

What is the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act on students?

May 30, 2008

A collection of student commentary from StudentsSpeakOut.org

The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was passed by congress and signed into law on January 8th 2001 by President Bush. According to the US Department of Education's web site, "*No Child Left Behind* is based on stronger accountability for results, more freedom for states and communities, proven education methods, and more choices for parents." NCLB uses standard based education to assess student achievement. The goal of the law is to ensure all students, regardless of ethnicity or socio-economic status, meet the same basic education standards. While most believe the intention behind the law is good, it remains controversial in practice. Many educators and students argue that the law has created a constant test prep environment in classrooms, which stifles creativity and higher level thinking skills. Still, despite its controversy NCLB has had some successes across the United States and specifically in Minnesota. Currently there are many states, including Minnesota, who are trying to opt out of NCLB. The following comments come from students participating in forums and discussions on StudentsSpeakOut.org.

Students and teachers explained the impact of NCLB and increased testing on students and schools. They also brought up in a discussion about standardized testing.

Dena (Freshman, Southwest HS) "... increased testing definitely makes school more boring and relate less to what is going on around us. For example, in English class we spent, I think, two months learning word roots because it is a requirement because it is on one of the big tests. But we really should be spending more time doing things like reading about current events or other activities that use critical thinking and analyzing what we have read."

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) "At my school, the main complaint I hear from other students is about the boring factor. I think it's mainly because of two things: **NCLB!!!** (This is a national issue, not just within our district.) Lots of what we cover is for tests, tests and more tests. It can't possibly be interesting! Maybe what we should be doing is start protesting the **No Child Left Behind Act**...I can't think of a SINGLE person I know who actually likes it. Critical thinking is MUCH more important to me than knowing the correct way to bubble in a circle. What we should be doing with our time is developing thinking skills that we need in the real world, like debate. We should be able to find ways of learning that are fun that help us apply our experiences and knowledge to other things besides a test.... Also, lots of teachers seem to be giving in to **NCLB**, and teaching in a non-thinking, memorizing kind of style."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "I also think that more testing is not the best thing for students learning when teachers end up having to teach to the test. That does not prepare anyone for the real world. What is a good test score if all it can land you is a good job but not the knowledge to keep it? ... I think somehow a different way to evaluate schools should be in action. ... I think to get a better overall view about schools and their educating abilities we need to put in a little more effort than sending so many tests for students to take."

Holly (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "The problem with **No Child Left Behind** is that it's turning into—and probably already has—No Child Allowed In Front. The standards are a pain in the butt for both teachers and students. It's holding students back while looking good and appealing to the parents. Not good at all."

Cori (Senior, Roosevelt HS) "Since **NCLB** came into existence the only people that have benefited from it are rich suburban kids. Every inner city school I've seen have visible elements of this dastardly bill almost begging to be taken out like lassie. Anne Sullivan was once a wonderful school, since **NCLB** they've cut approximately half of their teachers in one summer. They've cut the sign language program... wait, what? They CUT the DEAF program, the reason it was made, the bloody school was created to help communications between deaf people and non. I mean... Anne Sullivan was the teacher of Helen Keller! Plus, now that **NCLB** has been instituted, teachers have consistently stopped teaching for intelligence, now they teach the test. Because if a school gets on bush's "shit list" that school WILL suffer. Bitter? Hell yes."

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) "Well here's a news flash, people, **NCLB** isn't going to go away and we are spending money...wouldn't it be better spent using the most effective, innovative way of testing that is more useful and relevant to students? It just makes me feel cheated to know there are better ways out there...they know about them, but we aren't doing them because it costs more. Here's something for those big decision-making guys to think about: We are the up and coming generation. We are the future. How do you want to prepare us? Do you want to challenge us? Do you want us to be ready for the world and be good, creative problem solvers? Do you want us to be able to think critically? What's important here? The current, cheapest way, or investing in the future?"

Steve (Patrick Henry HS teacher) "If energy was spent actually developing a curriculum or ensuring that classrooms included important material (instead of force-feeding test-related facts), there might be more effective classrooms where students could stay interested during the day. Having said that, I think there is a lot to be said for accountability. Graduating 100% of the students is great, but constituents rightly want to know if the students are graduating having learned something. How can we measure this in a different way? My answer would be to have observations in classrooms. Have teachers watch each other. I don't think the 'team' environment is emphasized enough in teaching. Teachers should really be in the position to do some of the most inspiring work anywhere, especially in high school where students are old enough to go in depth on just about any topic, and young enough that they don't think they know everything already. I think by observing each other and by collaborating on curriculum (on a more regular basis), teachers might have the chance to be more inspired and bring out the best in themselves, and subsequently, their students."

Holly (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "[After completing] the MCAII's, several 'just to check on where you are, and those other ones to 'check on where you are NOW'...I was very glad they were over, but felt no great accomplishment. If they really are aimed to show the teacher where the student is, then shouldn't they also be aimed to see where the teacher is? I don't believe one letter in the alphabet's start can dictate whether or not a student is capable of learning. Tests and grades should be guides for teachers, parents, students, and elected government officials in charge of the national education. I know my ABC's. I just want to know the material, as well."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "I think they are a total waste of time at school. All the time we wasted to get ready was so we could evaluate the time we had already spent during the year learning. You would think we would spend less time preparing to evaluate and taking tests and spending it on learning to actual material. There is so much information and so little time to grasp it in school that in the next 100 years, what are we going to be asking our children to do? We waste many resources and time on systems and processes that don't work the most efficiently and effectively it takes away from everyone's learning...Why on these tests are you asking questions about plot and leaf graphs for example (Which I NEVER see anywhere nor does my science or math teacher really,) instead of questions about critical thinking, cultures... Why do we have so many subjects and topics left out and other somewhat pointless ones in the tests? Why are the tests so basic and far away from what people

really educating me want me to learn, how far I should go, and have grasped by the time I am out of their class?"

Dena (Freshman, Southwest HS) "We only spent a few days doing reviews before the tests in class - not nearly enough time to refresh our memory of EVERYTHING we learned in the ENTIRE YEAR! I think the teachers to expect us to learn something in a couple days and be able to remember it in 6 months with only a few minutes refreshing on that topic."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "Maybe we have to decide what we really want (if we were to redo the system,) once the information is all on the table regarding the implications. The schools would have to get the same information as policy makers so they could work to understand where the policy makers are coming from if they did not agree with the decision. Maybe the policy makers should look at what the schools say also?"

Matty (former HS student) "I think that there is major difference between laziness and boredom, although there may be a positive correlation. I believe these are the students who are willing to go beyond the recommended (sic) standards set by teachers and **NCLB**. Providing a parallel curriculum (sic), such as a book club would enable youth to consume more education on a more selective basis."

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) "... I researched standardized testing and how it's related to **NCLB**. I agree that **NCLB** was created with good intentions, and the Bush administration (sorry if this is getting really political) is what changed it...by lack of funding. Also, schools get funding based on how they do on tests REQUIRED by **NCLB** (there are certain requirements for subjects/grades nationally, and state to state) so teachers are stressing to cover test materials so that schools can get more funding. I feel like this is an indirect yet direct effect of **NCLB**."

ABOUT STUDENTS SPEAK OUT:

StudentsSpeakOut.org is an initiative of the Citizens League Minnesota 150th Anniversary Project (MAP 150). MAP 150's purpose is to find ways of cultivating citizens' ability to participate in designing public solutions by developing new spaces and roles that respect citizens' experiences and ideas as relevant to the policy discussion. People affected by the problem should be included in defining it.

StudentsSpeakOut.org is a project whose face is a social networking Web site. We are testing a variety of strategies for involving young people as active citizens by meeting them where they are (on the Web, using technology, and in both school-based and outside-of-school learning environments). The Web site was at first Minneapolis-focused, and has now expanded to all of Minnesota and Milwaukee, with potential for further expansion nationally.

There are forum discussions where students and adults raise questions and discuss ideas for solutions. We've "turned the tables" and asked students to act as commentators on the education-related ideas of high-profile adults in Minnesota. The Web site was also the host of the "I Am Minnesota's Future" Video Contest, a pilot-level contest providing a forum for students to articulate what adults and youth must do to ensure a better future in Minnesota.

There is a lot of behind-the-scenes work, too, that occurs to cultivate active citizenship and bring the site to life. For example: Student leaders from Minneapolis and from Minnesota's alternative-education programs have project coordinators who assist them in investigating topics of their choice on video and in written story, and who connect the students to decision-makers working in their scope of interest.

In Milwaukee, students learn how to use the site to address education matters they care about via workshops, and adults participate in separate workshops to learn how to support the students on the site. The workshop designs and in-person recruiting strategies built on the successes of Minnesota's site, and the strategies are succeeding (as evidenced by rapid growth of site participation—almost 80 new participants since its launch in mid-April 2008.)

There are a number of strategies for facilitating more dialogue amongst students regarding NCLB, and other issues affecting students, including using site's discussion forums and cultivating student leaders to run the discussion. Most important to the students' willingness to participate is their trusting that there is an audience willing to consider their ideas. If that's you, and you would like to know more about working with Students Speak Out to involve students in your work, contact us: info@studentspeakout.org