

## No Child Left Behind—A Tale of Unintended Consequences

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*Aristotle is reported to have said “All who have meditated on the art of governing mankind have been convinced that the fate of empires depends on the education of youth.”*

*Abraham Lincoln is quoted as calling education “...the most important subject we as a people can engage in.”*

*Theodore Roosevelt is credited with saying “To educate a man in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society.”*

In these three statements we observe both the historical importance placed on education as well as an understanding that the essence of education must never be simplified to a simple imparting of information and skills.

The *No Child Left Behind* program highlights our government’s commitment to education as a national priority. And that is viewed by most as a positive direction for the long term good of our nation. Unfortunately, there is a serious flaw in the approach which needs to be fully addressed before it causes major harm in the education of our nation’s children.

Setting measurable standards and developing tests to ensure that these learning standards are being met by all students especially in critical skills of reading, writing and computation has undeniable merit. It is hard to fault the effort to develop and publicize a national report card on the effectiveness of public schools in educating our nation’s children in these important areas of learning. However, even the best of our intentions and efforts can bring with them *unintended consequences* that can prove harmful to our long term goal of ensuring a meaningful and effective education for all our children.

Let me explain. In its implementation, the *No Child Left Behind* approach explicitly equates a student’s test scores in basic skills, especially reading, with a successful educational experience. Schools in which students score high on these tests are awarded positive labels, such as schools of excellence, and their teachers and administrators rewarded. Conversely, schools that have low scores and/or do not show needed improvements in test results, receive negative labels, such as unacceptable, and their teachers and administrators threatened with loss of jobs.

Based on a cursory examination, this approach would seem to make sense and the outcry by many teachers, administrators, educational associations and parents against the “high stake” testing and labeling approach employed would appear to be without merit—little more than defensive postures to mask their own shortcomings. And so the *No Child Left Behind* program continues with minor adjustments in its implementation, for example, changing specific tests used or smoothing out conflicts over the testing of children with learning disabilities or children from other countries with limited facility with the English language.

Unfortunately, for the long term health and improvement of our nation’s public school systems, the law of unintended consequences has come into play. Why and how? Let us begin with this reality: it is no simple matter to specify fully what learning is actually involved in a meaningful education and more importantly what it takes to help a child learn and grow in this learning. As a guide in illustrating all that an education might encompass, **Phi Delta Kappa**, the highly respected national association of professional educators, has developed a listing including 18 goals of education. Included in this listing are the following goals—

*Understand and practice democratic ideas and ideals*

*Learn how to examine and use information*

*Develop good character and self respect*

*Understand and practice the skills of family living*

*Learn how to use leisure time*

*Learn how to be a good citizen*

*Learn how to be a good manager of money, property, and resources*

*Develop skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening*

*Learn about and try to understand the changes that take place in the world*

*Appreciate culture and beauty in the world*

*Develop a desire for learning now and in the future*

*Learn how to respect and get along with people who think, dress, and act differently Gain a general education*

*Develop pride in work and feelings of self worth*

*Develop skills to enter a specific field of work*

*Learn to respect and get along with people with whom we work and live*  
*Gain information needed to make a job selection*  
*Practice and understand the ideas of health and safety*

**Phi Delta Kappa** sends this listing of educational goals to members of its association periodically to determine which of these goals receive priority in their schools at a particular time. Over a 25 year period I have personally used this listing of goals in workshops for teachers, administrators, parents and community members to help them determine and make explicit the educational priorities in their schools. I have observed that while individuals hold differing views of what is most important in a youngster's education, a majority of the group will consistently come to a general agreement on the 5 most important goals. This has held true over time and in diverse parts of our country.

Achieving success in helping students meet the goals listed below is considered by a majority of educators and parents most important in evaluating how well a school is performing:

*Develop good character and self-respect*  
*Develop skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening*  
*Develop a desire for learning now and in the future*  
*Learn to respect and get along with people with whom we work and live*  
*Develop pride in work and feelings of self-worth*

(As an aside, after many years of leading these workshops, as well as noting the similar findings of **Phi Delta Kappa**, I am confident that if today you brought together diverse members of your community and guided them through a process of consensus building using this same list about what really matters in the education of youngsters, these same five goals would in all probability remain at the top of their list.)

A surprise came when I took the next step and attempted to lead the participants to a consensus concerning which one of these five priority goals should be considered the most important. As a former Director of Reading for the public schools of Greensboro, NC, and Dallas, TX, I began with the assumption that building skills in reading and writing would always be the most important priority for educating youngsters... and found this not to be the case. Coming to a consensus on what was the most important goal of education was difficult to achieve. In a number of communities, we had to call it a draw—no one of these five goals could claim a decisive majority.

In schools in which reading scores had been low, *developing skills in reading, writing speaking and listening* was typically listed by most people as the most important priority. However, in schools in which student performance had been high, more often than not, a goal involving an affective area, not easily measured on group tests, such as developing (1) *good character and self-respect*, (2) *pride in work and feelings of self worth*, or (3) *desire for learning now and in the future* was placed by most people in the top position. It wasn't that they didn't consider skill in reading to be essential for they did. They did believe, however, that these affective goals involve critical identity issues and ultimately serve as the foundation upon which success in learning and life and reading will be achieved by students.

If you agree that (1) an education includes multiple learning goals, and (2) that some of the highest priority goals are not included in the *No Child Left Behind* evaluation of a school's performance, we are now ready to consider the law of unintended consequences.

The power to test is the power to control. That is a time-tested maxim which translates to this reality—what is tested will be taught, especially when those test results will be widely publicized and consequences for poor performance will be severe: students can be held back, schools stigmatized with negative labels, and staff members threatened with loss of their jobs. Conversely, schools in which students are high performing, or improving in their performance, as measured by these state or national tests, will be rewarded with positive labels and financial incentives.

Well, you might question, what can be wrong with that? Let me suggest there are a number of things that can be wrong. Here is a sampling of harmful unintended consequences that have come into play

The type of pressure and rewards being placed on schools to have high test scores has resulted in an obsession with performance on tests, in many cases distorting presentation of the actual content to be learned. Classroom time previously used for learning, discussing, and exploring ideas is now spent focusing narrowly on content expected to be on the test or simply practicing test taking skills.

The curriculum in far too many cases becomes narrowed to meet test requirements, eliminating worthy areas of learning and personal exploration in topics of interest that enrich knowledge and nurture a desire for learning. Time for art and music, for example, is curtailed and in extreme cases eliminated. A student's legitimate question—why do we need to know this?—receives a practical response—because it's on the test.

Affective areas of education that are the foundation for learning and future growth are not included on the group tests of knowledge and skills used to evaluate a teacher's performance or a student's growth. As a result these critical goals of education become undervalued, even pushed aside, in the obsessive concern over achieving higher performance on tests of basic skills. Just think of the self-concept of children with learning disabilities who know their performance on tests makes them a liability for the school. Consider for just a moment the threat these tests pose to a learning challenged child's sense of self-respect and worth. Perhaps, then, you might understand the protests raised by their anxious parents. Consider, on the other hand, the plight of the high performing student whose learning experience is contained, even stifled, by a narrow instructional focus to ensure success on a test.

In the face of intense pressure, human beings will take on defensive postures. You can count on that. Think about executives of corporate giants faced with the need to demonstrate growth in profits on quarterly and annual reports. As national headlines tell us, creative (misleading to outright dishonest) accounting approaches all too often come into play. Even worse, a company's long term health may be jeopardized as budgets for research and development are shifted to promotions that can impact the current bottom line....and, for the short term, make the company and its leadership look good. How different is that from a school in which a teacher or administrator "cheats" to make the test scores look better? Or more significantly, force students to focus on a narrow curriculum and practice incessantly on taking tests because that will impact the current test results...and for the short term make the school and its educators look good?

I am not justifying this behavior for it is clearly wrong. However, it should be understood that intense pressure does not often bring out the best in us-- that when threatened some people will resort to unethical, protective actions.

You may argue that the information and skills being taught and tested will remain with students for a lifetime serving as their springboard for success in life? Shouldn't that justify the *No Child Left Behind* approach? If it were true, that might be a valid argument, but it isn't true. Let me note three things that happen to that learning:

a) The human mind does not retain information it does not deem meaningful or useful. If the reason for its being learned is to pass a test or a course—and that has been done—you can count on forgetting to take place. As a senior citizen, I suspect I have forgotten more than I will ever learn the rest of my life. Information and skills, I learned in school such as how to find a square root, or each state's capital, or the major battles of the Revolutionary War are today just vague memories of something I once knew. How about you? Just think of all that you once knew and have now forgotten.

b) Over time the human brain modifies and distorts information and facts to better blend with its world view. We have all had the experience of being positive about something we once learned only to find that being positive did not mean we were accurate.

c) Most significant, much of the information students learn at any point in time and are tested on is finite. It has a limited life span. For example, when I was in school, I learned that the population of the United States was 140 million people and that New York State had the largest population of any state. That is no longer true. What about you? How much of what you once learned in school is no longer accurate?

During the decade of the 1990s, I had the opportunity to serve as Vice President of Education for **World Book Encyclopedia**. In that role, I worked with the editors and publisher of that respected encyclopedia and learned that a set of **World Book** had about 14,000 pages and each year 30 to 40 % of those pages needed some changes, usually small but sometimes big. What didn't changed? Anyone who was dead for over 100 years tended to stay constant, but not always. What changed? Anyone who was alive changed as their lives were changing. Anything involving politics or politicians changed. Just think of all that you once learned about the U.S.S.R. and its leaders--it's all changed and in its place we now have Russia and a number of small countries most of us never knew existed. Our knowledge base in science and technology is constantly changing: what once was state of art knowledge is now obsolete or found to be wrong, possibly even detrimental. The author and futurist Alvin Toffler put it this way, "The illiterate of the future are not those who cannot read or write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn."

Several years ago I was invited to write an article for a professional development series for educators. In summing up the role of a teacher, I wrote: "Each day in the classroom, teachers observe what research

confirms—each child is unique. Each brings different experiences and prior knowledge to learning; each has different learning strengths and preferences. The challenge is for teachers to get to know children as individuals and to find out each child’s reading level, comfort level with informational text, prior knowledge of key vocabulary and concepts and emotional response to a particular topic.” Reading over those words today, I can only think—what a challenge for the teacher!

The question that we must ask ourselves is how do we support teachers in educating, in the full sense of that word, all the unique students who enter the classroom every day. The teacher’s challenge is truly great and unquestioningly support is needed. The proper question is how do we provide that support? Ask yourself, is *The No Child Left Behind* program really the best approach we can come up with? Is it even a good approach when you consider the unintended consequences that have flowed from it?