The NCLB Era

In 2001, President George W. Bush established the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in order “to improve the performance of America’s elementary and secondary schools while at the same time ensuring that no child is trapped in a failing school.” NCLB provides federal funding to improve public school systems in the U.S. The legislation requires that each state have all of its public school students meet standardized testing proficiency goals in math and reading by the year 2014.

Also, each school is required to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) based upon outlined standards of academic excellence. According to the legislation, “AYP is primarily a measure of year-to-year student achievement on the state assessment in reading and mathematics.” NCLB act forces schools to document their strategies in making AYP in order to hold them accountable. AYP standards increase each year in order to challenge and encourage schools to meet higher academic expectations until 100 percent of students are performing at a proficient level.

Although the NCLB standards of accountability and grade level proficiency increase each year, the number of Virginia public schools that make AYP has not consistently increased each year since 2001. The most recent AYP data shows that the number of Virginia schools that made AYP goals in reading and math dropped during the 2008-09 school year. Virginia Department of Education noted that 71 percent of the state’s 1,855 schools met the federal standards for success in reading and math which is down from 74 percent. "The benchmarks are increasing at a faster rate now than the schools are able to show in increases in SOL scores," said Patricia Wright, State Superintendent for Public Instruction in Virginia. "Meeting annual AYP benchmarks becomes increasingly challenging as required pass rates move..."
closer to 100 percent,” said Board of Education President Mark E. Emblidge. “I encourage educators to continue their focus on instruction while policymakers determine how federal education law must evolve to maintain accountability without penalizing schools that really are making progress.” Since NCLB mandates 100 percent of schools make AYP, public schools achieving NCLB requirements has been harder to reach than the Virginia's state requirements for accreditation, which has been based on having at least 70 percent of a school's students passing SOL tests in English, math, reading and science. As the year 2014 quickly approaches, Virginia public schools will challenged with developing strategies that will raise the passing rates from 71 to 100 percent.

Race to the Top
An important legislation that was passed in 2009 to improve the U.S. public schools was the Race to the Top program. Led by U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, the 4.35 billion dollar Race to the Top program is an unprecedented federal investment in education where states submit education reform proposals and compete to develop new ideas. The program is designed to reward states that are leading the way in comprehensive, coherent, statewide education reform across four key areas:

**Key Areas:**

1. Adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy.

2. Building data systems that measure student growth and success, and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction.

3. Recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most.

4. Turning around our lowest-achieving schools.

Race to the Top winners provide examples for states and local school districts throughout the country to transform the public school system. According to Arne Duncan, “The Race to the Top program marks a new federal partnership in education reform with states, districts and unions to accelerate change and boost achievement. Yet the program is also a competition through which states can increase or decrease their odds of winning federal support. For example, states that limit alternative routes to certification for teachers and principals, or cap the number of charter schools, will be at a competitive disadvantage. And states that explicitly prohibit linking data on achievement or student growth to principal and teacher evaluations will be ineligible for reform dollars until they change their laws.”

Virginia was one of the 40 states that submitted a detailed education reform proposal in order to compete in the Race to the Top competition. The Virginia Department of Education proposed a wide variety of initiatives that bring more rigor and relevance into classrooms for all children with a primary goal of increasing all students’ preparation for postsecondary education and careers.
Virginia’s Race to the Top Proposal:

- A college ready initiative that defines the standards and associated achievement that students require to be prepared for postsecondary education.
- Technology-based resources in the hands of classroom teachers and students.
- School division support and incentives for rigorous, transparent, and fair teacher and principal performance evaluations.
- Providing incentives for charter school start-up in lowest achieving schools.

Potential Policy Changes

Although the NCLB Act was originally created to measure student achievement and to maintain accountability, it is still extremely difficult for schools to collect data that truly measures student success. One possible change could be the way student achievement is measured. In fall 2009, The Richmond Education Panel Series held an event in Richmond, VA to discuss student achievement and the future of public schools. The panelists featured in the event were Jane Norwood Kusiak, Executive Director of the Counsel of Virginia’s Future; Shane Lopez, Senior Scientist in the Residence at Gallup and an architect of the Gallup Student Poll; Arthur J. Rothkope, Senior Vice President and Counselor to the President of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and Bob Wise, president of Alliance for Excellent Education.

The panelists argued that measuring academic success should include looking at student’s progress in the classroom instead of just looking at the outcome of a standardized test. They believed that there should be comprehensive longitudinal data source that measures a student’s academic progress in the classroom from year to year. Teachers would update the students’ progress in a database which can be viewed by the school and legal guardians. As a student moves to the next grade level, the new teachers can use the database to look at the student’s education history. Then, the teachers can learn the student’s needs and try to frame their teaching styles around those student needs. This type of system would require one type of database system that all of the States use and the teachers would be trained in order to understand how to use the system.

Another possible policy change encouraged by the panelists could be giving students assessments that offer indications of emotional or psychological problems. These types of assessments are particularly important in failing schools where numerous students may be facing issues outside of school that negatively impact their academic performance. The assessments could be given twice a year; one at the beginning of school year and one at the end in order to determine the student’s level of progress.

Virginia Department of Education proposed significant enhancements to the statewide longitudinal data system that will put additional high quality, data into the hands of teachers, administrators, researchers and policymakers. A web-based portal will be developed to display student data and provide feedback to schools on the classroom outcomes of students and graduates. Tables, charts, and graphs will
be presented to provide different views of the data. Overall, this new longitudinal data system will provide powerful information on how well students are prepared for college and careers which can ultimately influence future education policies.

In order to turn around the lowest achieving schools, the Virginia Department of Education plans to develop high-performing charter schools. The schools will be led with educational management organizations to provide intensive services to students who are struggling academically and are at-risk of not graduating on time or not graduating at all. The selected educational management organizations must agree to maintain these charters or contract schools for a minimum of five years. This effort is consistent with Virginia’s approach to using federal entitlement funds that are required to be used for turning around persistently low-performing schools. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced that Virginia will receive nearly $59.8 million dollars to turn around its persistently lowest achieving schools. He stated, "When a school continues to perform in the bottom five percent of the state and isn’t showing signs of growth or has graduation rates below 60 percent, something dramatic needs to be done. Turning around our worst performing schools are difficult for everyone but it is critical that we show the courage to do the right thing by kids."

Final Thoughts
The challenges facing Virginia public schools are significant. Researchers, policymakers and educational professionals constantly debate over the next step in improving the public school system. Nevertheless, it is crucial for the Virginia Department of Education to implement new ways of measuring student achievement in order to help schools, particularly failing schools, improve. The Race to the Top program provides Virginia with an excellent opportunity to significantly improve the public school system for the future. The U.S. Department of Education recommends that Virginia aim to do a better job in demonstrating its efforts to boost teacher quality and adopt common standards and assessments to improve the state’s chances of receiving Race to the Top funding. Currently, Tennessee and Delaware have the strongest proposals for education reform and other states, including Virginia, are encouraged to implement their ideas in order to keep students from falling behind.
End Notes

3. Shane Lopez, Senior Scientist in the Residence at Gallup and an architect of the Gallup Student Poll; Jane Norwood Kusiak, Executive Director of the Counsel of Virginia’s Future; Arthur J. Rothkope, Senior Vice President and Counselor to the President of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and Bob Wise, president of Alliance for Excellent Education. Richmond Educational Panel Series. October 2009.
7. U.S. Department of Education Application for Race to the Top Funds.

About the Author

Alecia Houston served as the Richmond Families Initiative program and policy associate for the academic year 2009-10. She graduates in May 2010 with a bachelor of arts in urban practice and policy and will pursue a masters of urban planning at Virginia Commonwealth University in the fall of 2010.

Richmond Families Initiative

The Richmond Families Initiative is a university-community partnership for Richmond’s children and families. Managed by the University of Richmond’s Bonner Center for Civic Engagement, this initiative seeks through partnerships with nonprofits to leverage existing University and community resources and to support children and families in the city of Richmond.

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