

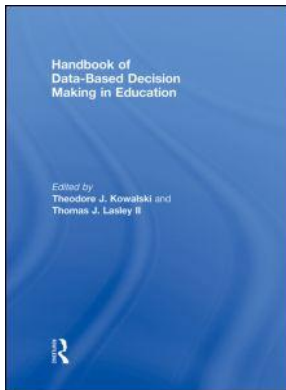
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How NCLB has Affected the Practice of School District Superintendents

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How NCLB has Affected the Practice of School District Superintendents

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Introduction

Since the mid-1960s, the state and federal governments have increased their intervention and scope of control over American schooling. Educational reforms such as higher standards, testing, and accountability seek to improve student achievement through tightened centralized control and more effective structures. Within the past 40 years, local control over America's schools has eroded, while at the same time, the federal and state governments exert ever-greater control over the educational process and outcomes (Wirt & Kirst, 2005). The enthusiasm among state and national leaders for greater levels of accountability and high-stakes testing has become part and parcel of election campaigns, sound bites, and funding streams. Federal and state policy makers have concluded, rightly or wrongly, that schools are in crisis and that one option for addressing this situation is reliance on federal mandates oriented at increasing educational outputs, especially those measured by standardized tests (Kowalski, 2006). Student achievement and closing the achievement gap have become the political *coin-of-the-realm* and powerfully mandated external pressures for educational accountability and school improvement have become the political tools of choice (Petersen & Young, 2004). In particular, the revised Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (also known as the No Child Left Behind [NCLB] Act of 2001—Public Law 107–110) has sweeping implications for those who work in public education. As the newest incarnation of the ESEA, NCLB has expanded the federal role in education and become a focal point of education policy. The legislation also sets in place requirements that reach into virtually every public school classroom in America. NCLB seeks to ensure that all American students are proficient in math, reading, and science by 2014. NCLB represents a significant departure from past practice. Overriding two centuries of state primacy in K-12 education, the federal government requires that academic performance lead to concrete consequences for schools—and that children in inadequate schools have the opportunity to seek assistance or move elsewhere (Hess & Finn, 2004).

The current climate and emphasis on the reform and restructuring of the American educational system have placed an enormous amount of political pressure on schools to demonstrate effective leadership at the district level (Fusarelli, 2005; Morgan & Petersen, 2002). Federally and state supported initiatives, like charter schools, vouchers, parental choice, high-stakes testing, and decentralization, provoke substantive questions in the minds of many about the future of public education and those who staff and lead public schools. It is not uncommon to hear state and federal office holders portraying public education as feeble while articulating what many believe are root causes to the problems facing schools:

Poorly trained teachers, undemanding curriculums suffused with political correctness and multiculturalism, the abandonment of drill and memorization and other traditional tools of learning and a general refusal on the part of a new generation of administrators to impose, and live up to, high standards of achievement.

(Ferguson, 2007, p. 32)

It was thought that in order to reverse this trend, schools must be held accountable. Test the kids, publish the scores, and let parents, armed with the results, decide whether the teachers and administrators were doing the job they were hired to do. NCLB has done just that. This accountability-laden program has readjusted the spotlight of responsibility and focused it directly on district leaders. Superintendents are held responsible for the performance of children in their districts, and rewards and sanctions are in place to goad annual yearly progress. For example, if a district is not successful in raising the level of all students, immediately and steadily, to the state-defined level of proficiency, the district will lose control (Heath, 2003). Of course, adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements vary by state. AYP punishes schools in one state for achievement levels that are defined as great successes in another (Sunderman, Kim, & Orfield, 2005). As a result, speculation and serious questions have been raised about the leadership of America's schools and the role superintendents will play in this *political mêlée* (Petersen & Barnett, 2005). As one California superintendent recently commented, "The [federal] government is attempting to *insult us into reform*" (Superintendent C1, personal communication, April 25, 2007). It is this issue that lies at the heart of our investigation. Our purpose is to examine superintendent attitudes and beliefs regarding the influence of the accountability movement and how it manifests itself on the professional life of the district leader. More specifically we investigate how the issues of assessment and accountability, parental choice, resource flexibility, and hiring highly qualified teachers play out in role realignment and decision making for district superintendents.

Theoretical Framework

Decision Making

In its simplest form, decision making can be defined as choosing between or among two or more alternatives (Picciano, 2006). Despite the fact that making decisions is the *sine qua non* of school leadership—it is not always as simple as choosing between

“option z” or “option y.” Far too often decision making in schools is a multifaceted process where complex and significant social problems cross paths with school policies and practices. It is at these intersections that school leaders examine and address problems and potential solutions (Bazerman & Chugh, 2006; Hoy & Tarter, 2008). While decision making may be *part and parcel* of the responsibilities of superintendents, decisions affecting the larger organization are not typically made in isolation. Current conditions of unpredictability and uncertainty in highly interactive and public settings coupled with increased demands for political, legal, professional, market, and bureaucratic accountability (Darling-Hammond, 2004) have resulted in school leaders taking more substantive measures to involve multiple actors who represent the larger social fabric (Kowalski, Petersen, & Fusarelli, 2007), as well as taking a more aggressive position in the integration of data-driven processes into all aspects of their operations (Picciano, 2006). Historically administrative operations like budgeting, inventory, and scheduling relied on data-driven processes; more recently educational reform initiatives such as NCLB have obligated school districts to develop and employ data delivery and data analysis support systems in order to accurately monitor and publicly report current information in the areas of instruction and student assessment (2006). School leaders find themselves using student assessment data and relevant background information, to inform decisions related to planning and implementing instructional strategies at the district, school, classroom, and individual student levels (Cradler, 2006).

No Child Left Behind and District Superintendents

Accountability

We find measures for greater accountability and laws designed to bolster how students and educational professionals are assessed are not new and in fact have played a significant part in the educational landscape. Historically, accountability legislation has been primarily aimed at finding methods to evaluate professional employees, to assess the achievement of students, and to evaluate and assess management methods (Gatti & Gatti, 1983). For example, in 1973 *Scheelhasse v. Woodbury Central Community School District*, 488, F.2nd 237 (8th circuit), focused on the issue of student performance and teacher accountability. In *Scheelhasse v. Woodbury* the courts found that a student’s performance on achievement tests could not be the basis of a teacher’s dismissal and in essence the court deferred to local school board discretion when dealing with academic standards. Despite the fact that previous legal efforts to wed teacher accountability to student academic performance have not been successful, the increased scrutiny of NCLB legislation around issues of student proficiency significantly strengthens grounds for tort suits on educational malpractice.

[S]tate and federal legislation making school districts accountable for ensuring student mastery of state standards may increase school districts’ potential liability. Even though it seems unlikely that public schools in the near future will be held responsible for a specified quantum of student achievement, it is conceivable that schools will be held legally accountable for diagnosing pupils’ needs, placing them in appropriate instructional programs, reporting their

progress to parents, and providing other educational options if they are not progressing in their current placements.

(Cambron-McCabe, McCarthy, & Thomas, 2004, p. 96)

O'Day (2002) points out that many of the current accountability policies make somewhat unrealistic assumptions about how public schools operate. In the case of NCLB and similar policies, the assumption is made that once schools possess current and accurate data about the achievement of their students, they will take whatever action is necessary to improve the learning outcomes. New accountability approaches, by their very nature, seek to influence from the outside what goes on inside schools. Moreover, such policies assume that external forces can play a determining role in changing the internal workings of schools. The limitations of such assumptions, however, have provided grist for the vast literature on policy implementation in education (Cambron-McCabe, Cunningham, Harvey, & Koff, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Lashway, 2001). NCLB has resulted in a dramatic shift in federal mandates for public schooling. NCLB affects almost every program authorized under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, including Title 1 (Department of Education, 2003). Moreover, NCLB shifts the federal government's role *vis-à-vis* local schools. The stipulations of NCLB require school districts that accept Title 1 monies to publish detailed annual reports on the progress of all children within the district (Heath, 2003; Jennings & Renter, 2006). The significant difference here is that unlike previous accountability initiatives, schools must demonstrate their compliance and growth by adequate yearly progress in student achievement regardless of disability, race or ethnicity, limited English proficiency, or economic status.

Obviously, the superintendent's role as the instructional leader is more important now than ever. NCLB requires district administrators to have an increased philosophical and technical expertise in curriculum scope, sequence, and alignment. Building and district leaders will use student test data to make decisions about effective services and practices, develop school improvement plans and if necessary take corrective action when schools miss the mark. The new evaluation provisions have made student assessment high stakes for all districts. Proven results, extensive evaluations, and data-driven decision making have moved the role of the superintendent from the sideline to the frontline (Petersen & Barnett, 2005; Petersen & Young, 2004).

Recent research by the Center on Educational Policy indicates that there is an upside to the emphasis on accountability. As a result of NCLB, schools are paying closer attention to the achievement gap and the learning needs of particular groups of students. They are also spending more time on reading and math, sometimes at the expense of other subjects not tested as well as working at aligning school curriculum and instruction as well as utilizing test score data for district decisions (see Jennings & Rentner, 2006).

Highly Qualified Teachers

A compelling body of research makes it clear that classroom teachers are vital elements in achieving student learning and school progress. Cohen and Ball (1998) write

that a teacher's "intellectual and personal resources influence instructional interactions by shaping how teachers, apprehend, interpret, and respond to materials and students" (p. 3). Instructors' knowledge, understanding of content, and flexibility of content understanding dramatically affect teacher interaction with students. Additionally, teacher resources are influenced by their relationships developed with students over time. Teachers must have an acquaintance with the students' knowledge and have the ability to relate to, interact with, and learn about the student. Finally, a teacher's repertoire of means to represent and extend content and personal knowledge and to establish classroom environments combines to mediate how teachers shape instruction. Overall, a teacher's ability to use, develop, and extend his or her knowledge and capabilities can considerably affect instruction by how well they involve students around materials (Spillane & Louis, 2002; Spillane & Thompson, 1997).

One of the most important provisions of NCLB is that by 2006 all teachers of core academic subjects are required to be highly qualified. To mandate school districts to attract and retain better teachers and to improve the educational preparation of teachers' aides are very positive goals (Sunderman, Kim, & Orfield, 2005). Although NCLB leaves it to the states to define the terms of *high quality*, the National Conference of State Legislators consider "highly qualified teachers" to be teachers who possess full state certification, successfully pass a state licensing exam, or meet the requirements of the state's public charter school laws (Jennings, Rentner, & Kober, 2002). Along with classroom teachers, NCLB required all teacher assistants in Title 1 schools to become "highly qualified" by January 2006. In the case of teaching assistants and tutors, highly qualified means they possess an associate degree, or two years of college credit, or have successfully passed a state-approved test (Petersen & Young, 2004).

Yet, a glaring caveat in NCLB is its failure to address the dilemma many school districts face in placing "highly qualified teachers" in all classrooms and teachers that may hold tenure. One of the fundamental issues facing concentrated poverty schools is their limited ability and resources to attract and retain highly qualified and experienced teachers. NCLB's requirement for highly qualified teachers has stimulated recruitment efforts in districts where traditionally underserved populations (e.g., "poor" and "minority" students) have experienced a revolving door of inexperienced and marginally trained teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Yet, No Child Left Behind's practice of labeling schools as failures often exacerbates efforts of district leaders to attract and keep qualified teachers. School districts plagued by such difficulties bound the superintendents to concentrate their efforts to work with and educate members of their communities. Yet, defining *high quality* in terms of credentials and certification creates an added burden for district leaders. It requires them to subject all existing and future district professional employees to higher levels of scrutiny. No more will an uncertified teacher be a simple red flag in the state supervisor's report. District administrators must ensure that current teachers strengthen and improve pedagogy using researched-based instructional strategies in their teacher development and continuing education programs. While districts may be in compliance with NCLB's teacher quality provision, current research indicates that it does not ensure dramatic increases in student achievement (See McMurrer, 2007).

NCLB requires superintendents to focus on the tasks associated with long-term, sustained success which begin from improving the quality of the novice teacher ensuring that teachers already in the classroom have the resources and learning opportunities they need to be most effective (Cicchinelli, Gaddy, Lefkowitz, & Miller, 2003; Petersen & Young, 2004).

Resource Flexibility

The No Child Left Behind Act also has a dramatic effect on how district administrators receive, allocate, and maintain funding for programs focused on instruction and learning. Under current federal statute, districts and schools that do not make sufficient yearly progress toward state proficiency goals for their students first will be targeted for assistance and then be subject to corrective action and ultimately restructuring. Any school district identified for corrective action must reserve and spend up to 20% of their Part A Title I funding for students who exercise an option for choice-related transportation, and supplemental educational services. Although these funds do not have to be taken from Title I allocations, and may be provided from other allowable federal, state, local or private sources (see U.S. Department of Education, 2002), this provision inhibits the employment of district monies to spend on other, more pressing local educational issues. While this may be the most significant financial effect felt by districts, they do face other potential costs for corrective actions. NCLB also states that aside from choice-related transportation any school targeted for corrective action may have to do one or more actions such as replace the school staff, implement a new curriculum, decrease management authority at the school, appoint an outside expert to advise the district, extend the school day or year, and reorganize the school internally (Code of Federal Regulations, 2002, sec 200.42).

Even though NCLB is very specific on sanctions for schools that fail to make adequate annual progress, the statute does not operationally define the limitations or allowances for this type of “punitive result,” therefore superintendents must step up their efforts to become advocates for the extraordinary costs posed by these types of situations. Moreover, they must be knowledgeable of the resources available, through the state, to assist low-performing schools. State funds should be available to provide low-performing schools with technical assistance for school improvement, corrective action, or restructuring, to provide school districts with funds for after-school and summer school programs, and to reward schools/teachers for closing the achievement gap over two consecutive years (Petersen & Young, 2004).

Parental Choice

NCLB mandates that parents are to receive information on the academic progress of their children, the performance of their schools, and to be involved in meaningful ways with school officials. Evidently, the authors of NCLB consider parents, “armed with data” and “schooling options,” to be in the best position to guarantee their children a quality education. Unlike previous reform initiatives,

NCLB couples school choice with accountability measures to allow parents of children in under-performing schools the opportunity to choose higher-performing schools.

District leaders are keenly aware of the positive influence parental and community involvement has on improving the quality of schooling (Griffith, 1996), as well as increasing the academic achievement of children (Peterson, 1989; Xiato, 2001). NCLB also recognizes the importance of parents and offers parents of children in low-performing schools a range of educational options. Parents with children in schools that fail to meet state standards for at least two consecutive years may transfer their children to a better-performing public school, including a public charter school, within their district. If they do so, the district must provide transportation, using Title I funds if necessary. Students from low-income families in schools that fail to meet state standards for at least three years are eligible to receive supplemental educational services—including tutoring, after-school services, and summer school. In addition, the NCLB Act provides increased support to parents, educators, and communities to create new charter schools. After five consecutive years of inadequate progress, schools are required to restructure by:

- (a) converting to a charter school,
- (b) replacing staff relevant to the failure,
- (c) hiring an external contractor to operate the school,
- (d) inviting the state to take over the school, or
- (e) another significant reform that fundamentally changes the school.

While the five options reflect specific means for change, they all potentially entail retaining the same students and, at a minimum, some of the staff, but quickly and substantially changing the academic performance of the school (see U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Offering parents data and choices, on the surface, appears an important step in enabling them to make wise decisions about their children's education. However, due to a variety of factors, from access to information to a parent's ability to understand the information or data they have been given, few parental choice programs have been successful (Young, 1999). A recent investigation into the area of parent involvement in the wake of NCLB has found that many parents are not receiving clear and timely information, and not surprisingly, poverty, English proficiency, and varying cultural expectations remain significant barriers to meaningful parental participation (Coleman, Starzynski, Winnick, Palmer, & Furr, 2006).

For district superintendents, increased parental choice, whether accomplished at the levels stipulated by NCLB and state legislation, has a significant level of influence on their ability to lead. At a minimum, increased efforts and resources must continue to be reallocated toward parental outreach and education. More significantly, however, is the management of student transience. Superintendents who lead districts in which schools have been classified as failing or low performing are required to make difficult staffing and resource decisions, and in some cases they may even lose significant amounts of funding. Such a loss of control over one's district makes school improvement very difficult, if not impossible. The difficulties, however, will not

impact only those superintendents with low-performing schools. District administrators of high-performing schools could see a significant influx of students from failing schools creating overcrowding in classrooms, numerous strains on district, school, and classroom resources, thus eroding the educational experience and performance of all students (see Education Commission of the States, 2004).

A lack of academic achievement is not the only stipulation that permits parents the option to transfer their children to another school. Under the *Unsafe Schools Choice Option*, NCLB requires states to establish and implement a statewide policy that provides parents the option to petition for transfer schools under two conditions:

- (a) the child attends a persistently dangerous elementary or secondary school; or
- (b) has been a victim of a violent criminal offense while in or on the grounds of the school he or she attends.

This exacerbates an already a complex situation faced by numerous school leaders in their attempts to make schools significantly safer than the streets leading to the schoolhouse door; while at the same time attempting to maintain an open atmosphere that emphasizes democratic principles and student learning (Petersen, 1997).

The Study

In this chapter we examined the influence of NCLB on the professional life of a district superintendent. Using four critical areas of the law, namely (a) assessment and accountability, (b) highly qualified teachers, (c) resource flexibility, and (d) parental choice. We asked superintendents if NCLB introduced significant role realignment for district leaders. The emphasis on academic achievement and accountability requires superintendents to move from the historical role of a comprehensive manager to a leader focused on learning and outcomes of all students. Through the examination of these areas separately, we speak to some of the challenges superintendents face in fully implementing and complying with this complex and sweeping federal mandate. These changes and challenges present implications for the daily practice of district leaders.

Data Collection and Analysis

The authors made use of a non-random selection method when choosing district superintendents for this investigation (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). This investigation was conducted using semi-structured ethnographic interviews with 15 district leaders, seven superintendents in California and eight in Nebraska (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 2003). Similar protocols were used in all interviews (Seidman, 1991). Questions were primarily open-ended and were based on the four critical areas of the law. Interviews provided us with information regarding the attitudes, perceptions, and actual practices of district leaders that would be difficult to assess using a paper and pencil measurement. All interviews were tape recorded

and verbatim transcripts were made. Systematic examination of each interview was conducted using a two-part domain analysis (Spradley, 1979). The first part required analysis of each interview across the question categories. Once each individual interview had been examined and categorized, responses were examined across districts. This helped to establish if themes or consistencies were apparent in the perceptions of the respondents. Preliminary data from interviews with district leaders provided a rich foundation of information from which to more clearly understand superintendents' perspectives on NCLB and the areas of assessment and accountability, parental choice, resource flexibility, and highly qualified teachers.

Findings

Examination of the data and review of interview transcripts indicate some interesting perceptions of the district leaders who participated in this investigation.

Accountability Historically, teaching and learning in American classrooms have depended heavily on intuition, skills, and expertise of educators, albeit public schools have long been held accountable for compliance with state and federal regulations. Between 1997 and 1998, the California State Board of Education (SBE) adopted standards for the core curriculum areas of English language arts, mathematics, history/social science, and science and aligned tests to those standards, largely through the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR). The district leaders we interviewed indicated that schools have always been accountable for student learning on some level; they also indicated that NCLB now requires district leaders to “dive beneath the data,” regarding who is and who is not learning. The superintendents we interviewed also agreed that NCLB had some important points directed at issues of equity and service to all children. “We have to be results oriented and we must pay closer attention to what the data is telling us about the learning needs of particular groups of students, especially those students who have traditionally underperformed” (Superintendent C2, personal communication, March 2, 2007). As part of this view, several superintendents said that discussion about serving all children had been answered. “The debate is over. We are now after results. NCLB has given us a common vocabulary” (Superintendent C4, personal communication, March 17, 2007). “The discussion of closing the achievement gap is over, we must get it done—period!” (Superintendent C7, personal communication, May 1, 2007).

In Nebraska, superintendents indicated that the combination of state accountability and assessment techniques along with NCLB increased their attention to the need for reliable assessment data on which they could make decisions about student learning and school improvement. The larger school districts in the sample (and those that were less rural in location) had assessment plans in place as far back as 1994–1995. While NCLB increased the attention on testing, the majority of superintendents interviewed insisted their schools had a vision for learning in advance of NCLB. One superintendent was quick to say, “Do not let NCLB become your school district’s vision for excellence; it is not a vision aimed at excellence. A school’s vision must be much more comprehensive than NCLB” (Superintendent N8, personal

communication, September 21, 2007). Another superintendent was adamant about the vision for a successful school: “(Educators) must understand the connections among quality goal setting, quality instruction, and quality assessment—that is why we are here! The worst thing we can do is accept NCLB as the standard for learning—we cannot be lulled into narrowing student opportunities for learning in schools. NCLB is a restrictor, not an expander” (Superintendent N6, personal communication, October 1, 2007).

It is evident that NCLB was responsible for an increased awareness of the use of data for purposes of making sound educational decisions and it focused attention on the alignment of curriculum from elementary through secondary levels with all superintendents in this study. One superintendent’s comment captures the sentiments of many of the participants around the issue of accountability and its influence on schools. “NCLB focused our attention on student achievement; everyone is talking about student achievement, even the board of education” (Superintendent N4, personal communication, October 4, 2007).

Resource Flexibility Superintendents in this study were well aware of the specific sanctions for schools that fail to make adequate annual progress; they emphasized the importance of their role as district leader and spokesperson in the advocacy for available resources offered through states to assist low-performing schools. These superintendents indicated that while numbers of students eligible for “supplemental services” has increased somewhat over the last three years, the number of for-profit entities offering these services has also increased.

Superintendents talked about a reallocation of money when they spoke about the way NCLB impacted their spending. Seven of the eight superintendents in Nebraska said they invested a greater percentage of their budget in specific professional development programs to assist teachers and para-educators to improve instructional strategies, select and implement curriculum and instructional interventions, and align curriculum. Most said they had shifted resources toward professional development and curriculum development as a result of the state accountability system; however, when NCLB was added, the urgency to shift money to projects that improved teaching and learning strategies was heightened.

Parental Choice The seven California districts participating in this study had open enrollment and home schooling policies in place well before the passage of NCLB. Provided this fact, superintendent responses focused on what they believed were the larger and more public meaning of parental choice. As one California superintendent said, “This law is discouraging, it indicates to our families that education is a broken and failed enterprise” (Superintendent C6, personal communication, March 5, 2007). Another superintendent indicated that her district had open enrollment for several years and there did not seem to be a great deal of dissatisfaction among parents in her district; although her view of parental choice is stipulated in NCLB, she saw it as “redefining the school and parent relationship in a negative way. Devaluing somehow this natural relationship and putting us in opposing camps” (Superintendent C4, personal communication, March 17, 2007). Other district leaders echoed these observations. Responses uniformly also suggested that

the idea of choice is limited to individuals with the resources to move and therefore it may seem politically expedient but it is not a panacea: “We tell parents of their options. I don’t see it [changing schools] as something that will automatically improve the students learning. There are too many factors involved in what a child needs to succeed. For NCLB to tell parents if they’re dissatisfied they can change schools is short-sighted” (Superintendent C5, personal communication, April 2, 2007).

Option enrollment, home schooling, and parental choice have also been available to Nebraska parents for many years. Parents are afforded numerous options to change schools given a practical rationale for their request. In that respect, none of the superintendents viewed parental choice as anything new or threatening, although it is important to note that there are few choices to move to a nearby school in the less populated regions of the state because there is no nearby school.

The perspectives of Nebraska superintendents indicated that parents were generally not familiar with the finer points of NCLB and probably would not be until a school did not meet AYP; then concerns would be raised. One superintendent noted that new people who moved into an area where school choices existed were “excellent school shoppers.” “They visited schools and asked questions about school and student performance” (Superintendent N8, personal communication, August 23, 2007).

Highly Qualified Teachers Putting highly qualified teachers in classrooms ensures American schools will be able to meet the challenges of teaching in a rapidly growing and diverse student population. The extant literature indicates that in 2005–2006, 88% of school districts reported that all of their teachers of core academic subjects met the NCLB definition of “highly qualified” (Jennings & Renter, 2006). Even though districts may be in compliance with NCLB’s teacher quality provision, this does not ensure increases in student achievement. As one superintendent stated, “There are common sense things like background, degree and teaching experience, but providing a rich and stimulating learning environment is much more complicated than that. There are multiple factors involved in working with and helping children learn, being highly qualified as stipulated by NCLB standard does not really address the really important stuff” (Superintendent C7, personal communication, May 1, 2007).

A Nebraska superintendent noted that “. . . the credentials of teacher applicants were examined closely to find candidates who had a background in assessment of learning and evidenced experience in curriculum design and curriculum alignment” (Superintendent N2, personal communication, October 5, 2007).

Placing a high-quality teacher in front of every child in the nation is the most important thing schools can do to improve student achievement. Although several superintendents stated that their districts continued to experience shortages of qualified teachers, especially in certain subject areas (e.g., math and science) as well as teachers of special education and in California particularly, teachers prepared to teach English learners. Many of them also pointed to the fact that as district leaders they had worked to increase the numbers of high-quality teachers in their schools, long before NCLB came into play. “Getting the best teachers with the proper degrees and

background is just common sense. NCLB just mandates what we've been trying to do for years" (Superintendent C2, personal communication, March 2, 2007).

Conclusion

Much of what we can grasp from an overview of our interviews and multiple meetings with district leaders regarding the four areas of NCLB (i.e., accountability, teacher quality, resource flexibility, and parental choice) is that this relatively new legislation has created a new and more intense dynamic for district leaders. No Child Left Behind's accountability mandate, in essence, is about obligating school leaders to support the achievements of all children. Clearly this involves a number of different knowledge and skill areas (Clark, 1999; Van Meter, 1999), one of them, data-driven decision making (Picciano, 2006). For example, although these district leaders understood and clearly articulated the importance of their role and accountability in fostering the learning of students, their responses resonated that their state's adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements were external factors that influenced their decision-making processes. They were now expected to meet and eventually exceed system requirements, which required them to use diagnostic data to drive effective instructional decisions and practices within a high-stakes environment (Cambron-McCabe et al., 2005; Petersen & Young, 2004). Responses also indicated that the increased emphasis on assessment required district leaders and their administrative teams to have a firm grasp of assessment instruments (e.g., what different types of assessments can and cannot tell you, what types of assessments are most useful for diagnostic purposes), develop the ability to analyze student achievement data, make yearly comparisons, and use those analyses as the basis for student achievement-centered decision making, resulting in different ways to enact their own leadership within highly public environments.

In terms of teacher qualifications, our interviewees indicated they had increased their recognizance in regard to the skills applicants enumerated when they applied for positions as classroom teachers. Potential new hires were carefully screened to determine whether they met the "highly qualified" designation. The screening processes naturally eliminated those who did not meet the criteria. The definition of highly qualified teachers is problematic as administrators seek to hire those who are most qualified. In addition to identifying highly qualified teachers by degrees held and training attained, Pianta suggests that "classroom visits to watch teachers teach [and] employing standardized assessments of good teaching could be used to accomplish this objective" (Pianta, 2007).

Some superintendents indicated they had indeed observed and reassigned teachers in an effort to place their most talented individuals at key grade levels. "Some teachers have been reassigned to meet the highly qualified designation, especially in Special Education and English Language Learners programs" (Superintendent N7, personal communication, September 27, 2007). One of the crucial decisions superintendents and their building level administrators contend with is the level at which teachers can take the pressure off increased public scrutiny. Another superintendent indicated that new teachers, those who were prepared in the past two or three years,

“seemed to have a good grasp of assessment and accountability” and, if that held true, the district could provide the professional development they needed to operate effectively as a classroom teacher. “Some of the veteran teachers experienced high levels of stress with accountability in general and with NCLB specifically. Some have resigned or retired, and others have been reassigned” (Superintendent N4, personal communication, September 20, 2007).

The decisions about how to deploy limited resources may have been further complicated by NCLB. However, the superintendents we interviewed, by and large, indicated that they had a well-reasoned vision for learning in their school districts. One of the discoveries made in the interviews we conducted was the assertion by superintendents that they were confident about their knowledge of what the educational priorities were in their districts. They had a clear sense of what it took to assure student achievement at the classroom level and they deployed financial and human resources to that end. The decision-making process they used was related to the vision they held for learning and student achievement. They invested resources in four primary areas:

- (a) good teachers,
- (b) intervention strategies that had been carefully studied by teachers and administrators,
- (c) alignment of curriculum, and
- (d) targeted professional development to assist teachers with their work.

Those interviewed in this study perceived they had flexibility in terms of resource allocation, but wondered aloud how long that flexibility would be in place.

Parental choice was not a theme that engendered a great deal of discussion from the interviewees. While it is true that options exist for parents to request and expect transfers from poorly performing schools to other schools, the 15 superintendents in this study had not dealt with parental demands to change schools. The sample for the study was small and admittedly did not include schools which had previously been identified as poorly performing so we cannot generalize a response based on the information we collected. The option to move children from failing schools to better schools is a topic that should be investigated in further studies.

Suggestions for Future Research

With Congress stalled on revisions to NCLB and the presidential campaign in full swing, it may be reasonable to assume that a flawed law will not receive the adjustments it likely deserves. School leaders must contend with state and federal mandates to increase student achievement and leave no child behind without the benefit of a focused national dialogue regarding remedy or elimination of NCLB. Regardless of what happens or does not happen, the parents of children in classrooms expect their local schools to document student progress, hire the best and brightest teachers, and improve learning for all students—and so they should.

The swirling rhetoric of educational politics and the necessity to assure citizens

that public schools are a good investment for them and the country will remain as schools strive to meet the demands placed on them.

Further information is needed about parental views of the efforts their local schools have made and are making to address the issues raised in the discussions that led to the No Child Left Behind Act. Is it possible for parents to move their children from low-performing schools to higher-performing schools? How many parents have exercised that option? What costs in terms of dollars and time have been incurred by parents and school districts? Are parents more cognizant of overall student achievement measures in America as a result of NCLB or is student achievement in elementary and secondary education more focused at the local and state levels rather than at the national level?

The matter of school district expenditures needs to be studied in light of the demands of NCLB. Have school district budgets been modified in any meaningful way in attempts to address issues raised by the passage of NCLB? Are veteran teachers resigning or retiring early as a result of the significant emphasis on accountability as stipulated in NCLB? Are newly prepared teachers more highly qualified than their more senior colleagues? Are districts allocating more resources to professional development programs for all teachers? Has there been an increase in expenditures for curriculum alignment, instructional interventions, testing and assessment materials, and new curricular materials?

Finally, the issue of whether American citizens perceive American Public Education to be best managed at the federal, state, or local levels should receive serious attention. Should an educational system that is rooted in state responsibility and local control be converted to a national system? If so, why, and if not, why not?

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