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Northern Illinois University

**issue:** *Implications of the Federal “Leave No Child Behind Act”*

Glenn W. “Max” McGee

- *The number of students truly left behind now is staggering, especially among minorities.*
- *The new law will almost triple the new money for educational programs in Illinois public schools next year.*
- *The law relies on programs proven to work and targets money to where it is most needed.*
- *State leaders must act immediately to take full advantage of the law.<sup>1</sup>*

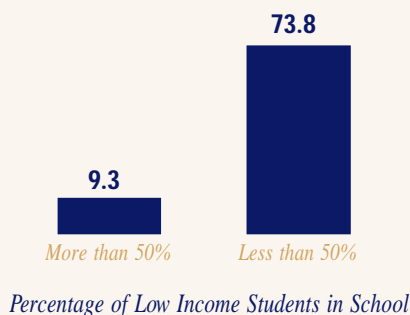
In Illinois, where all 894 school districts advocate “local control” with near religious zealotry, the wave of patriotism currently sweeping the United States may well not extend to the new, landmark federal education law, the *Leave No Child Behind Act*. The same reluctance characterizes state policy makers who fiercely defend education as a state right. Though the \$220+ million the Act will bring to Illinois education next year may temper some opposition, this sweeping educational reform bill has important implications for Illinois’ two million public school students and certainly has the potential to make a profound, positive difference in the education of Illinois children. This *Policy Profile* outlines the most critical components of the Act, weighs their merits, and concludes with recommendations for Illinois.

## Why is the new law so significant in Illinois?

The Act reflects President George W. Bush’s belief that all children can learn and that no child—quite literally—should be left behind. Like it or not, Illinois’ system of “local control”—as well as state reform efforts—have, indeed, left many children behind. As Graphs 1 and 2 document, “the achievement gap” between students from low income families and their peers from more affluent families is vast and, despite substantial recent efforts to rectify this situation, *it is not decreasing*.

### graph one

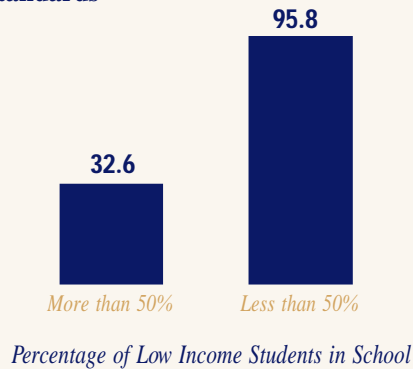
Percentage of Schools with More than Two-Thirds of the Students Meeting 3rd Grade Reading Standards



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## graph<sup>two</sup>

### Percentage of Schools with More than Half of the Students Meeting 3rd Grade Reading Standards



The numbers are compelling. In 2001, only 40% of Illinois students from low-income families met third grade reading standards, compared to about 75% of their peers. At eighth grade, fewer than 20 per cent of low income students meet state math standards, compared to 60 per cent of their peers.

Considering that approximately 40,000 Illinois children at each grade level are from low-income families, *the number of students truly left behind is staggering.* Moreover, since many minority students are from low-income families, the racial implications are also disturbing. In the great Land of Lincoln, just 30% of African American students meet state standards in eleventh grade language arts compared to 67% of the white students.

### But is this gap the fault of the students or the schools?

If school performance data is substituted for student performance data, *the situation is even bleaker.* In third grade reading, more than 95% of the schools with fewer than 50% of their students from low income families had at least half of their students meet third grade reading standards. Less than 33% of the schools with more than 50% of their students from low-income families reached that bar. See Graphs 3 and 4.

Looking at improvement over time, during the last three years, only 12.6 per cent of schools with more than half their enrollment from low income families managed an average gain of 3.3% per year on the state assessment. Ironically, these data were compiled *after* a five-year period in which the state gave nearly *\$1 billion* new dollars to local school districts through state aid and the school improvement block grant, neither of which carry accountability measures.

The potential for success exists as schools like Jefferson in Belleville, Humboldt in Mattoon, Harrison in Peoria, and George Washington in Chicago evidence, but the potential for continued disparities in achievement and opportunity loom far larger. *Clearly, more money for “local control” is not the sole answer to assuring that no child is left behind.*

What is the answer? The federal government is willing to put billions of new dollars into strategic initiatives that may succeed in ensuring that nearly all students meet state standards, but only if schools, districts, and state policy makers are prepared to work together in an unprecedented manner. The potential of the Act is monumental; an effort to implement the new law clearly is in order.

### What are the key components of the “Leave No Child Behind Act”?

#### 1. Assessment

The Act requires states to measure student performance through a testing program consisting of:

- tests in reading and mathematics given annually to all students in grades 3-8 starting no later than 2005-2006;
- tests in science given at least once in grades 3-5, 6-9, and 10-12 by 2007-08;
- tests in reading and math given at least once to students in grades 10-12.

Each state may select and design its tests, but such tests must be aligned with the state’s particular academic learning standards. Test results must include individual diagnostic reports on students and itemized score analyses that will allow parents and educators to understand and address each child’s academic needs.

### 2. Academic Improvement and Accountability

The Act gives each state twelve years to show that all students meet state standards. Penalties are imposed on schools which do not make adequate yearly progress two or more years in a row. Schools that do not make adequate progress after five years must be reconstituted under a new governance structure such as a charter school, state run school, or independent panel. States are also required to oversee districts as a whole and take corrective action for those that need improvement.

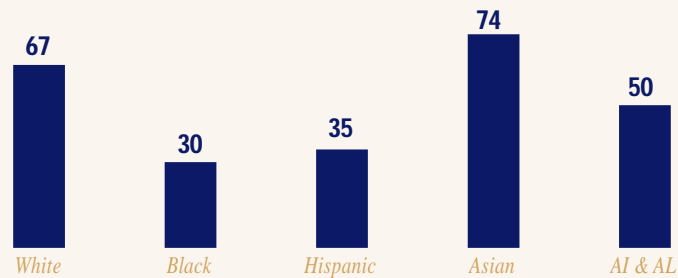
Next year Illinois will receive about \$12.3 million to develop the annual assessment and accountability system needed to implement these requirements.

### 3. Reading First and Early Reading First

States and districts are to establish “scientific, research-based” reading programs for primary grade children (grades K-3). Of the \$32.8 million coming to Illinois for Reading First programs next year, up to 20% can be used for professional development of teachers and the rest must be distributed on a competitive basis, with the most needy districts having the highest priority.

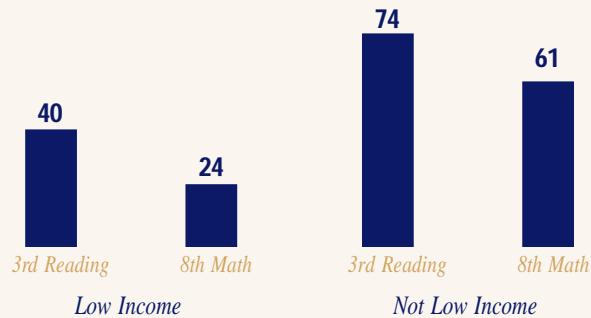
#### graphthree

Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding Language Arts Standards - 2001 Prairie State Examination



#### graphfour

Percentage of Students Meeting State Standards 2001



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Early Reading First will be a competitive grant program funding programs designed to insure that children in high poverty areas will come to school prepared to learn to read.

#### 4. Teacher and Principal Quality

An impressive \$115.5 million will be available to Illinois beginning next year to hire teachers to reduce class size, provide in-service teacher training, retain teachers, and ensure that all teachers meet the certification requirements of the Act.

#### 5. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers

The Act funds before and after school initiatives to advance student achievement. Grants may be made to school districts, community based organizations, and faith based groups. There will be \$12.5 million targeted to this provision in Illinois next year.

#### 6. Innovative Education Program Strategies

Funding will be provided for innovative programs and practices to improve student achievement. At least 85% of the \$16.4 million that Illinois will receive must go to school districts. Also included is a program, “Fund for the Improvement of Education,” that allows the Secretary of Education to support nationally significant programs proposed by states or school districts to improve education.

#### 7. Flexibility Demonstration Projects

Up to 150 school districts may develop performance agreements with the US Department of Education to consolidate

several Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) programs, except Title I. This provision enables them to create broad, flexible programs. Up to seven states may be allowed to consolidate all state administration and state activity funding under several ESEA programs.

#### Why should Illinois residents like this Act?

Objections to the Act’s “interference with local controls”—a common objection to any new money coming with strings attached—have been surfacing. But the record shows that more money left to local control is not solving educational inequities whereas “Leave No Child Behind” is based on programs proven to work, and the Act targets funding to where it is most needed and can make the most difference.

Moreover, the new dollars alone are significant. Assuming Governor George Ryan and the legislature fulfill their commitment to spend 51% of all new revenue on education, Illinois’ public schools will probably receive about \$200 million new dollars, of which only about \$75 million new dollars at can be reasonably expected for state aid, categorical grants, block grants, and targeted initiatives. *The new money from the federal government will be almost three times as much!*

Beyond the money, the Act focuses on student learning and rigorous academic standards for all children. For example, the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) requirement is not just a school average;

it applies to children in all subgroups. In other words, *each* subgroup must reach the AYP bar in addition to the school as a whole. This requirement, with its mandate for reporting data for both individual schools *and* individual students, compels attention to the most needy students, and the Reading First provisions make money available to do something meaningful for them. In the long run, the Act appropriately drives funding to children’s early years in education. Success with young children will help prevent problems and result in significant savings trying to solve those problems later.

Educators should also like this Act because it may actually reduce the testing burden. *If* the assessment provides the type of data required by the Act, and *if* the schools can get the information back more quickly and in more detail than the state currently provides, one test could, and should, take the place of the two or three tests now typically in use.

A final reason to celebrate this Act is that it fosters innovation and flexibility. The list of innovative programs is impressive and reflects some of the latest research on how the brain works. For example, one program, “Bridges Learning Systems,” uses kinesthetic training session to improve achievement, attention, and behavior. Research shows that before and after school programs boost achievement—the Boys and Girls Clubs being just one concrete example—yet state funding for these has been nil.

## What are the disadvantages of the Act?

The Act is so expansive that it may be unenforceable. With no sanctions, local districts may take the same attitude that has been evident with new programs initiated by the state: “this, too, shall pass.” The mechanics of the accountability provision may render it meaningless. For example, the Act defines two scenarios for establishing the starting point for determining Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) and then leaves the measure of AYP up to the states. Preliminary calculations indicate that more than 80% of Illinois’ schools could not meet the AYP requirements! Additionally, in many Illinois districts, students in failing schools will not have the options to move to better schools because many districts have only one school that serves each grade level. In other districts, there may well be more failing schools than successful ones, and there will just not be room for children in schools that are working well.

## What should Illinois do to take full advantage of the Act?

Though implementation rules are not yet written, the Governor, the State Board of Education, school districts, and even individual schools should act now to take full advantage of it.

## What should the Governor do?

*The Governor should convene a team that will aggressively attempt to have Illinois named one of the seven Flexible Authority states.*

With only seven states to be so named, competition will be fierce, but Illinois cannot miss this opportunity. The ability to use federal money flexibly will drive significant dollars to strategic initiatives which have been woefully underfunded, and increase support for the schools most in need. Examples include dollars for before and after school programs, school wide professional development tied to student achievement, parent involvement, and parent training for early childhood learning. Illinois has both the demonstrated need and an infrastructure that can maximize the effectiveness of the flexible funds through the State Board’s “system of support,” reading block grant, and early learning initiatives.

Given the record of Dennis Hastert, Speaker of the U. S. House of Representatives, and the educational advocacy of other members of the state’s congressional delegation, Illinois is well positioned to succeed, provided the Governor’s office moves expeditiously.

## Is legislative action needed?

*The Illinois General Assembly must designate the annual assessment instrument.*

This past summer, members of Illinois’ Senate Education Committee heard broad support for the Illinois Learning Standards and for the concept of annual assessment. Local districts want an assessment that accurately and thoroughly measures the state learning standards—that measures student growth accurately from year to year, that enables them to track individual

student growth, and that gets test results back to them quickly—so they can forge school improvement plans that will result in changes in curriculum and instruction.

At issue is the kind of test that should be used: should it be the Illinois Student Achievement Test (ISAT) which was developed specifically to assess Illinois learning standards or should it be an existing test, such as the Iowa, adapted to fit Illinois’ needs? The ISAT is arguably a better measure of state standards, but there are significant limitations on the speed and detail in which results can be reported. Legislative leaders will need to make this decision quickly so the system can be finalized and the state can maximize the use of federal dollars.

*In addition, legislative action is needed to insure long term state funding to support the federal funding for programs and policies that will improve instruction in high poverty schools.*

The Governor’s recent proposal to eliminate targeted grant programs and send this money to local districts with no accountability provisions is counter to the intent of the Act and will not insure that students who most need programs and services have them. Certainly, some grant programs could—and should—be eliminated, but those that support struggling students and schools must be protected. Early Childhood Education, the Reading Block Grant, and Bilingual Education Program are three intervention programs that are working, but are still not able to serve all the children needing help. Continuation of these programs, with

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the additional federal support and accountability, will make a difference!

Likewise, state “Teacher Quality” dollars must be used strategically. The teacher qualification and quality problems are most acute in Illinois districts with a high percentage of low income families; state and federal funds must go there. Most school districts do not need an infusion of money for more master teachers or for teacher mentors, but the 65 school districts that have the 594 schools on the state’s warning list do. The legislature must approach this problem strategically and insure that federal funds to improve, attract, and retain teachers are spent where they are most needed.

There is not a shortage of elementary grade teachers: suburban and wealthy districts have more than enough applicants. It is in the urban and remote rural schools, however, where there is often a shortage of qualified applicants, new teachers frequently leave, and the districts lack funding or the capacity to support acquisition of master teacher credentials. *The state must ensure that federal funds are spent here, in these schools, where the dollars are most needed.*

## What should the State Board of Education do?

*First, the State Board of Education should develop and execute a plan for using the federal money to impact districts with schools on the academic early warning list.*

Recently, the State Board of Education identified nearly 594 “watch list” schools in 65 districts. These are

schools that have had fewer than 50% of their students meeting state standards for two consecutive years. The past “system of support” for warning list schools has produced mixed, but overall disappointing, results as most schools have not been able to make sustained improvement. The State Board’s new system of support, with its Baldrige based continuous improvement framework, school and district performance agreement requirement, and ongoing staff monitoring is built on sound principles. The new Act provides the funding and the State Board now must finalize a coherent plan—including provisions to help the poorest districts obtain competitive Early Reading First grant funds—and then flawlessly execute it.

*Second, the State Board must clearly define and communicate what “annual yearly progress” (AYP) means.*

The definition of AYP is now based on nearly impossible targets that have little basis in data application. Under it, the further a school is from having more than 50% of its students meet state standards, the higher the annual percentage of improvement must be. Currently, AYP for districts with 45% meeting state standards is about 1% per year, vs. 6% per year for those with only 20% meeting state standards. The data for schools that have more than 50% of the students from low income families (most of the watch list schools) indicate that only 12.6 per cent made an average gain of 3.3% per year, and 5.1 per cent made an average gain of 5% per year. The definition of AYP should be realistic and still achievable, and it should be consistent from school to school.

## What should school districts do?

*First, they should insist that all school improvement plans have performance measures based on data for both individual schools and individual students.*

Each school district must be mandated to use such data to develop a plan which assures that all students meet state standards and then to insist that each school develops and implements a sound school improvement plan. Districts should not and can not wait for an annual assessment. Any test will only confirm what the ISAT has told them—significant disparities based on gender, race, and income exist! Districts must act now to take bold steps to close these gaps.

*Second, they must require that school improvement plans focus on a small number of key initiatives.*

Individual schools must be directed to assist struggling readers by using proven programs and practices based on individual, direct instruction in phonics and comprehension, fluency and vocabulary. They should also develop close partnerships with pre-schools and early care providers. The Illinois Early Learning web site ([www.illinoisearlylearning.org](http://www.illinoisearlylearning.org)) provides information to assist with this task.

*Third, they must reallocate financial and human resources to their struggling schools.*

Too often, in large school districts, the most needy schools do not get the financial support, the instructional support, and the very best teachers and principals. The gap between the best and weakest schools grows. It is time to develop and begin executing a strategic plan that supports the children in these schools and the neighborhoods around them.

*Fourth, districts must develop formal cooperative programs with community based organizations and other school districts to pool resources, share best practices, and improve data analysis and management.*

Districts must expand their thinking beyond traditional constraints (classroom instruction, district boundaries, the limitations of the school day and year). They should explore the innovative programs described in the Act, and study the feasibility of partnerships with child care providers and faith based organizations so they can capture some of the Innovative Program or Early Reading First competitive grant dollars.

“Collaboratives,” such as the South Cook Consortium or LAQA (Leadership in Accountability and Quality Assurance), which offer opportunities to share data, dialogue, and replicate programs are rare, but they can be successful.

Requiring annual compilation and analysis of both student and school data will generate data beyond the management capability of many small districts. Joint use of a single data/research staff by several districts can solve this problem.

### What should individual schools be doing?

There are three steps that schools can take. First, each school should have a school improvement plan and make it the central focus of the school. It is critical that *each* and *every* teacher must commit and contribute to the plan’s success. Second, each primary school should implement proven, research based reading intervention programs.

Finally, each individual school must be made an attractive place in which to work. A growing body of research regarding why teachers leave the profession points more and more to working conditions, e.g. small class sizes, a comfortable setting, adequate supplies, and places and times to meet with colleagues. As schools consider the best use of Teacher Quality Funds or competitive grants, they would be well-advised to look at impacting teacher working conditions as a way to improve student achievement.

## conclusion:

### Where does all this leave Illinois education?

The Leave No Child Behind Act has a long reach and lofty aspirations, yet it is built on a foundation of what has worked in Illinois schools — standards, no-nonsense accountability, quality teachers, innovative practices, early intervention, and before and after school support for kids. There is actually a lot of common sense embedded in its 1158 pages and, despite its ponderous size, it is a clear blueprint. It is now up to the state, district, and school leaders to work together to follow that blueprint, and to translate the specific strategies into clear and concise action plans.

If we — Illinois’ educators — become embroiled in the traditional turf protection of federal vs. state vs. local control; if we start and stop on targeted initiatives; and if we try to cut and paste agendas onto this, we will get more of what we have — an educational system that continues to benefit some students while neglecting others, and to produce results stratified by income and race.

If, however, the state and local districts work together, using the flexibility afforded by the blueprint to address the problems of the neediest students, Illinois schools can achieve a level of success for *all* students that has eluded even the most fervent reformers.

It will take sustained hard work, it will take unprecedented cooperation, it will take consistent support and collaboration, and it will take time. The vision is clear, the agenda is set, and it is now time to get to it. Illinois’ two million children need and deserve nothing but the best effort to assure that not one of them is left behind.

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<sup>1</sup>The views expressed in this edition of *Policy Profiles* are those of Mr. McGee and do not necessarily represent the views of the Center for Governmental Studies or of Northern Illinois University.

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