

To achieve better results, look to Finland

Congressional hearings on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, currently known as No Child Left Behind, have just started. But spurred largely by the Annual Yearly Progress provisions of NCLB that unrealistically require all children to be 100 percent proficient in reading and math by 2014, at least 11 states, including Indiana, have already filed for waivers from the law.

The recently released 2011 National Assessment of Education Progress underscores why changes to NCLB are necessary.



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Known as the nation's report card, NAEP has been monitoring fourth- and eighth-grade student achievement in mathematics and reading since the early 1990s. Since the passage of NCLB, which unleashed a wave of high-stakes testing and accountability in the schools, the results of NAEP have been reported every two years.

Based on NAEP, it is now clear that NCLB has not produced its intended effects.

The latest NAEP scores

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spawned headlines pointing to a pattern of stagnation. In math, fourth- and eighth-graders nationally scored one point higher than in 2009. In reading, fourth-grade scores did not change and eighth-grade scores went up by one point. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said, "It's clear that achievement is not accelerating fast enough for our nation's children to compete in the knowledge economy of the 21st century."

Progress on NAEP has not only slowed, in some states it has reversed. In Indiana from 1992 to 2003, before NCLB was implemented, fourth-grade math scores increased 17 points. After NCLB, they increased another seven points by 2007 and dropped two points in 2009 before recovering one point this year. Eighth-grade math scores increased 14 points between 1990 and 2003, and then increased another six points by 2009 before going back down two points this year. Indiana is one of 12 states that saw a decrease in eighth-grade NAEP math scores between 2009 and 2011.

In reading, fourth- and eighth-

grade scores have remained flat both nationally and in Indiana. Indiana fourth-graders scored the same in 2011 as in 1992. Nationally, fourth-grade reading scores increased only four points since 1992. Eighth-grade reading scores in Indiana are exactly the same as in 2002, the first year they were reported.

Clearly, the high-stakes testing and accountability policies promoted by NCLB under President George W. Bush and the more recent Obama administration's Race to the Top, which extended such measures to individual teachers, are not producing the desired results, at least not as measured by NAEP.

If we're serious about improving student achievement and international competitiveness, we should examine what the highest-performing nations do. Finland, whose students score first in international comparisons, does not require annual testing and high-stakes accountability for teachers and schools. Instead, Finland focuses on making teaching a highly valued

and prestigious profession. There, teachers are recruited from among the best and the brightest students, supported financially during their preparation, required to complete master's degrees, paid well when they join the workforce, and treated as professionals.

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away from the punitive approaches of the past. Like Finland, Singapore, Canada and other high-performing nations, we should focus on improving school leadership and teacher quality. For example, NAEP clearly shows that students taught by teachers with master's degrees have higher scores in both reading and math.

It is time we in the United States start focusing on the things that really matter for increasing student achievement. Doing more of the same and expecting different results, as the saying goes, is just insanity.

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