

Questions on the *No Child Left Behind Act* for the President and Congress
The National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy

As we prepare for a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (most recently called No Child Left Behind), here are suggested questions about the law for our President and members of the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives. These questions are coordinated with another resource from the NCC Committee on Public Education and Literacy, "Ten Moral Concerns in the *No Child Left Behind Act*."

1. The *No Child Left Behind Act* requires schools to bring all students to a level of proficiency by 2014. Many people believe this utopian goal is unattainable. What is a more realistic way to articulate high expectations and what will you do to maintain support for public education?
2. The *No Child Left Behind Act* tests children each year and has measured the average achievement of each subgroup of children against set score thresholds. Do you support the use of additional measures and what is your view of growth models for tracking student achievement?
3. The *No Child Left Behind Act* blames demographic groups of children who have failed to make "adequate yearly progress," blames their teachers, and punishes their schools through sanctions. The law has increased incentives for schools to focus on children whose scores are very near the test score thresholds and to "push out" adolescents who are unlikely to pass tests. How can "blaming" be reduced and incentives be developed for schools to support learning among very vulnerable children?
4. What changes can be made in testing special education students to ensure assessments are consistent with what each child has been taught and that each child's Individual Education Plan (IEP) Team has a role in these decisions?
5. Currently the *No Child Left Behind Act* requires testing in English before students have had the opportunity to learn English. What would be a more reasonable strategy?
6. Many people agree on the stated goals of the *No Child Left Behind Act*—to proclaim that every child can learn, to challenge every child to dream of a bright future, and to prepare all children to contribute to society. Many also realize that public school teachers and schools alone cannot overcome all of the challenges posed by poverty and by racial and class discrimination. What do you think should be changed in the law to strengthen the capacity of public schools and what other supports must society provide for children in poverty?
7. Studies demonstrate that the pressure of standardized testing under the *No Child Left Behind Act* has narrowed the curriculum in many places. What should a school curriculum cover? Which skills are important for public schools to develop—academic, physical, civic or ethical? Why?
8. Under the *No Child Left Behind Act*, Title I funds, formerly earmarked for academic support for children in poverty, must now be set aside for transportation to move children to another school, for privatized supplementary tutoring, and for major interventions like converting schools into charter schools or turning them over to private management firms. First, how do you think Title I funds should be used? Second, when private tutoring firms, charter schools, and private management firms are receiving federal dollars, should the school itself, the school district, the state, or the federal government be required to regulate these outside services?
9. In many places, the rankings assigned by the *No Child Left Behind Act* to schools and school districts are published in the press, supposedly to help the public compare the quality of services. First, do you believe standardized test score rankings are an accurate indicator of school district quality? Second, do you worry that publishing such rankings exacerbates racial and economic segregation across city and suburban districts in metropolitan areas?
10. How can federal education funding be reformed to improve achievement in public schools? What should be the federal government's role in funding the mandates of the *No Child Left Behind Act*? What do you think of requiring the federal government to undertake a cost study as part of the reauthorization?

Overall Question: As a person of faith, I do not view children as products to be tested and managed but instead as unique human beings, created in God's image, to be nurtured and educated. What will you do to help change the focus of federal policy to emphasize our civic obligation to enrich our children's lives through education?

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Ten Moral Concerns in the *No Child Left Behind Act*

A Statement of the National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy

Christian faith speaks to public morality and the ways our nation should bring justice and compassion into its civic life. This call to justice is central to needed reform in public education, America's largest civic institution, where enormous achievement gaps alert us that some children have access to excellent education while other children are left behind. The *No Child Left Behind Act* is the most recent, 2002 version of the federal education law. It purports to address educational inequity. Now, however, after we have watched *No Child Left Behind's* hundreds of cascading regulations for six years and as the law faces reauthorization, it has become clear that the law is leaving behind more children than it is saving. The children being abandoned are our nation's most vulnerable children—children of color and poor children in America's big cities and remote rural areas—the very children the law claims it will rescue. We examine ten moral concerns in the *No Child Left Behind Act*.

1. While it is a civic responsibility to insist that schools do a better job of educating every child, we must also recognize that undermining support for public schooling threatens our democracy. The *No Child Left Behind Act* sets an impossibly high bar—that every single student will be proficient in reading and math by 2014. We fear that this law will discredit public education when it becomes clear that schools cannot possibly realize this utopian ideal.

2. Till now the *No Child Left Behind Act* has neither acknowledged where children start the school year nor celebrated their individual accomplishments. A school where the mean eighth grade math score for any one subgroup grows from a third to a sixth grade level has been labeled a "in need of improvement" (a label of failure) even though the students have made significant progress. The law has not acknowledged that every child is unique and that Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) thresholds are merely benchmarks set by human beings. Although the Department of Education now permits states to measure student growth, because the technology for tracking individual learning over time is far more complicated than the law's authors anticipated, too many children will continue to be labeled failures even though they are making strides, and their schools will continue to be labeled failures unless all sub-groups of children are on track to reach reading and math proficiency by 2014.

3. Because the *No Child Left Behind Act* ranks schools according to test score thresholds of children in every demographic subgroup, a "failing group of children" will know when they are the ones who made their school a "failing" school. They risk being shamed among their peers, by their teachers and by their community. The *No Child Left Behind Act* has renamed this group of children the school's "problem group." In some schools educators have felt pressured to counsel students who lag far behind into alternative programs so they won't be tested and their scores won't count. This has increased the dropout rate.

4. We believe that all students, including students with disabilities, should be challenged to meet high academic standards and assessed on that material. We also know, however, that the *No Child Left Behind Act* has placed some children with disabilities in situations where they are expected to pass regular state grade-level assessments, despite the fact that they may be working considerably below and/or have not been taught grade level material. We strongly believe that students' Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams, in accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), are best positioned to determine which assessments are most appropriate for students identified as needing special education and related services.

5. The *No Child Left Behind Act* requires English language learners to take tests in English before they learn English. It ranks public schools that serve many English learners as "failing schools" simply because these schools serve children who are in the process of learning English.

6. The *No Child Left Behind Act* blames schools and teachers for many challenges that are neither of their making nor within their capacity to change. The test score focus obscures the importance of the quality of the

"Too often, criticism of the public schools fails to reflect our present societal complexity. At a moment when childhood poverty is shamefully widespread, when many families are under constant stress, when schools are often limited by lack of funds or resources, criticism of the public schools often ignores an essential truth: we cannot believe that we can improve public schools by concentrating on the schools alone. They alone can neither cause nor cure the problems we face. In this context, we must address with prayerful determination the issues of race and class, which threaten both public education and democracy in America."

—The Churches and the Public Schools at the Close of the Twentieth Century, National Council of Churches Policy Statement, November 11, 1999

relationship between the child and teacher. Sincere, often heroic efforts of teachers are made invisible. While the goals of the law are important—to proclaim that every child can learn, to challenge every child to dream of a bright future, and to prepare all children to contribute to society—educators also need financial and community support to accomplish these goals.

7. The relentless focus on testing basic skills in the No Child Left Behind Act diminishes attention to the humanities, the social studies, the arts, and child and adolescent development. While education should cover basic skills in reading and math, the educational process should aspire to far more. We believe education should help all children develop their gifts and realize their promise—intellectually physically, socially, and ethically. The *No Child Left Behind Act* treats children as products to be tested, measured and made more uniform.

8. Because the No Child Left Behind Act operates through sanctions, it takes federal Title I funding away from educational programing in already overstressed schools and uses these funds to bus students to other schools or to pay for private tutoring firms. A “failing” school district may not be permitted to create its own public tutoring program, but it is expected to create the capacity to approve private firms that provide tutoring for its students. One of the sanctions provided is to close or reconstitute the “failing” school or to make it into a charter school, but in many places charter schools are unregulated.

“Our nation’s teachers are asked to change lives and solve problems with resources nowhere near commensurate with the task while facing constant criticism by politicians, the public and the press for their alleged failures and inadequacies...”

—National Council of Churches Resolution: *The Churches and Public Schools*, adopted November 5, 2003

9. The No Child Left Behind Act exacerbates racial and economic segregation in metropolitan areas by rating homogeneous, wealthier school districts as excellent, while labeling urban districts with far more subgroups and more complex demands made by the law as “in need of improvement.” Such labeling of schools and districts encourages families with means to move to wealthy, homogeneous school districts.

“Most tellingly, the schools that offer the least to their students are often schools serving poor children, among whom children of color figure disproportionately, as they do in all the shortfalls of our common life. Indeed, the coexistence of neglect of schools and neglect of other aspects of the life of people who are poor makes it clear that no effort to improve education in the United States can ignore the realities of racial and class discrimination in our society as a whole.”

—*The Churches and the Public Schools at the Close of the Twentieth Century*, National Council of Churches Policy Statement, November 11, 1999

10. The late Senator Paul Wellstone wrote, “It is simply negligent to force children to pass a test and expect that the poorest children, who face every disadvantage, will be able to do as well as those who have every advantage. When we do this, we hold children responsible for our own inaction and unwillingness to live up to our own promises and our own obligations.” The No Child Left Behind Act makes demands on states and school districts without fully funding reforms that would build capacity to close achievement gaps. To enable schools to comply with the law’s regulations and to create conditions that will raise achievement, society will need to increase federal funding for the schools that serve our nation’s most vulnerable children and to keep Title I funds focused on instruction rather than on transportation and school choice. While Title I is small relative to state and local funding, it is the federal government’s primary tool for equalizing educational opportunity. Fully funding Title I would begin to shift the focus of the *No Child Left Behind Act* from punishing struggling schools to improving them, especially in districts with diminishing tax bases and exploding needs that serve populations segregated by race and extreme poverty.

Christian faith demands, as a matter of justice and compassion, that we be concerned about public schools. The *No Child Left Behind Act* approaches the education of America’s children through an inside-the-school management strategy of increased productivity rather than providing resources and support for the individuals who will shape children’s lives. As people of faith we do not view our children as products to be tested and managed but instead as unique human beings, created in the image of God, to be nurtured and educated. We call on our political leaders to invest in developing the capacity of the public schools. As Congress reauthorizes the

federal education law, we ask our elected representatives to uphold high expectations for all children but honor every child’s accomplishments; shift the focus from punishing public schools to strengthening them; reduce high stakes testing; and fully fund the law. Our nation should be judged by the way we care for our children.

Redefining the Federal Role in Education as the No Child Left Behind Act is Reauthorized

Talking Points



The National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy has released a statement, *Ten Moral Concerns in the No Child Left Behind Act*, that proclaims, “As people of faith we do not view our children as products to be tested and managed but instead as unique human beings, created in the image of God, to be nurtured and educated.” We do not support a philosophy of test-and-punish.

As we prepare for the reauthorization of this law, we remind the President and members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives that justice in public education is much on our minds. We look for a more carefully considered role for the federal government in federal education policy.

We lift up ten changes in the No Child Left Behind Act, each directed to one of the concerns in our statement: “Ten Moral Concerns in the No Child Left Behind Act.”

1. Establish ambitious student achievement targets to set high expectations for all children, but eliminate the utopian and unrealistic goal of universal proficiency by 2014.
2. Measure the growth in each student’s learning over time, and use additional measures of assessment, particularly those diagnostic measures that can guide instruction.
3. While setting high standards, develop policy that values the accomplishments of all children and their schools.
4. Challenge all students with disabilities academically and assess their accomplishments. However, policy should recognize that Individualized Education Plan (IEP) teams are best positioned to determine which assessments are most appropriate for students identified as needing special education and related services.
5. Teach English Language Learners the English language and other academic subjects at the same time their native culture and language are honored.
6. Support teachers by ensuring adequate resources, quality staff development, and strong school leadership.
7. Fully develop the gifts of all children, intellectual, physical, civic, psychological, and ethical. Require a rich curriculum that includes reading, math, the humanities, the sciences, the social studies and the arts.
8. Focus federal investment on improving public schools by reducing sanctions that privatize services. Any remaining federally funded, privatized services must be federally regulated.
9. Stop ranking schools and school districts on the basis of one annual standardized test. The educational endeavor is complex, many-faceted, and multi-variable.
10. Fully fund the mandates of this law and press states to address school funding inequity. The United States is a society with pockets of deep poverty and other pockets of astounding affluence. No Child Left Behind has been a double blow because it imposes sanctions without equalizing resources and opportunity. Restore the historic federal role in education to more fully support equal opportunity.

The No Child Left Behind Act culminates our society’s growing computerized capability to measure and quantify, but education remains primarily qualitative—the establishment of trust between teacher and child—the development of community within and beyond the school. We ask Congress to uphold high expectations for all children but honor every child’s accomplishments; shift the focus from punishing public schools to strengthening them; reduce high stakes testing; and fully fund the law.

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