

# EDUCATION WEEK

## **NCLB: Perspectives on the Law**

by Neal McCluskey

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In 1975, assessing the first 10 years of Title I, RAND Corp. researcher Milbrey McLaughlin found that the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was failing. No one in Washington, however, wanted to take it on because "the teachers, administrators, and others whose salaries are paid by Title I, or whose budgets are balanced by its funds, are ... a more powerful constituency than those ... disillusioned by its unfulfilled promise."

Basically, the law was a victim of concentrated benefits and diffuse costs, a situation that hasn't changed in a decade of No Child Left Behind, the current version of the ESEA.

The root problem is that the people with the most at stake in a policy are the most motivated to participate in the politics of it, giving them disproportionate power. In education, those people are the school employees whose very livelihoods depend on the system. And they want what everyone, ideally, wants: generous compensation and no accountability.

This basic reality is why for decades Washington dumped money onto schools regardless of performance. It's why, once taxpayers got so fed up they demanded change, politicians created accountability regimes they never really enforced. And it's why, when you dig into them, National Assessment of Educational Progress scores provide no meaningful evidence that NCLB has worked.

Unfortunately, some people think that the solution is to double down on government power by imposing a federal curriculum. Not "voluntary, common standards," but standards forced onto states by the Race to the Top and NCLB waivers and accompanied by federally funded tests.

The idea is that a single standard will keep states from "gaming" accountability. But this assumes that those who would be held accountable won't gut standards at the federal level, an irrational assumption.

We don't need more federal intervention, but to sidestep imbalanced incentives by letting parents control education funds and educators teach as they see fit. Then parents wouldn't have to match hugely disproportionate political power, and accountability would be rooted in satisfying the people the schools are supposed to serve.