# Public Perceptions of Today's Schools: Impact of Community Size

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The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 formed the catalyst for one of the most comprehensive educational reform efforts ever undertaken in the United States. In the seventh year of implementation, NCLB was under congressional consideration for reauthorization; considering the cost and potential unintended negative consequences, high-stakes testing policies appeared to provide a questionable means of improving student learning. The purpose of this manuscript was two-fold: 1) to review the literature, particularly in the areas of testing and funding, and 2) to discuss the results of a 2007 survey to determine public perceptions of NCLB policies.

## Literature Review

While equity has emerged as a driving force in educational policy, it has been the central emphasis on NCLB reform requirements. Weaver (2006) noted that the major focus of NCLB was to improve the achievement of all students and help close achievement gaps between white and minority students, particularly those from lower socioeconomic groups. This literature review covers historical perspectives leading to the passage of NCLB, as well as the major emphasis on testing and funding issues.

### *Historical Perspectives*

The origin of the perception that education was crucial to a democracy's success in the world dates back to our forefathers (Baker, 2007). Today the role of education is increasingly important to economic competitiveness in an increasingly global world (Brown & Lauder, 1997). Marton (2006) defined globalization to include new patterns of communication between people and nations that demand increased flexibility in most aspects of social life, increased completion in economic pursuits, and the rise of new social movements. According to Marton a new language has appeared in education policy incorporating such terms as excellence, accountability, efficiency, and competitiveness. Dawn (2002) suggested that educational restructuring may not only be a response to global competitions but also to a state's financial situation and management capabilities. Baker (2007) perceived that worries about the performance of U.S. schools came from international achievement testing programs of the 1960's where higher test scores were correlated with success and such perceptions persist today.

### *State Accountability Systems*

NCLB was primarily based upon the Texas accountability system (Nelson, McGhee, Meno, & Slater, 2007). A major component of the Texas accountability system adopted by NCLB included examining student learning outcomes rather than monitoring process and information management. Nelson et al. identified components of the NCLB Act that worked. Included in their list was the public school accountability system where data was disaggregated by various subgroups and reported to state agencies. Other components found effective by Nelson et al. included the development of a standards-based curriculum framework and assessment that measured higher order skills. The NCLB focus on teacher quality through certification requirements and continuing professional development tied to certification

was considered noteworthy by these authors. Major testing issues have emerged as well as funding concerns, and a discussion of these areas follow.

***High Stakes Testing***

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) provides achievement information across states in the form of statistical indicators, databases, descriptive and technical reports, and research studies (Swanson & Barlage, 2006). These authors noted that NAEP has emerged as the top-ranked influential information on student achievement in the country; as such NAEP information has been used for state achievement comparisons.

Since the implementation of NCLB, there has been a national effort to require achievement results as accountability measures for states, districts, schools, teachers, and students. Accountability tests have been termed high-stakes because of the association with accountability consequences (Marchant, Paulson, & Shunk, 2006). Some test advocates perceived that testing, with associated state standards and consequences provided achievement motivation (NCLB, 2001) while others have suggested the opposite effect (Jones, Jones, & Hargrove, 2003; Paris, 2000).

***NAEP testing***. Using NAEP information, Amrein and Berliner (2002) investigated changes in NAEP scores over time both before and after states implemented high stakes testing policies. These authors noted small achievement gains for some states while other states showed there was insufficient evidence that high stakes testing improved student achievement. Cowelti (2006) found that accountability implementation varied from state to state, making national data comparisons difficult.

***Achievement impac*t.** Marchant, Pavlson, and Shunk (2006) suggested that studies attributing significant achievement gains to high-stakes testing have failed to adequately control for demographic differences. These researchers found the characteristics of NAEP test-takers accounted for the majority of variance among testing samples at state levels. Cech (2007) noted that achievement gains have slowed down since the implementation of NCLB, while Baines (2007) found that an examination of achievement scores on standardized tests over the past 50 years showed no significant changes despite multiple reform efforts.

***Testing Criticisms***

Since the implementation of NCLB, a number of criticisms about testing have surfaced. Nelson, McGhee, Meno and Slater (2007) commented that testing drove what students would learn rather than what was learned. Cowelti (2006) suggested that the focus on high-stakes testing negatively affected teacher morale. Toch (2006) proposed that states were opting for fast and cheap multiple-choice tests which focused on basic skills rather than creating higher quality problem solving type tests. Toch found that the testing industry was buckling under the demands of NCLB's increasing test development requirements. Meek (2006) proposed that the NCLB has focused upon testing students rather than teaching them. Guilfoyle (2006) noted that any system that evaluated the whole school on one test score average could not accurately assess that school and recommended multiple measures of achievement to provide a clearer picture of student learning and school successes.

***Testing Myths***

Rothberg (2006) identified several myths associated with NCLB testing. This author found U.S. policy was dominated by the perception that test scores were valid indicators of the state of the economy or the quality of education. Rothberg further noted that there were no data to support the premise that international test score ranks were valid measures of the quality of education. This author found few countries that held educators accountable for student test scores and noted that many countries were attempting to decrease the emphasis on rote learning caused by testing, whereas, the United States continues to promote rote learning to increase student testing results. Rothberg proposed that it was a myth that testing can address problems resulting from poverty. Rothberg stated, "although the size of the achievement gap among students from different socioeconomic backgrounds may vary among countries, the existence of this gap is universal" (p. 59).

***The Gallup Poll – Testing***

The Gallup Poll investigates public perception concerning public education issues each year. Authors of the 2007 Gallup Poll reported that the public's view of standardized testing was becoming less

favorable, with more than two-thirds of the poll respondents reporting that increased testing has hurt the public schools or that testing has made little difference (Rose & Gallup, 2007 September).

Baker (2007) pointed out "evidence of the effects of education within nations does not transfer to differences among nations" (p. 102). This author suggested that fixation on test scores actually harms the nation by diverting attention and resources away from major issues, such as too few minority students graduating from college. Baines (2007) noted that the current thinking in the United States has not been toward creating student and family friendly policies or broader social initiatives but toward putting in more rigorous and more frequent testing.

***Special Education Testing***

Many authors have expressed fears about special education testing requirements. Wasta (2006) noted that NCLB requires all students with disabilities to demonstrate proficient academic performance, meaning grade level. This author noted that after 40 years, understanding learning disabilities was still not accomplished. According to Meek (2006), learning disabled students were often tested inappropriately. This author found state grade level examinations too long, too difficult to read, too difficult conceptually, and noted that many learning disabled students simply gave up and marked responses randomly.

Some states have disagreed with federal mandates for testing special education students using grade level expectations. In 2005, some eligible states were allowed to identify schools or districts that did not meet expectations. In 2005, the Department of Education allowed states to count as proficient up to two percent of all students tested (Irons & Harris, 2007; Samuels, 2007). A solution to special education testing was the development of growth models where the amount of achievement growth during the year was calculated as evidence of satisfactory progress. Special educators were particularly interested in a growth model (Olsen, 2005).

***School Funding***

According to the 2007 Gallup Poll, the public was aware that funding was tied to student achievement outcomes and lack of funding surfaced as a major concern among educators (Rose & Gallup, 2007). NCLB policies were based upon the assumption that states have the capacity to implement all requirements (Sunderman & Orfield, 2007). These authors noted the NCLB Act instituted a large expansion of federal control over the nation's schools which was passed down to states for implementation.

***State capacity for assistance***. According to Sunderman and Orfield (2007), states do not have the capacity to ensure large-scale educational change and support low-performing schools. Sunderman and Orfield suggested that state agencies traditionally did not view school interventions as their role; some state agency personnel lacked expertise to effectively intervene. These authors noted that state agencies did not have adequate relationships or organizational networks established to facilitate relationship building with school districts. Sunderman and Orfield noted a large capacity gap with up to 40% of the school districts in some states identified as needing improvement.

***State funding assistance***. Nelson, McGee, Meno, and Slater (2007) found that states needed to provide adequate funding to support NCLB requirements. Weaver (2006) recommended that adequate resources must be provided and punitive mandates replaced with positive support for NCLB policies to be effective. Jennings and Rentner (2006) noted that NCLB requirements gave state agencies and school districts expanded roles without adequate federal funds. Jennings and Rentner noted that most state departments do not have the capacity to carry out all of the NCLB policies.

Everhart (2006) noted that higher demands required reallocation of existing resources as well as additional monies. This author explained that the United States is a class-based society where stratification has increased and middle and low-income groups bear an added tax burden relative to their share of the national wealth. Everhart noted that the wealthiest 20% received 50% of the national income, whereas the poorest 20% received 3.5%. Everhart suggested that support for school funding could not be separated from income distribution and that while the public wants high-quality schools they resist tax increases to pay for them.

***Public school revenues***. Revenue to finance public schools comes from state and local money with only about seven percent coming from federal sources. Traditional school finance policy responses to

inequities caused by unequal property tax bases has been to restructure state financing systems to mitigate unequal effects (Yudof, Kirp, Levin, & Moran, 2002). Since 2000, school funding issues have emerged nationwide. State Supreme Court judges are requiring state legislatures to address school funding formulas and local tax issues. Some state funding formulas based on local taxes were challenged as unconstitutional, (e.g., Texas; Irons & Harris, 2007). These authors noted that North Carolina became the 42nd state to endorse a lottery and allocate the money for college scholarships and public schools.

***Unfunded federal mandates***. Some states have voiced strong objection to the Department of Education's mandatory NCLB policies without providing adequate funding (Irons & Harris, 2007). The spending clause allows Congress to enact legislation in areas over which it otherwise has no authority if the legislation is in the form of a contract, (e.g., federal funds are offered to states as an incentive to meet certain conditions; Irons & Harris, 2007). These authors noted that courts have upheld federal NCLB required spending based on the promise that the states knowingly accepted the terms of NCLB, although authorization levels do not guarantee any particular amount of funding. Azzam, Perkins-Gough, and Thiers (2006) conceded that the education landscape was changing but expressed concerns about the lack of funding and staff necessary to carry out NCLB's requirements. A major recommendation made by Azzam et al. was to provide adequate funding to schools for NCLB implementation. A discussion of survey research to determine public perceptions of public education issues follows.

## The Study of Public Perceptions of NCLB

A spring 2007 project provided the impetus for an action research project. Two hundred and seven individuals responded to a survey concerning public attitudes toward education. This section includes the following topics: design and questions, instrument development, sample selection, data collection, limitations, analysis and findings, summary, and conclusions.

### *Design and Research Questions*

The design for this project was quantitative using a survey method. Questions for research follow. Were there differences between or among raters concerning their perceptions of higher education, general education, and NCLB implementation with respect to: gender, age, educator and non-educator, ethnicity, community size, income level and level of education?

### *Instrument, Sample, and Data Collection*

Copies of the 35th, 36th, and 37th *Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Polls of the Public's Attitudes Toward Public Schools* were used to formulate survey questions (Rose & Gallup, 2003, 2004, 2005). Questions were developed in the areas of higher education, general education questions, and NCLB implementation. The higher education strand contained 12 questions, the general education cluster contained 12 questions and the NCLB cluster contained 24 questions. A Cronbach's alpha yielded an overall internal reliability coefficient of .68. Individual strand reliability coefficients were .63 for higher education, .55 for general education, and .56 for NCLB. Instrument reliability appeared slightly weak. The number of items, the homogeneity of the items in each cluster, and the differing backgrounds of the respondents could account for lower internal reliability. Experts comprised of education professors and education professionals serving in field-based settings established face validity of the instrument. Additionally, use of the content from the Gallup Poll provided validity for the instrument.

Sample selection was purposive. Graduate students and professors distributed surveys to educators and non-educators of professional conferences, their work place, their churches, and to acquaintances willing to participate by completing the survey. Two hundred seven surveys were completed and returned.

## Limitations

The limitations associated with this study are consistent with survey research methods. The sample was purposive and non-random. The majority of respondents reported income in the upper middle class range. The study was conducted in Texas; as a result, the respondents do not necessarily represent the general population of educators or non-educators. Additionally, some respondents selected a neutral response representing not a perception, but a lack of one.

### *Descriptive Analysis*

Descriptive statistics were used to characterize the sample in terms of percentages. The majority of the sample may be described as female (68%) and Caucasian (78%). Educator (49%) and non-educator (46%)

participants were fairly evenly split. The majority of the respondents (43%) reported having an income level in excess of $75,000 per year. The community represented by the majority of the respondents (43%) had a population exceeding 100,000.

***Participant Age Ranges***

The largest age range of respondents was the group between the ages of 18 to 42, representing 35%. Both the other two groups, representing ages 43 to 55 and over age 56, showed 31% of the respondents respectively.

***Level of Education***

Thirty-three percent of the respondents reported no college degree. Thirty percent reported a bachelor's degree. Thirty-six percent reported having a graduate degree.

***Inferential Analysis***

Higher education, general education, and NCLB implementation with respect to the independent variables of gender, age range, income level, and level of education were not perceived differently. Significant findings follow.

***Educators and non-educators vs. NCLB***. A significant analysis of variance (ANOVA), $F(1, 195) = 8.11$, $p = .05$ showed mean differences between educator and non-educator's ratings on the NCLB implementation questions. A higher mean rating of 3.22 for non-educators in contrast to 3.09 for educators suggested that non-educators viewed NCLB mandates more favorably than educators struggling to implement them.

***Ethnicity vs. public school***. A significant analysis of variance (ANOVA), $F(1, 205) = 7.89$, $p = .01$ showed mean differences between Caucasian and non-Caucasian group ratings on public school questions. A higher mean rating of 3.42 for non-Caucasians in contrast to 3.23 for Caucasians means that non-Caucasians viewed general education more favorably than Caucasians.

***Community size vs. higher education***. A significant analysis of variance (ANOVA), $F(3, 206) = 3.30$, $p = .02$ showed mean differences among the various community size groups with respect to the higher education questions. Since there were four different community size groups, a post hoc multiple means comparison test (Tukey HSD) was used to identify significant mean differences. Findings showed respondents from a community with a population below 15,000 and those from communities with 100,000, rated higher education responses significantly ($p = .05$) more favorably than respondents from communities with populations ranging between 15,000 to 30,000 and over 100,000. It may be that individuals from small communities viewed higher education as a means of future job security. Individuals from communities with 100,000 may have had more counseling, advanced course opportunities and scholarship opportunities.

***Community size vs. NCLB***. A significant analysis of variance (ANOVA), $F(3, 206) = 3.25$, $p = .02$ showed mean differences among various community sizes with respect to the NCLB implementation questions. A Tukey HSD post hoc multiple means comparison test differentiated the means. Respondents from communities with populations ranging between 30,000 and 100,000 rated items on the NCLB strand more favorably than communities with populations ranging between 15,000 and 30,000. Additionally, communities with populations ranging between 30,000 and 100,000 rated items on the NCLB questions more favorably than respondents from communities with populations ranging greater than 100,000.

In general, respondents from communities with populations ranging between 30,000 to 100,000 rated survey items significantly more favorably across all three areas, higher education, general education, and NCLB. Further, respondents from communities with a population less than 15,000 rated all three areas more favorably. Schools in communities over 100,000 tend to be large 5A schools. In general, large urban school problems are more public than smaller schools and therefore receive more sensational negative publicity in the press. Consequently, it may be that respondents from large urban areas perceive public schools more negatively. Schools in smaller rural areas with populations ranging from 15,000 to 30,000 tend to have fewer teachers to teach more subjects. Teachers may be assigned to teach a subject out of their teaching field. Such teachers are then considered not highly qualified in those subjects under NCLB mandates. Additionally, these schools may fail to meet their yearly performance goals. Respondents from such communities may perceive their schools more negatively because of such problems.

Respondents from communities with populations ranging from 30,000 to 100,000 rated survey items more favorably across all three areas. Generally, these 4A suburban districts have more parent involvement than large urban schools. Extra-curricular activities and athletics are important. Many parents may be professionals who value education. Such parents tend to become more involved in school activities and view their schools more favorably. Respondents from communities with a population less than 15,000 rated all three areas more favorably. In general, individuals from small communities are close-knit and loyal to their community. Participants from small communities tend to rate their schools more favorably.

***Qualitative Findings***

The overwhelming majority (88%) of the respondents strongly agreed with this statement: "Financial support is a major problem for the public schools in the community." The majority (52%) of the respondents disagreed with this statement: "Charter schools in your community should be funded by the state even if it means reduction in funding for the regular public schools."

When asked to rank major concerns about public schools, respondents ranked funding issues as their major concern and when asked to recommend ways to improve education, respondents suggested that teacher salaries should be raised commensurate with industry standards. Further, respondents reiterated their concern about lack of school funding to implement state mandates such as accountability testing.

The second major concern was the emphasis on high stakes testing. Respondents suggested that testing and state accountability be given less emphasis so that schools could more adequately cover other curriculum areas in addition to reading and math. Respondents expressed a desire to have more rigorous instruction in basic skills and a broad based curriculum. While respondents were interested in a strong foundation in math and science, they noted a need for physical education and the arts as well.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

Two major political trends could impact the future of NCLB. First, Congress has now put consideration of the NCLB reauthorization on hold until after the 2008 Presidential Election. Under NCLB policies, standardized tests have become a central, dominant force and funding continues to be a national concern at both state and local levels. It appears that the reauthorization of NCLB is requiring very tough decisions. Unfortunately, NCLB could be remembered for massive testing and data collection with very little achievement gain, high political cost, and inadequate funding.

Secondly, the nation is now in the throes of a political campaign for president. Under such political conditions, there are no guarantees that the highly visible NCLB policies of today will continue unabated into the future. Education policies have been cyclical in the past, as well as weakened through lack of funding support until they have had little or no influence. Research studies focusing upon identifying what specific assistance and funding amounts are needed to turn around low performing school may be beneficial, additionally, a common public school system for all students does not appear to meet the demands for diversity of today's society. Other arrangements may need to be investigated.

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