

**EDUCATION WEEK**  
ON THE WEB

American Education's Online Newspaper of Record


HOME | **EDUCATION WEEK** | TEACHER MAGAZINE | DAILY NEWS | ARCHIVES | SPECIAL REPORTS | HOT TOPICS | STATE INFO

Jobs | [Subscribe in Print](#)  
[Advertise](#) | [Order Reports](#)

**WEB CONNECTION**  
Showcase of Education Web Sites

**Get Education Week**

**EDUCATION WEEK** 

 [Glossary](#)  
 [Organization Links](#)

[Printer-friendly version](#)  
[E-mail this article](#)  
[Subscribe](#)

[Commentary](#)

**December 4, 2002**

## Can the Bush School Plan Work?

By **Michael Casserly**

Related stories:

["Final Rules Give States Direction, Little Flexibility,"](#) this issue.

["States Anxious for Federal Guidance on Yearly Progress,"](#) Nov. 27, 2002.

["Good-Bye to the Gentleman's C,"](#) Commentary, Nov. 27, 2002.

["State Boards Worried About ESEA's Impact,"](#) Oct. 23, 2002.

["Houston Awarded New Urban Education Prize,"](#) Oct. 9, 2002.

["Study Tracks What Works in Four Urban School Districts,"](#) Sept. 11, 2002.

The federal "No Child Left Behind" Act of 2001, signed into law with great bipartisan fanfare last January, is in danger of giving way to a national catfight over whether the letter of the law is more important than its grand intent.

States are struggling over whether they should jettison their current tests. Local school districts are gasping at the requirements they have to meet. Special interests continue to press their narrow concerns. And the press is reveling in the thought of having an endless stream of stories about how everyone is out of compliance with one provision or another.

**How to keep 'No Child Left Behind' from dissolving into its fine print.**

Yet, this new law could work if schools view it, as most major city school systems now do, as an opportunity to focus anew on student performance.

The law calls for all children to be proficient in reading, math, and science within 12 years; requires tests of progress in grades 3-8; and holds educators accountable for the results. Schools lose varying degrees of authority and control if achievement does not improve.

Schools traditionally have not worked under these kinds of pressures. Results often take a back seat to the schooling process. Credentials trump expertise. And teachers and staffs often think accountability is a threat rather than an opportunity.

Congress wanted to end this mind-set and the poor results it achieved by borrowing liberally from the lessons learned in Texas. There, schools gave tests frequently, supported teachers,

["Paige, Bush Upbeat on Making ESEA Work,"](#) Sept. 11, 2002.

and measured results for each racial and economic group. The state's progress on the National Assessment of Educational Progress bolstered the claim that Texas was on the right track. Little other empirical data existed, however, about whether the Texas approach would work elsewhere, allowing one set of partisans to argue that the state's gains were sensational and the other to claim that the "Texas miracle" was overstated.

A new report—one out of the cities, not the states—suggests that the framers of the No Child Left Behind Act may have actually been on to something. More importantly, the research on which the "Foundations for Success" report is based suggests a path along which cities might meet the act's goals, and bolsters the law in places where it is silent—for example, school district improvement.

**A new report suggests that the framers of the 'No Child Left Behind' Act may have actually been on to something.**

The Council of the Great City Schools and the independent research firm Manpower Demonstration Research Corp. completed a two-year analysis of city school systems that had improved reading and mathematics performance at rates faster than their states', and had simultaneously narrowed their racially identifiable achievement gaps. The study asked the question: How did they do it?

Researchers also contrasted these city school systems—Charlotte, N.C.; Houston; Sacramento, Calif.; and New York City's Chancellor's District, a unit composed of the city's lowest-performing schools—with other districts getting less traction under their reforms.

---

The reforms pursued by these faster-improving city school systems were strikingly similar to one another and were often in concert with the strategies outlined in the No Child Left Behind Act.

Overall, each district took a comprehensive, systemwide approach to reform, rather than rely on each school to figure it out for itself. This approach helped spur improvements across the district, rather than in pockets of schools. In each city district, reform was initiated and led by a superintendent and a school board that pursued a common agenda over an extended period about how to boost student performance, did so in a steady but relentless fashion, and minimized the political game-playing and zero-sum decisionmaking found in other districts.

The analysis also found that the districts shared three common strategies that a contrasting group of districts without student gains had not implemented.

First, each district set hard-nosed and measurable goals for itself and its individual schools, with an accountability system based on a number of measures. These districts' accountability systems went beyond what their states had established and held district leaders and school staffs personally responsible for results. Eric Smith, who headed North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg County schools before moving to the Anne Arundel County, Md., school district, had a contract that tied his evaluation to the attainment of the detailed goals set by his board. Similarly, members of the school board in Sacramento signed a public pledge to resign if they could not raise achievement.

Second, the districts implemented a coherent, somewhat prescriptive, districtwide curriculum and professional-development program. This meant that the central office took direct responsibility for raising student achievement, rather than remaining passive and leaving individual schools to devise their own curriculum and training. The Sacramento schools had 17 different reading programs at one time; Houston had seven; and the Chancellor's District in New York had too many to count. The sheer number and variation of these programs stretched the districts' capacity to implement them effectively.

**Reforms pursued by fast-improving city school systems were often in concert with those outlined in the 'No Child Left Behind' Act.**

A districtwide instructional approach, however, allowed these districts to mitigate the effects of high student mobility and large numbers of inexperienced teachers.

Third, the districts instituted regular testing and used detailed data to measure progress, diagnose weaknesses, and intervene as problems arose. They provided teachers and principals with early and ongoing assessments and training on how to use the data throughout the school year. Most districts wait until the end of the school year, when it is too late to make adjustments and improve results.

Charlotte administers short assessments in many schools every 10 days or so. Houston and Sacramento give quarterly tests and use the results to target supplementary services for students and professional development for teachers.

The experience of these districts suggests that doing all of these things together can have a much greater impact on a district's success than doing any one of them alone. Indeed, unless a district tried to reform its system as a whole, trying any one of these approaches or pursuing a school-by-school strategy was probably a waste of time and effort.

---

The findings are not particularly surprising. Nevertheless, they

take the discussion about systemic reform out of the realm of speculation and into the empirical.

The research could not answer all questions, of course. It was not clear, for instance, whether the improvements were due to the uniformity or to the prescriptiveness of the curriculum. The analysis could not determine the relative importance of each reform. Neither could it tell where the effects of systemic reform ended and the effects of individual school reforms began. And it could not calculate whether any of the districts met the federal legislation's literal definition of "adequate yearly progress."

Still, the results—and the uncertainties they raise—suggest that No Child Left Behind is actually a solid framework within which to think about reforming America's public schools. The legislation's emphasis on results, accountability, regular assessments, coherent professional development, supplemental services, and teacher quality are clearly on the mark.

What remains unclear is whether the internal gears of the legislation are calibrated to spur higher achievement. The law, if some provisions are followed literally, could have the unintended effect of restricting instructional time in order to accommodate various procedural reviews.

**How ironic it would be if 'No Child Left Behind' devolved into a squabble over how tightly to comply with the law's technical provisions, rather than how to spur student improvement.**

The law's minutiae probably say more about Congress' skepticism that educators will do what works than about its certainty that the law's levers are the right ones. Many of the nation's educators, for their part, feed the skepticism by whining about the details rather than embracing the law's overarching intent.

Likewise, the Bush administration and Congress may have unwittingly confused people by suggesting that there was broad flexibility in the act in places where there shouldn't be. There should be lots of flexibility in how the act is implemented programmatically—its inputs. But there should be little flexibility when it comes to what the legislation strives to achieve—the outcomes.

In other words, there ought to be maximum flexibility in areas such as the selection of instructional interventions, and limited latitude in areas where the bill specifies performance targets and accountability. It is in the latter area where attempts at the state level to game the system can do the most damage to the act's underlying purpose.

Congress and the U.S. Department of Education should not be so worried about compliance with the inputs that the process of achieving it chokes off the outcomes. But they should stick to their guns in insisting on results.

How ironic it would be if No Child Left Behind—in some ways, the capstone of a reform movement to emphasize results rather than process—devolved into a squabble over how tightly to comply with the law's technical provisions, rather than how to spur student performance.

The point here is to make sure that we are flexible about the right things and hard-nosed about the bottom line—and don't confuse one with the other.

President Bush's school plan can and should work if the administration adheres to the academic framework of its legislation, funds it adequately, focuses compliance on schools making little or no progress, and uses the new research to provide better technical assistance to schools and districts that need it most.

The job for educators is to stop fretting about being ticketed over every flashing light in the legislation and get on with the business of boosting student achievement.

---

*Michael Casserly is the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, in Washington.*

### ON THE WEB

---

Read "[Foundations for Success: Case Studies of How Urban School Systems Improve Student Achievement](#)," the report referenced by Mr. Casserly. Posted by the [Council of the Great City Schools](#).

© [2002 Editorial Projects in Education](#)

Vol. 22, number 14, page 48,38,39

[advertising](#) | [about this site](#) | [order special reports](#) | [jobs](#) | [archives](#) |  
[web connection](#) | [privacy policy](#) | [feedback](#) | [letter to the editor](#)