

## Within Our Reach

The contents of this publication are drawn from the book  
*Within Our Reach: How America Can Educate Every Child*  
(ISBN 0-7425-4887-2 cloth, ISBN 0-7425-4888-0 pbk.)  
published by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, in asso-  
ciation with the Hoover Institution on War Revolution and  
Peace at Stanford University.

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# Within Our Reach

## *How America Can Educate Every Child*

Findings and Recommendations  
of the Hoover Institution's  
Koret Task Force on K–12 Education

*Edited by*  
John E. Chubb

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ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.  
*Lanham • New York • Toronto • Oxford*

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*Stanford University • Stanford, California*

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First printing, 2005

11 10 09 08 07 06 05 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Manufactured in the United States of America

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# Prologue: The No Child Left Behind Act

## *Koret Task Force on K–12 Education*

**November 2004**

With the reelection of President George W. Bush, it is tempting to think that the future of the nation's most important education law has been secured. No Child Left Behind (NCLB), after all, was the focus of every education debate during the campaign. Senator John F. Kerry and his Democratic allies called for its major overhaul. The president and his supporters staunchly defended NCLB's ambitious ends as well as its controversial means. After a bitter campaign, the president won the popular vote and the electoral vote, and the Republican Party increased its majorities in the Senate and the House. If the

president wants to stay the course with NCLB, he can almost certainly have his way.

But if President Bush and Education Secretary-designate Margaret Spellings and their associates choose this course, they will be wasting a rare opportunity. As we show in this study of NCLB, the administration and Congress have a chance to make improvements in the quality of education in America that are desperately needed and potentially historic. NCLB is the most significant federal education initiative since *Brown v. Board of Education* sought to bring equality to America's schools. It is a very good thing for America's students that the overhaul promised by Senator Kerry will not come to pass. That "overhaul," so popular with teachers unions and other establishment critics of the law, would have done nothing more than thoroughly weaken, even cripple NCLB.

Supporters of NCLB—and this includes both many Democrats who voted for it in 2001 and most Republicans—should not rest on their laurels, for the potential of NCLB will not be fully realized if the president chooses simply to stay



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the course. As we show, the current law does need change—not only to strengthen it but to avoid potentially calamitous problems only now appearing on the horizon. The White House should take advantage of the brief honeymoon that the administration will likely enjoy during the first months of its second term to reform NCLB along the lines that we outline.

The administration may be tempted to delay. NCLB does not have to be reauthorized until 2007. The president has other worthy education initiatives, particularly upgrading high schools and rewarding teachers; calling for midcourse corrections can open the law to mischievous changes by opponents. Yet without the kinds of reforms that we describe, the future reauthorization of NCLB is likely to be conducted in an atmosphere of crisis. Such an environment does not produce the best legislation and, if intense enough, could significantly weaken or even eliminate results-based accountability in American K–12 education.

An ounce of well-timed prevention could do a world of good. Accordingly, the president

should use some of his considerable political capital to reach out to those Democrats and Republicans who embrace NCLB's serious purpose, to focus attention on strengthening its functioning, and to agree on important changes that could usher in an era of high achievement, narrowing gaps and creating near-universal proficiency in core academic skills among young Americans.

## Executive Summary: Saving NCLB

### *Koret Task Force on K–12 Education*

#### Findings

**1** The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has the potential to drive historic improvement in the *quality* of America's schools. Indeed, NCLB could do for the *quality* of America's schools what *Brown v. Board of Education* did for the *equality* of America's schools.

**2** Early evidence suggests that NCLB has already spurred significant achievement gains, including a doubling of the rate of improvement in the nation's largest school systems.

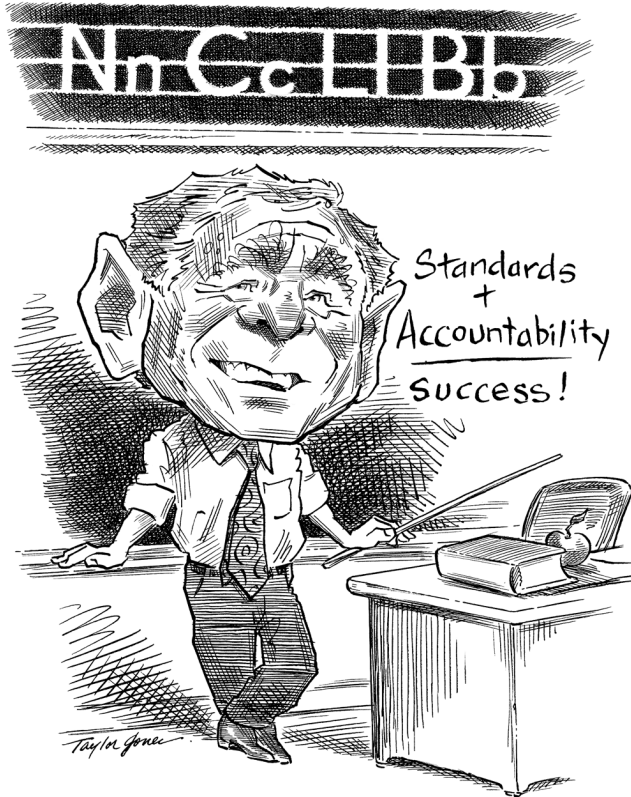


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**3** The potential of NCLB derives from the basic principles that it employs to catalyze change—*accountability*, *transparency*, and *choice*—principles that are fundamentally different from the traditional guidelines of public education.

**4** There is strong evidence that the kinds of tough accountability measures adopted by NCLB have been raising achievement in states since 1994, and there is reason to believe that the transparency and choice provisions of NCLB can do the same: the law has dramatically increased the visibility of student achievement nationwide and stimulated the entry of many new providers into public education.

**5** The major goal of NCLB is audacious: to have all public school students proficient in reading and math by 2014. But this goal is morally right and, we find, attainable; the standards of proficiency adopted by many states, as required by NCLB, reflect levels of performance that are both important for all students to reach

and within the grasp of all students, if properly instructed—a judgment that is supported by comparisons of state and national academic standards. The law also provides ample allowance for students in exceptional circumstances—for example, students with serious special education needs or non-English-speaking students newly arrived in the country—to satisfy alternative standards or proceed at a slower pace.

**6** Although it is often asserted in the political arena that NCLB is underfunded, and therefore incapable of reaching its goals and hence unreasonable to be expected to, funding should not be at issue. It is a red herring. The direct costs of implementing NCLB's requirements are more than covered by the substantial funding increases that have followed its enactment. The indirect costs are highly debatable, for they are nothing more or less than the costs of public education that states and districts are otherwise expected to provide.

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**7** The goals of NCLB are nevertheless in serious jeopardy. They will not be reached without modifications to the law (and its administration) *to reinforce the principles on which the law is based* and to strengthen its key processes. NCLB's framers had to accept many compromises to obtain passage in Congress in 2001. Experience now makes clear that those compromises jeopardize the law's major ambition.

**8** Our recommendations are unambiguously aimed at helping the law meet its goals according to its demanding timetable. They must not be confused with all-too-frequent calls for "midcourse corrections" by interest groups and policy analysts that would effectively gut NCLB in the name of "feasibility" and "fairness."

**9** Despite its promising evidence of progress, NCLB suffers several major weaknesses that threaten its success:



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**a** States have used the discretion provided them by NCLB to set proficiency standards that vary widely in difficulty (and worthiness), that in some cases have begun to decline, and that are likely to foster a “race to the bottom,” driving academic standards further downward as 2014 approaches rather than establishing and sustaining the high standards intended by the law.

**b** Some states have used the discretion provided by NCLB to set intermediate proficiency targets (what the law calls annual measurable objectives, or AMOs) that spare most schools from any improvement efforts for several years, delay the need for major achievement gains by all schools for many years, yet promise to cause most schools to be labeled failures later in the decade—an untenable outcome. If this prospective “train wreck” is allowed to happen, the nation will have little alternative but to ignore NCLB or indefinitely delay its implementation.

**C** NCLB's mandate that (by 2005–2006) all public school students must be taught by “highly qualified teachers” who are proficient in their subject areas is being satisfied in disingenuous ways that do not in fact ensure that teachers know their content areas. Some states have used their discretion under NCLB to adopt tests for new teachers and alternative requirements for veteran teachers (HOUSSE provisions) that are far too easy. Unless this portion of NCLB is modified, the law will not significantly improve the quality of teachers.

**d** The major new engine in NCLB for raising student achievement is choice: the right of students in faltering schools to choose a new school or private tutoring (known as supplementary education services, or SES). These promising strategies for getting students better education are being resisted by the school districts responsible for implementing them. Unless this situation changes, these powerful forces for improvement,

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equality, and opportunity will fall well short of their potential, leaving NCLB with far less chance of succeeding.

## Recommendations

**1** *We recommend that all state proficiency standards be calibrated using the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) as a common yardstick.* The point is to give states that set high standards an incentive to keep them while giving states with low standards an incentive to raise them. We recommend specifically that NAEP be used to rank all states using its rigorous standards and that these rankings be made public. We further recommend that states above the median be given extra time, proportional to their distance from the median, to reach the goal of 100 percent proficiency. States below the median would be encouraged by the public exposure of their low standards to lift theirs.

**2** *We recommend that the system of state AMOs, created to evaluate whether schools are*



*Margaret Spellings, U.S. Secretary of Education*

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*making adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward 100 percent proficiency, be replaced by straightforward statistical forecasts of whether individual schools are making adequate progress.* The purpose of this reform: to give all schools immediate incentives to raise student achievement, to avoid drawing misleading conclusions that schools are making adequate yearly progress when they are not, and to resolve issues of how large subgroups must be evaluated for making progress. We recommend using each school's recent and current test scores to project its total and subgroup achievement forward to 2014. Schools that fall significantly below the trajectory needed to reach 100 percent by 2014 would not make AYP and would thus become subject to NCLB's accountability provisions.

**3** *We recommend that the definition of highly qualified teacher be revised to include any teacher who possesses a bachelor's degree and one of these three additional attributes: (1) a college major in the subject being taught, (2) passage of a subject competency test provided or approved by an*

*independent national agency on teacher certification, or (3) demonstration through a statistically sound value-added methodology that one's teaching has significantly raised pupil scores on state proficiency tests—thereby eliminating the ineffective HOUSSE provisions of NCLB.* There is a dual purpose here: first, to attract more promising candidates to teaching by concentrating on skills directly related to student performance and providing alternatives to time-consuming and often ineffective traditional certification; second, to retain effective veteran teachers by focusing directly on their subject matter knowledge and teaching effectiveness and to weed out ineffective ones who are holding down positions better given to new, highly qualified teachers.

**4** *We recommend that NCLB take away from school districts primary responsibility for the law's choice provisions and put them in the hands of a state education agency. We further recommend that eligible parents and students be able to choose any regular or charter public school in any school district—provided the family handles transporta-*

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*tion out of the district—as well as any private school that accepts public per capita funding as full tuition. We also recommend that SES services (as well as choice) be available to students whose schools fail to make adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years.* The purpose of these proposals is multifold: transparency, to ensure that the parents know the status of their schools and the alternatives open to them; choice, to increase the probability that students have ample alternatives to select among, should they wish to change schools; and effectiveness, guaranteeing that direct help to students in the form of tutoring from a competent provider is available as soon as possible. This recommendation would also end an unacceptable conflict of interest built into NCLB today whereby a school district is expected to foster alternatives to its own services.

**National Goals and Local Control**

The key impediment to achieving the bold objectives of the No Child Left Behind Act, objectives that both political parties enthusiastically



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embraced, is the law's reluctance to interfere with traditional state and local powers and prerogatives. We believe that America's tradition of decentralized primary-secondary education has many virtues. We also believe that important national goals, such as ensuring that every U.S. student reach proficiency, can and should be accomplished through a system that respects state and local control. We would be a poorer nation were this not possible. We strive in this volume to recommend modifications to NCLB that will enable the policy to accomplish what it intended while respecting and maintaining vital state and local roles. The balance between state and nation needs to be altered, yes. But every level of government retains a crucial responsibility in achieving universal proficiency for every young American.



## Contents of *Within Our Reach: How America Can Educate Every Child*

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## About the Contributing Authors

**John E. Chubb**, a distinguished visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution, is chief education officer and one of the founders of Edison Schools, a private manager of public schools, including many charter schools. Edison Schools today operates 130 schools in 19 states, with approximately 70,000 students. Chubb is also the coauthor (with task force member Terry M. Moe) of *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, a seminal work that argues for the introduction of free market principles within the American education system.

**Williamson M. Evers**, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, was senior adviser on education to Ambassador Paul Bremer of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq in 2003. Evers

is a member of the White House Commission on Presidential Scholars and was a member of the National Educational Research Policy and Priorities Board in 2001–2002. He serves on panels that write mathematics and history questions for California's statewide testing system and was a commissioner of the California State Commission for the Establishment of Academic Content and Performance. He is coeditor of *School Accountability*, a 2002 publication by the Koret Task Force, and *School Reform: The Critical Issues* and editor of and contributor to *What's Gone Wrong in America's Classrooms*.

**Eric A. Hanushek** is the Paul and Jean Hanna Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution. He was nominated by President George W. Bush to be a member of the National Board of Education Sciences. His works on education policy include *Improving America's Schools: The Role of Incentives*, *Making Schools Work: Improving Performance and Controlling Costs*, and *Educational Performance of the Poor: Lessons from Rural Northeast Brazil*. His current research involves

## Contributing Authors

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understanding the role of teachers, programs, and funding in determining student achievement. Previously, he served as deputy director of the Congressional Budget Office.

**Caroline M. Hoxby**, a distinguished visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution, is a professor of economics at Harvard University and director of the Economics of Education Program at the National Bureau of Economic Research. She was nominated by President George W. Bush to serve on the National Board of Education Sciences. She is the editor of *The Economics of School Choice* and the forthcoming book *College Choices*. She is also the author of several influential papers on education policy, including “Does Competition among Public Schools Benefit Students and Taxpayers,” “The Effects of Class Size and Composition on Student Achievement: New Evidence from Natural Population Variation,” and “Not All School Finance Equalizations Are Created Equal.”

**Lance T. Izumi** is Senior Fellow in California Studies and Director of Education Studies at the

San Francisco-based Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy. Izumi is a member of the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges and a member of the U.S. Department of Education's Teacher Assistance Corps, a task force of teacher-quality experts. He is a past member of the California Postsecondary Education Commission. Izumi is the coeditor of *School Reform: The Critical Issues* (Hoover Institution Press and Pacific Research Institute, 2001) and *Teacher Quality* (Hoover Institution Press and Pacific Research Institute, 2002) and a chapter coauthor for *School Accountability* (Hoover Institution Press, 2002).

**Terry M. Moe** is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and the William Bennett Munro Professor of Political Science at Stanford University. He is the author of *Schools, Vouchers, and the American Public*, the coauthor (with task force member John E. Chubb) of *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, and the editor of *A Primer on America's Schools*. He also edited *Private Vouchers*, the first book to chronicle the growing sup-



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port for school vouchers for low-income children.

**Paul E. Peterson**, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, is the Henry Lee Shattuck Professor of Government and director of the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University. He has been appointed to a Department of Education independent review panel to advise in evaluating the Title I program and, in 2003, was awarded the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation prize for Distinguished Scholarship. Peterson is the editor in chief of *Education Next* and author or editor of numerous books on U.S. education, including *No Child Left Behind? The Politics and Practice of School Accountability* (co-edited with Martin R. West), *The Future of School Choice, Our Schools and Our Future . . . Are We Still at Risk? The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Schools*, and *Earning and Learning: How Schools Matter*.

**Diane Ravitch**, a distinguished visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution, is a research professor at New York University and holder of the Brown

Chair in Education Policy at the Brookings Institution. She is a member of the National Assessment Governing Board, to which she was appointed by Secretary of Education Richard Riley. From 1991 to 1993, she served as assistant secretary of education and counselor to Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander. A historian of American education, she is the author of many books, including *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn*, *The Great School Wars*, *The Troubled Crusade*, and *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms*.

**Herbert J. Walberg**, a distinguished visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution, is research professor emeritus of education and psychology and University Scholar at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He has edited more than sixty books and written approximately 350 articles on educational productivity and human accomplishment. He was nominated by President George W. Bush to serve on the National Board of Education Sciences and is one of ten U.S. members of the International Academy of Education. He is

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also a fellow of several scholarly associations in the United States and abroad. He is coauthor of *Education and Capitalism: How Overcoming Our Fear of Markets and Economics Can Improve America's Schools* and coeditor of *School Accountability*, a 2002 publication by the Koret Task Force.



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The Hoover Institution established the Initiative on American Educational Institutions and Academic Performance to examine the specific role and extent of government in proposed solutions to education issues in the United States. The initiative addresses education policy related to government provision and oversight versus private solutions—both within and outside the public school system—that stress choice, accountability, and transparency. Scholarly inquiry within this initiative weighs equity concerns against outcome objectives, and stresses systematic reform options such as vouchers, charter schools, and testing.

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### **The Koret Task Force on K–12 Education**

A concern in the United States is that the quality of K–12 education has been gradually declining over the past few decades. Questions about the quality and productivity of primary and secondary schooling in America merit significant inquiry into the subject. Thus the Hoover Institution has assembled a top-rated team of education policy experts to work together on an ongoing basis to address these questions as part of the Institution's initiative on American Educational Institutions and Academic Performance. The primary objectives of this team are to (1) gather, evaluate, and disseminate the existing evidence in an analytical context and (2) analyze reform measures that will enhance the quality and productivity of K–12 education. The outcome from this task force is consequential research output that is published and broadly disseminated by the Hoover Institution.

The task force currently includes eleven members. John E. Chubb, Edison Schools; Williamson M. Evers, Hoover Institution; Chester E. Finn Jr., task force chairman, Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and Hoover Institution; Eric A. Hanushek, Hoover Institution; Paul T. Hill, University of Washington; E. D. Hirsch Jr., University of Virginia; Caroline M. Hoxby, Harvard University; Terry M. Moe, Hoover Institution and Stanford University; Paul E. Peterson, Harvard University; Diane Ravitch, New York University; and Herbert J. Walberg, University of Illinois at Chicago.

The Koret Task Force on K–12 Education is named in honor of the Koret Foundation, a major supporter of the Hoover Institution's K–12 Education Initiative.

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(2002)

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(2003)

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Edited by John E. Chubb  
(2005, 217 pages—copublished with  
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