Preface

No federal policy is as important to the future of education in America as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Since its passage in 2002, the law has provided the nation with ambitious goals, concrete timetables, and potent remedies for raising student achievement and providing *every* American child a decent education. This is historic stuff, in a country that has long left education policy to the states and local school districts. With NCLB, the United States has committed itself to solving, as a nation, the education problems that have stymied policymakers since at least 1983, when a federal blue ribbon panel confirmed with *A Nation at Risk* the severity of the situation: achievement in math and science that lags many other nations around the world and gaps in achievement at home, between Blacks, Hispanics, and whites that leave most minority students ill prepared for life after high school.

But no federal education policy is as controversial as NCLB either. The law requires that students be tested in reading and math every year beginning at grade 3, and holds schools accountable for helping ever increasing portions of their students demonstrate proficiency every year. By 2014, the law requires that schools bring 100 percent of their students to proficiency. If schools fail to make sufficient progress, the law allows students to choose other schools and

receive tutoring at district expense. Schools that fail to make adequate progress face increasing sanctions, including the possibility of closure. Public educators generally oppose the law, arguing that the expectations and sanctions are unfair and under-funded. State policymakers, sympathetic to the cries of educators, have shaped their own education laws, including especially their academic standards and definitions of proficiency, to make things easier for educators—thereby weakening NCLB. Critics of the law sometimes ridicule the very purpose of NCLB, to ensure that *every* child is proficient in the near future. But it should come as no surprise that a law that attempts to do as much as NCLB attempts to do, or that does so by upsetting the historical balance between federal and state power, should generate controversy. This is to be expected. Real change never comes easy.

As President Obama and Congress work to reverse the worst economic slide since the Great Depression, it is all the more important that the nation's education problems remain a top priority. Economic growth depends ever more strongly on the quality of education; the stronger a nation's education system, the greater the returns in the international marketplace. The president clearly appreciates this, and has won support for an $800 billion economic stimulus plan that promises to boost federal education spending in the short run and the long by tens of billions of dollars a year—doubling federal support for public schools. But this spending will be a missed opportunity if the money is not spent in ways that, while staving a financial crisis also promote fundamental school reform. NCLB can and will help guide this massive infusion of funds. But no one knows for how long. NCLB, which is authorized by Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, is operating under a temporary authorization, and needs to be reauthorized. Arne Duncan, the new secretary of education, indicates that

NCLB's reauthorization is in fact a top priority for the administration, but has not set a schedule for getting it done.

What should the administration do? In anticipation of the challenges facing the new administration, and the criticality of NCLB to education in the United States, the Hoover Institution Task Force on K–12 Education took up this question in 2008, giving the law as much time as possible to surface issues, self correct and otherwise prove its mettle. We had studied the law during its early days, and written in *Within Our Reach: How America Can Educate Every Child*, that NCLB had historic potential but significant weaknesses that we urged policymakers address. In the years since, the US Department of Education has ameliorated some of these issues. More important, the law has developed a track record that permits a more rigorous examination of its effects. Six years of test scores have piled up since NCLB became law. Researchers have begun more nuanced analyses. The Task Force reviewed the data and the extant research. We looked at the direct evidence of NCLB's consequences. We also considered the evidence, which is more abundant, on the principles on which NCLB rests: accountability, transparency, school choice, standards, teacher effectiveness, and much more. We debated, vigorously on most issues, and came to the conclusions we share here.

Several conclusions stand out. First, the nation *is* making academic progress. Student achievement is increasing, after a generation of stagnation, especially for the disadvantaged students that NCLB sought most directly to help. Second, as students are learning, we are learning more as a nation about what really works to raise student achievement. Third, while it would be premature to ascribe achievement gains directly to NCLB, it is safe to say that the principles on which NCLB is based provide an empirically sound foundation for serious school reform. Fourth, NCLB contains

elements of unfairness, some of its provisions do not work nearly as well as they could, and at least one provision does not work at all. Finally, NCLB should be reauthorized, but with major defects corrected—as we outline with ten lessons to be learned and recommendations for improvement.

These ten points and the analysis that supports them constitute a coherent proposal for continuing the improvement of public education. The passage of NCLB did not start a reform process, nor should it be the end of one. NCLB was more a capstone event in a reform process that began twenty years earlier and that we strongly urge continue. NCLB was the culmination of a process that began with the national call to arms in *A Nation at Risk* and gained steam with the growing willingness of policymakers to adopt reforms that truly challenged the status quo. NCLB embraces these principles like no other law before it, and deserves support for this reason. Every member of the Task Force on K–12 Education supports these principles and, with one exception, endorsed the package of recommendations shared here. This does not mean that every Task Force member endorsed every element of every recommendation; they did not. But they supported the analysis and recommendations overall, reflecting confidence in both NCLB and in the larger process of fundamental reform of which NCLB is a part.

Supporters of the Task Force recommendations are a diverse and distinguished group of education scholars: economists Rick Hanushek and Caroline Hoxby of Stanford University; psychologist Herbert Walberg, emeritus professor from the University of Illinois; policy analysts Chester Finn, Jr., of the Fordham Foundation, Paul Hill of the University of Washington, Tom Loveless of the Brookings Institution; and political scientists Terry Moe of Stanford University, and Paul Peterson of Harvard and Stanford Universities. As author of the study I was responsible for leading

the analysis and distilling our collective ideas into a coherent package that we could all support. I am a political scientist, a distinguished visiting scholar at the Hoover Institution, and an officer of EdisonLearning, a company that partners with public schools, typically serving disadvantaged students, to raise student achievement. Only one task force member chose not to endorse the overall report—though she supported various recommendations. That is Diane Ravitch, historian with New York University, whose views on NCLB are being published in *Education Next*. An additional Task Force member, Williamson Evers, was on leave from the Task Force during the project and did not participate in it.

Reform of an institution as venerable as public education is inevitably difficult. Disagreement and opposition are par for the course. Controversy comes with the territory. But public education is changing, and for the better. NCLB did not begin the change and will not end it. But NCLB is part of a longer process that is addressing the nation's lagging achievement at its core. The nation should take pride in the difficult decisions already made, learn from experience, correct clear mistakes, and continue down the path that NCLB has helped to blaze. The nation and our children will be smarter for it.

John E. Chubb
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