

## New book from UCLA's Civil Rights Project takes aim at No Child Left Behind Act

### Authors recommend major assessment and accountability changes to the federal law

By Shaena Engle

The federal No Child Left Behind Act's current accountability system provides insufficient evidence that the law has succeeded in raising student achievement levels or closing the nation's racial achievement gap, according to a new book from the Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles at UCLA's Graduate School of Education & Information Studies.

Edited by Civil Rights Project senior researcher Gail L. Sunderman and featuring contributions from noted education scholars Linda Darling-Hammond, Catherine Snow, Robert Linn, Daniel Koretz and Civil Rights Project co-director Gary Orfield, among others, "Holding NCLB Accountable: Achieving Accountability, Equity, and School Reform" (Corwin Press, 2008) examines themes of capacity, accountability, school reform and NCLB's impact on educating all students, especially those from low-income and minority backgrounds.

In addition to critically evaluating NCLB's performance-based assessment and accountability system, the authors recommend that new measures be put in place that will help provide better information on how students are performing, improve opportunities for low-performing students, and ensure that states have adequate financial and administrative support to turn around low-performing schools.

"We know far too little about how to hold schools accountable for improving student performance," says Harvard University testing expert Daniel Koretz, who argues in the book that the entire NCLB accountability system is not based on hard evidence.

Co-author Jaekyung Lee, an associate professor of education at the State University of New York in Buffalo, has compared the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) -- known as the nation's report card -- to state assessment results and has concluded that federal accountability hasn't improved reading and mathematical achievement or reduced achievement gaps.

“Based on the NAEP,” Lee says, “there are no systemic indications of improving the average achievement and narrowing the gap after NCLB.”

Other contributors suggest that the law has not focused on the kinds of serious long-term reforms that can actually produce gains and narrow the huge gaps in opportunity and achievement for minority students.

The pending reauthorization of NCLB by Congress this year has generated spirited debate among educators on the effectiveness of the law, which holds states and schools accountable for ensuring that students attain proficiency in math and reading. Many are hoping that the reauthorization process will provide an opportunity for major revisions of the law.

Throughout the book, the contributors provide information on what we know and don't know about educational accountability and what *types* of accountability systems will most improve opportunities for low-performing students while minimizing the negative effects.

They also lay the groundwork for developing a system of multiple measures for obtaining evidence on whether NCLB is achieving its aim of increasing student achievement and closing the racial achievement gap, and for tackling the very important issue of whether states have the financial and administrative capacity to meet the law's requirements to improve low-performing schools.

Additionally, the contributors examine whether NCLB maximizes its potential for fostering reform in low-performing schools. Taken together, these discussions raise important questions about the law's effects and offer strong recommendations for designing workable accountability systems that will lead to coherent efforts to improve schools.

Among the authors' findings:

- Too little is known about what types of accountability systems will most improve opportunities for low-performing students.
- The current NCLB accountability system does not provide the information we need to know about how students are performing or what to do to advance students' learning and improve instruction.
- Evidence that NCLB is working to improve student achievement and close achievement gaps is not promising.
- State education agencies' capacity to meet the law's requirements and intervene in low-performing schools on the scale demanded by the NCLB is limited.
- Many of NCLB provisions -- including the definition of highly qualified teachers, the design of the testing and accountability regulations, and the reliance on mandates -- impede school reform and make it more difficult for high schools serving low-income students to do their work.

- Only about 40 percent of the nation’s high schools with high dropout rates are identified as needing improvement by the NCLB’s core accountability measure.

In encouraging the development of assessments and accountability systems that assist rather than interfere with educational progress, and the creation of a viable education agenda that is mindful of state and local capacity, the editor and authors of “Holding NCLB Accountable” make the following recommendations:

- More needs to be done to develop an accountability system that is fair, yields information that informs and advances student learning goals, and contributes to improving instruction -- including adopting performance goals that are ambitious but realistic and obtainable, multiple indicators of performance, and realistic timetables for school improvement.
- The high expectations of NCLB must be paired with adequate support and greater investment in capacity building in low-performing schools and districts.
- To offset the disadvantages faced by historically lower-performing groups of students, in-school programs and reforms need to be complemented by out-of-school interventions and programs that address non-school conditions such as housing, poverty, health care and safety.
- An independent, federally funded analysis of what it takes in administrative and financial resources for states to have a reasonable chance of turning around low-performing schools needs to be conducted.

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**The Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles** at UCLA’s Graduate School of Education & Information Studies is a leading national organization devoted to research and policy analysis about critical civil rights issues facing the nation. Its mission is to bridge the worlds of ideas and action by becoming a preeminent source of intellectual capital and a forum for building consensus within the civil rights movement.