students in small classes were more likely to graduate on time, complete high school, and complete more advanced math and English courses (NEA, 2000). Moreover, poor and African-American students benefited most from smaller classes ("Education Issues," 2003). Reducing class size reduced the achievement gap between African-American and white students by 38 percent (NEA, 2000).

Similarly, researchers at the Education Policy Studies Laboratory and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee concluded that poor students participating in a five-year class-size reduction program achieved at higher levels than poor students in larger classes ("Education Issues," 2003). Another study in Texas showed that students in classes greater than 18 students scored worse on reading and math tests than students in smaller classes (Lewis et al., 1999).

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP, 2000) recommends no more than 15 students per teacher in kindergarten, and no more than 20 in elementary school classes. The NEA endorses a class size of 15 students for regular classes and supports even smaller classes for students who have special needs (NEA, 2000).

Parent/Teacher Partnership

Children are more successful when their parents are involved in their learning (Lewis et al., 1999). Parents provide encouragement and support for their children's academic pursuits, for example, by helping with homework and reinforcing lessons and values taught in school.

Research supports the belief that high-quality education cannot exist without parental involvement. Studies show that parental involvement in learning has a positive impact on student achievement, while reducing the dropout rate. In addition, at schools where parental involvement is high, the achievement level of all students in the school improves (Carey, Lewis, & Farris, 1998). One study found that 90 percent of the differences in student test scores could be attributed to three factors over which parents assert tremendous control: absenteeism, variety of reading materials found in the home, and the amount of television viewing (Skinner, 2003).

Schools play a critical role in influencing the level of parent involvement in learning. Therefore, schools must encourage parents to become full partners with teachers and school administrators in their children's education. Evidence suggests that coproduction and trust between schools, parents, students, and the larger community is critical for high-quality education (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000).

Schools that make families feel welcome and promote home learning are more likely to get more support from parents and have students who are more motivated (Carey et al., 1998). Clearly, teachers are more successful when parents are working with them.

Quality schools strive to develop collaborative relationships between parents, students, and teachers.

This partnership is founded on regular, open communication about goals and objectives of classes and school programs, student progress and achievement, and personal development. This helps ensure that parents are well informed about the child's education and that the child is an active participant in his or her education.

Good schools promote active parent involvement, for example, by encouraging parents to volunteer. In addition to traditional open houses and parent conferences, such schools also have an active parent-teacher organization that involves parents in important school decisions (NAESP, 2000; Skinner, 2003). Other ways high-quality schools encourage parent involvement include providing information on parenting and child development, encouraging learning activities in the home, working with other businesses and agencies to provide resources and services for families, training teachers on how to collaborate with parents, helping parents learn what their children are bringing home for homework, and making the schools the center of community life (Skinner, 2003).

Challenging Environment With High Standards and Expectations of Students

A challenging environment sets high academic goals and expectations. It pushes students to compete and excel at a high level through demanding courses and graduation requirements. Standards and expectations are widely communicated, so students know exactly what is expected of them and respond accordingly (Writ et al., 2002).

High-quality schools provide challenging learning environments that employ unique learning opportunities, including hands-on learning experiences, class discussions, group projects, and field trips. In such a professional environment, teachers and students share a sense of purpose, and academic achievement is well supported (Writ et al, 2002).

Research indicates that the courses a student takes in high school strongly influence achievement and whether the student will go on to college. Taking challenging courses also helps students overcome socioeconomic barriers. A report, *Charting the Right Course: A Report on Urban Student Achievement and Course Taking*, (as cited in American Federation of Teachers [AFT], n.d.) found that poor students who took more advanced math classes outperformed the average urban student regardless of poverty level. It also reported that all urban students who took more rigorous courses consistently outperformed other students, regardless of poverty level.

In addition, the U.S. Department of Education reported in 1999 that a high school curriculum of high academic intensity was the most important determinant in whether an African-American or Latino student would complete a college degree. It also reported that students in low-socioeconomic groups who completed a high-intensity, high-quality curriculum and who had high test scores and academic rankings earned bachelor degrees at a higher rate than most students in the top socioeconomic group (AFT, n.d.).

Another study shows that students who take more math and science classes outscore other students in high school, regardless of race and socioeconomic status. Students who take a more rigorous curriculum with four or more years of English and three or more years of math, social studies, and science score higher on ACT tests and get better grades in college (AFT, n.d.).

Setting rigorous standards, measuring student progress against standards, and holding educators accountable is the foundation upon which the NCLB Act is built. The underlying assumption of the NCLB Act is that with standards in place, all students are capable of meeting high expectations.

Under NCLB requirements, states must establish their own standards for what a child should know and

learn. Standards for reading and math must be developed immediately, while standards for science must be developed by the 2005–06 school year. States must administer tests aligned with the standards to determine students' progress toward those standards (Adams, 2002).

Strong Reading Programs

According to the National Education Association's official reading policy, "Reading is the gateway to learning in all content areas and essential for achieving high standards" (NEA, 2002a). Unfortunately, far too many children do not master essential basic reading skills. Approximately 40 percent of all students and almost 70 percent of low-income fourth-grade students cannot read at a basic level (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b). Research suggests that children who do not read at their grade level by the fourth grade are more likely to drop out of school and be less successful in life (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.[b]).

The NCLB Act demonstrates President Bush's strong commitment to ensuring every child can read by the end of third grade with the Reading First program. This plan significantly increases federal funding for implementing reading programs in kindergarten through second grade. It is designed to help children overcome barriers to reading proficiency by requiring states and schools to establish programs that are based on scientifically proven methods of reading instruction (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.[a]).

Most experts argue against promoting one particular method of teaching reading above all others. Such an approach does not address the diverse needs and abilities of students who may require different kinds of activities depending on their stage of development. Instead, experts recommend a complete reading program that balances whole language teaching methods with phonics (NEA, 2002a). The No Child Left Behind Act (2002) provides grants for states and school districts that systematically employ proven methods that combine phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.



GOALS:

When opting out of a failing school, parents should choose high-quality schools that meet the following criteria:

- Achieve high scores on standardized, statewide tests.
- Promote the recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers.
- Have smaller class sizes.
- Support parent participation in learning by encouraging a partnership between parents and teachers.
- Create a challenging academic environment with high standards and expectations.
- Provide a balanced reading program based on proven methods including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.



ACTION OPTIONS:

Many factors contribute to the quality of a school. When choosing a new school, parents should consider the following:

- Obtain a copy of published test results by contacting the school, local district office, or state department of education. How does student academic performance compare against the district? Against the state?
- Find out about each school's teaching preparation and qualifications and teaching practices. Talk with teachers and visit the school to observe teaching practices firsthand. Are the teachers certified and experienced in their subject matter? Do they use different teaching styles to adapt to each child's unique learning needs?
- Compare average class sizes to determine which school has the smallest sized classes. Observe classrooms firsthand. Do students receive individual attention? Are they encouraged to participate? Is discipline a problem?
- Determine to what extent the school encourages parent involvement. Do teachers and staff seem welcoming? How do they communicate with parents? Do many parents volunteer? Is there an active parent-teacher organization? Are parents involved in key decisions? Are home learning activities encouraged?
- Evaluate the school's standards and expectations. Are students pushed to excel? Is college preparation a priority? Does the school employ a wide variety of learning experiences? How are expectations communicated? How is progress measured? What percentage of students graduate? Do they graduate on time? What percentage goes to college?
- Ask teachers and administrators to discuss the curriculum. Is it rigorous? How does it compare to state standards? Are students encouraged to take advanced math, English, and science courses?
- Learn about the school's reading program. Is it balanced, employing a variety of language teaching methods? Is it tailored to individual student needs and abilities?



IMPLEMENTATION PITFALLS:

Choosing a new school involves evaluating a number of factors that are not always easy to measure or locate information about. Parents should anticipate the following pitfalls:

- Relying on report cards alone. Test scores are important, but a variety of factors contribute to the quality of a school.
- Not visiting the school. No amount of research can tell you as much as you'll learn from visiting the school and forming your own opinion about the learning environment. Parents should visit the school to speak with teachers and administrators and observe teaching practices and the learning

environment firsthand.

- Asking the wrong questions. Make a determination based on sound criteria that contribute to a high-quality education and address your child's learning needs, instead of matters such as convenience, social factors, or sports.



DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW:

School Choice

Not everyone agrees that parental choice will lead to sweeping changes in the educational system. Opponents question whether all families will make informed decisions about their child's education. Because only certain types of families will exercise choice, social inequality is only reinforced. Some argue that allowing schools to fail will cause the system to fail children who are unlucky enough not to be able to change schools.

In addition, the loss of funding that occurs when students leave for another school could hurt schools that are already struggling financially. Other opponents contend that school choice will be difficult to implement in urban systems, where students who want to leave failing schools may have few choices (Ansell, 2003).

With the proliferation of school choice, the level of information parents have about their children's school is becoming increasingly important. Yet, parents typically know very little about schools and "certainly do not conform to the ideal of a highly informed citizenry gathering information about choices and making a considered choice among their options" (Schneider & Buckley, 2001, p. 3). Further, the costs of gathering information on schools are high in comparison with the perceived benefits, so many parents simply choose to remain uninformed.

Given the complex nature of education, some opponents question whether information about schools is understandable even when it is available. In addition, parents often have little information about schools in their district, or at least not the level of information they would need to make an informed choice. Yet, given the availability of adequate information, most parents make their choice based on factors that have little to do with quality of education, for example, the availability of day care, convenience, social factors, and sports. Moreover, underprivileged parents are the least able to analyze information about schools, even though they are the most likely to benefit from school choice (Buckley, 2001; Schneider & Buckley, 2002).

Quality Teachers

Few argue that teachers need to have a postsecondary education and strong content knowledge of their subject area. Some do argue, however, that research that focuses on teaching credentials does not provide sufficient information about the actual quality of teaching practices. Information about teaching credentials provides only a rough sense of the overall quality of teaching quality (Lewis et al., 1999).

Class Size

Some researchers have concluded that smaller class size has little effect on student performance. A study trending data from the 1950s to 1986 did not show a consistent correlation between class size and standardized test scores (Lewis et al., 1999).

Moreover, making classrooms smaller requires hiring more teachers, resulting in greater cost. One

researcher concluded that the modest gains in achievement resulting from smaller class sizes did not justify the cost of implementing reform (Lewis et al., 1999). Others believe the push for smaller classrooms will compel schools to hire teachers who are less qualified, sacrificing educational quality for quantity ("Education Issues," 2003).

In addition, to get the most out of smaller classrooms, teachers need to alter their teaching styles, allowing for interaction and feedback. Some studies indicate that few teachers adapt teaching methods for smaller classes, teaching them the same as they would larger classes ("Education Issues," 2003).

Standards

Many are concerned with the clarity and quality of standards set by states. According to the American Federation of Teachers' *Making Standards Matter 2001* (as cited in Doherty, 2003), only five states had clear and specific standards out of the 49 states that had at least some academic standards at the time.

Some are concerned that the standards will be set too low—in other words, that they will define minimum requirements rather than high expectations. Because they are being held accountable, some school districts may have an incentive to set the bar low when translating standards into tests and test results. Also, some are concerned that tests are simply not well aligned with the standards they are designed to measure (Doherty, 2003).



ILLUSTRATIVE CASES:

Several cases illustrate how parents are empowering themselves by arming themselves with data and choices, embracing school choice as a means toward improving their child's education, and supporting testing and accountability as a way to improve academic performance.

When she noticed her sons were experiencing significant difficulties learning how to read, Norma Garza took action. She became a parent advocate for literacy at her sons' school in Brownsville, Texas, promoting research-based reading instruction and training for teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Garza chairs the Brownsville Reads Task Force, which helps promote literacy in her racially diverse school district, and is a member of the National Reading Panel.

Director of the San Diego City Schools Parent Involvement Department, Jean Preston helps school faculty get parents actively involved in their child's education. Preston's program has received national attention; it assists in motivating parents to become academic coaches for their children (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Leah Vukmir is former president of Parents Raising Educational Standards in Schools (PRESS), a statewide Wisconsin organization committed to raising academic standards and increasing parental involvement in school reform. Vukmir was recently elected Wisconsin State House assemblywoman and is the vice chair of the assembly's Education Reform Committee.

In 1999, Kendra Lindsay opened the first charter school in Appleton, Wisconsin, the Classical Charter School. A K–8 school, Classical Charter School's curriculum is designed around E.D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge Sequence (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Smaller Class Size

Research projects such as STAR and the Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) confirm what teachers already know: Smaller classes work. Benefits include better discipline, more individualized attention to students, and more opportunities for teachers to vary instruction methods to meet student needs.

After California implemented a class size initiative in 1997, Sue Westbrook went from teaching 30 fourth graders to teaching a much smaller second-grade class at Laguna Vista Elementary School. "Professionally, I feel better about my job, and feel I'm being more successful with my students," says Westbrook. "It has made a significant difference in how teachers feel and how we think our students are doing. When you have 30 students, you don't get to know them as well because there are so many demands on your time. With 20, you get to understand their strengths and weaknesses better" (as quoted in Gursky, 1998).

Parent Involvement

Partnerships With Parents, an effort in the Los Angeles Unified School District, strives to improve relationships between teachers and parents. The initiative has had a positive impact on parent and teacher attitudes toward family involvement in education. Funded by grants from the Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project and the Weingart Foundation, its purpose is to encourage parents and teachers to work together to further children's academic progress through communication, parenting skills, and home learning. Research indicates that teachers at participating schools are more likely to get involved in staff development related to parent involvement, to communicate with parents via voicemail, and to believe that parental involvement is important to improving learning (Jacobsen, 2001).



CONTACTS:

National Center for Education Statistics

Contact: John Ralph
(202) 219-2270
<http://www.nces.ed.gov/>

National Education Association

1201 16th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20036-3290
(202) 833-4000
<http://www.nea.org/>

National Institute for Literacy: Partnership for Reading

<http://www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/>

Nationwide School Locator

<http://nces.ed.gov/globallocator/>

No Child Left Behind

U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202
(888) 814-NCLB

<http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov/>

Additional links:

<http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov/next/where/index.html>

State Departments of Education

<http://ericeece.org/statlink.html>

<http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/ccseas.asp>

Additional Resources

The following resources provide helpful tips, sources of information, and questions to ask when searching for a new school:

Choosing a New School

MSN House & Home

<http://houseandhome.msn.com/move/choosinganewschool0.aspx>

Choosing a School

Michigan Department of Education

<http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,1607,7-140-52233-32711--,00.html>

Choosing the Best School

Georgia Family

http://georgiafamily.com/choosing_the_best_school.shtml

Developing Educational Standards

<http://edstandards.org/Standards.html>

Moving? Choosing a School? Sources of Information on Individual Schools and School Districts (1998)

KidSource Online

http://www.kidsource.com/kidsource/content4/choosing_school.pn.html

No Child Left Behind: A Collection of Online Resources. North Central Regional Educational Laboratory

<http://www.ncrel.org/policy/curve/resource.htm>

Priven, Judy (1998). *Choosing Elementary and Secondary Schools: Questions Parents Need to Ask*. Washington, DC: Hello America.

Quality Counts: A Report Card on the Condition of Public Education in the 50 States

<http://www.edweek.org/qc/>

School Match (fee-based service)

<http://www.schoolmatch.com/>

The School Visit: Things to Look For, Questions to Ask

greatschools.net

<http://www.greatschools.net/cgi-bin/showarticle/mi/48/improve>

Standard and Poor's School Evaluation Services

<http://www.ses.standardandpoors.com/>

The Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) program Web pages:

<http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/CERAI/sage.html>

<http://www.weac.org/sage>

<http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/oea/sage/index.html?>

The Student Teacher Achievement Ratio Study (Project STAR)

<http://www.heros-inc.org/>

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greatschools.net

<http://www.greatschools.net/cgi-bin/showarticle/MI/87/improve>

Toumani, Meline. Choosing a School: Seven Steps from Start to Finish.

greatschools.net

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Family Education Network

<http://www.familyeducation.com/article/0,1120,3-2019,00.html>



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