

Policy Dialogue

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Perspectives on the “No Child Left Behind” Law in Massachusetts

The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 sets forth reforms in the public education system to spur academic improvement. It allows parents with children in schools that do not meet certain standards to transfer their children to schools within the same district that do meet performance standards. What has been the response so far in Massachusetts? At a February 12, 2004 Pioneer Forum, Harvard government professor William G. Howell presented the results of a Pioneer-commissioned statewide parental survey. Local school district and national perspectives were offered by, respectively, Joseph Burke, Springfield’s school superintendent, and Michael Sentance, New England regional representative for the U.S. secretary of education. Excerpts of each speaker’s remarks follow.

The speakers’ remarks excerpted here are available in their entirety online at www.pioneerinstitute.org/nclb.cfm. For a slide presentation by Prof. Howell, go to www.pioneerinstitute.org/nclb/howell.ppt.

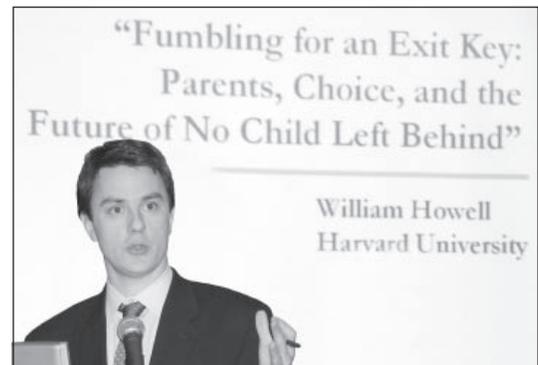
Fumbling for an Exit Key: Parents, Choice, and the Future of NCLB

William Howell: The No Child Left Behind Act requires states to administer annual standardized tests to all public school students in grades 3-8 and to develop criteria by which to evaluate the progress of schools. Based on these measures, states have the responsibility of identifying those schools that are underperforming—so-called “in need of improvement.” Schools that fail to meet what’s called adequate yearly progress, or AYP, for two consecutive years must offer students the option of switching to a performing public school within the district. After three years, and after four years, additional penalties apply.

In 2003, there were roughly a million students in Massachusetts public schools, of whom about 100,000 attend schools that had been deemed underperforming. Only about 300 students had exercised the choice option provided by NCLB. Just 0.3 percent of the eligible population had left their underperforming school to attend a performing school in the same district.

Why are so few parents taking advantage of the choice option provided by NCLB? There are a lot of reasons. One reason may be that parents simply do not know about it, and that is precisely my focus. What do parents know about No Child Left Behind? And how much interest do they have in the choice provisions that NCLB affords?

A survey commissioned by Pioneer Institute and conducted this past summer looked at 1,000 public school parents in the ten largest Massachusetts districts—Boston, Springfield, and Worcester at the top of the list, going all the way down through Newton. Being the largest



William Howell, assistant professor of government at Harvard University, presenting the results of a parental survey that was commissioned by Pioneer Institute.

www.pioneerinstitute.org

85 Devonshire St., 8th floor
Boston, MA 02109
617-723-2277 | Tel
617-723-1880 | Fax

districts, they are also the most likely to have enough schooling options to provide choice under NCLB. At the time of the survey, these districts together educated 72 percent of students who attended underperforming schools statewide.

The most basic piece of information that parents need to know in order to take advantage of the choice option provided by NCLB is the status of their child's school. We asked parents whether their child's school was on the list of underperforming schools. Forty-nine percent of public school parents in the ten districts got it right. Eleven percent hazarded a guess and got it wrong. And 40 percent said they didn't know.

We then wanted to figure out who among public school parents is more likely and who is less likely to know about the status of their child's school. What you might expect is that those parents whose children attend underperforming schools have the highest level of knowledge. After all, the district is required to send letters to these parents to inform them that their child's school is underperforming. On the other hand, parents whose children are attending performing schools—who don't stand to benefit from the law's choice provisions—may have considerably less information.

In actuality, 57 percent of parents whose children were attending performing schools correctly knew the status of their child's school. But only 29 percent of parents with children in underperforming schools got the school's status right. In other words, less than one in three parents of children who are attending underperforming schools in the state's ten largest districts know that their child's school is underperforming—and therefore have the most basic information required in order to take advantage of the choice provisions under the law.

So we have a disjunction—precisely those people NCLB was intended to reach have the least amount of information about the status of their child's school, and those people who don't qualify under the law have the most information. These differences break down along a host of socioeconomic indicators as well. [For details, see Professor Howell's slide presentation, available online at <http://www.pioneerinstitute.org/nclb/howell.ppt>.]



Forum speakers were (left to right) presenter William Howell of Harvard University, Michael Santore of the U.S. Department of Education, and Joseph Burke, Superintendent of Springfield Public Schools.

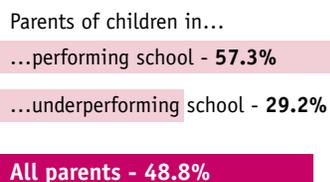
When asked whether they were satisfied with their child's school and those in their community, parents were quite positive. In general, parents claimed to be more satisfied with their own school than with the schools in their communities. It is worth noting, however, that parents with children in underperforming schools were significantly less pleased with their child's current school and with the schools in their communities than parents with children in performing schools.

In order to assess parents' interest in alternative schooling options, we asked them whether there were schools in the same district they would rather their child attend. About 15 percent of all parents said that they would prefer to send their child to a different public school within the same district. Although parents of children in underperforming schools are much less likely to know the status of their child's school, they nonetheless were more than twice as likely to say that they'd rather switch their child from his or her existing school into a different public school in the district (23.1 percent of parents with children in underperforming schools vs. 10.8 percent of parents with children in performing schools).

What about a public school in a different district? Again, we see differences between the two groups of about 3 percentage points (18.1 percent of parents with children in underperforming schools vs. 15.5 percent of parents with children in performing schools). What about a charter school? Parents in underperforming schools are about two and half times (18.3 percent vs. 7.6 percent) more likely to say they'd rather their child attend a charter school in the district than the public school their child currently attends.

Finally, we asked, "If costs were not an obstacle, would you rather have your child attend a private school?" Parents in both sectors got quite excited about the option of switching their children out of a public school and putting them into a private school (45 percent of parents with children in underperforming schools vs. 38.1 percent of parents with children in performing schools). The vast majority who said that

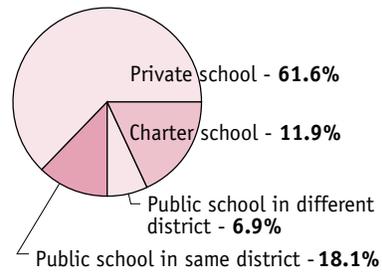
Parents who correctly knew the status of their child's school



they would rather have their child attend a private school were capable of naming, on the spot, a specific school. This strikes me as pretty remarkable. About two-thirds of these parents had in mind elite boarding schools, while about one-third identified smaller parochial schools that aren't charging tuitions of \$15,000 a year or more.

Let us focus only on those parents whose children attend underperforming schools (the population eligible for the NCLB choice provision) and who expressed an interest in moving their child. Which of these four options do they get *most* excited about (in other words, pick as their first choice)? Eighteen percent said they would most like their child to attend another public school within the district. About 7 percent said they would rather have their child attend a public school in a different district. Twelve percent said they would send their child to a charter school. And 62 percent said they would prefer to have their child attend a private school.

First choice for alternative schooling by parents of child in underperforming school



Now, if we take a look at those schools they named as preferable within their district, we find that the public schools they identified are considerably higher performing than the schools that their children currently attend. But here's the kicker. Forty-four percent of those schools that they're picking are also considered underperforming under No Child Left Behind. But those schools are not options under NCLB; the law only allows parents to move a child from an underperforming school to a performing school. And so, while these schools do have higher test scores, many of them are not available as options.

In summary, the main findings are these:

- 1) Those parents who qualify for the choice options under NCLB are much less likely to have the most basic information required in order to take advantage of the choice provisions available to them.
- 2) Parents with students in underperforming schools are less satisfied with their schools, and more likely to express interest in alternative schooling options.
- 3) Private schools, more than other schooling options, excite parents with children in both performing and underperforming schools.

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There are policy recommendations that fall out of this. First, non-district organizations should be given primary responsibility for informing parents about choice options under NCLB.

Second, special accommodations are needed to reach non-English speakers. Hispanics are far and away the least likely to know the status of their child's school. We need more creative ways of reaching this population and letting them know both about the quality of the public schools that they attend, at least under NCLB, and the choice provisions that are available to them.

Third, I believe choice should extend to all public schools within the district, including other underperforming schools. Parents are selecting schools that are better than the schools their children attend. The measure that determines which schools are performing and which schools are not is really quite crude. And there's a lot of variance below the bar. Truncating the number of choices that are available to parents, in the ways that the current law does, leads to a highly restrictive set of options.

As schools are being held accountable, they're graded on the basis of not just the performance of the student bodies as a whole, but also subgroups defined by race, limited English proficiency, and whatnot. We're going to see in Massachusetts, and nationwide, an increasing number of public schools deemed underperforming. While we're going to have more students who qualify for the choice provisions under No Child Left Behind, the number of alternatives they have is going to decline.

Finally, private schools. I'm putting a question mark by it. I know that this doesn't stand much of a chance politically of getting through, but if what you want to do is meet parents where they are today, and address their particular interests, expanding choice into the private realm may be a way to go.

The Picture in Springfield

Joseph Burke: The primary purpose of No Child Left Behind is not now and never was to create a market for choice. It was intended to improve public schools. With that in mind, we need to look at some of the complex issues that Dr. Howell brings up. One of them is the knowledge parents have about whether their children are attending schools in need of improvement, which are defined as schools that have not met adequate yearly progress.

In Massachusetts, we base it essentially on MCAS results. The adequate yearly progress of a school is measured against a timeline of having all of the students in the school, and in the district, reach a proficiency standard by the year 2014. Adequate yearly progress measures improvement that a school is making relative to that standard of reaching proficiency.

Large urban districts like Boston, Worcester, and Springfield tend to have, in almost every school, several of the subgroups that have to show improvement required under the law. Those subgroups would be limited English proficient students, Hispanic students, African American students, Asian students, special education students, and students on free and reduced-price lunch. In most of the schools in Springfield, for example, not only would the entire tested population of students have to meet a standard of improvement in performance, but those subgroups would also have to meet that standard. In the calculation of adequate yearly progress, an individual school could be making excellent progress overall, but could miss meeting adequate yearly progress because one subgroup didn't make sufficient progress.

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I would anticipate that the knowledge parents may have about adequate yearly progress and what it means would be relatively small in the first year or two of the implementation of this law. Collectively, parents may have a sense of whether or not their children are in schools in need of improvement. The 50 percent that Dr. Howell alluded to is probably fairly accurate.

But let me share a problem with you that we encountered in Springfield. Last year, when we first implemented the law, we sent out more than 13,000 letters to parents whose children were in schools that were in need of improvement. After we sent out the letters, the state changed

the formulation of which schools were in need of improvement and which ones were not. Some of the schools that we had sent letters about saying that they were in need of improvement were now no longer in need of improvement. Some other schools that parents had already chosen as desirable—schools that were meeting adequate yearly progress—were all of a sudden on the list of not meeting adequate yearly progress. We had to go back and send a second letter to those families with the correct information about which schools were eligible for school choice, and which ones were not. One of the schools that had been determined to be really desirable by parents was no longer available to their children.

What we obviously have to do is get more schools to achieve adequate yearly progress. That's the goal.

If you look at the basic profile of private schools, they tend to be smaller, tend to have students with higher socioeconomic backgrounds, and tend to have fewer minority children. So it makes sense to me, based on those data, that parents would have a natural preference for private schools.

There are a significant number of Hispanic parents in the Springfield who are very likely to have had some experience with private schools, either in Puerto Rico or in the city. We have had a number of families in Springfield in and out of private schools, for a variety of reasons. In a particular span of years, they may have the resources to send their children to private schools, and in some other years, they may not.

Another phenomenon that we've had in Springfield is the systematic closing of private schools, particularly parochial schools that the Diocese simply cannot maintain. Families now sending their youngsters to the public schools might have some fond memories of their private school experience and may in fact, respond to a survey, and say, if I had the choice, I might really like my child to be back in a private school.

The data and the basic concepts that Dr. Howell has given us are interesting, informative, and helpful to the debate about choice. I'm not sure whether they give us the picture of whether No Child Left Behind is meeting its ultimate goal, which is to try to improve the performance of students in the public schools.

I certainly would like to achieve that goal as a superintendent. The quality of the public schools in Springfield, Worcester, Boston, and other communities around the state of Massachusetts is going to have a very significant impact on the quality of life in those communities, particularly the urban communities.

If we look at the purpose of NCLB as finding ways and mechanisms to improve the quality of the public schools, rather than as an engine to create markets for choice, then we need to be asking a different set of questions about whether

the application of AYP and the various other provisions of No Child Left Behind are in fact going to improve the quality of the public schools, and the performance of the students who are continuing to attend the public schools.

No Child Left Behind: The Right Thing to Do

Michael Santance: I work with all six New England states. The issues with No Child Left Behind vary fairly dramatically with each state. Massachusetts, which has much more history with standards-based reform, meaningful accountability, and choice, has fewer issues with the law than some states.

NCLB does highlight a variety of issues. Dr. Burke was kind about how tough it is for urban schools to meet this standard of adequate yearly progress. Of course, when you have significant populations of African American and Latino students, that is a far more difficult standard to meet than if you're in Needham, which only has the whole school population and the special ed population. Not only do they have to meet it for the subgroups he listed, but they also have to make sure that there is 95 percent participation on the tests for all of those subgroups.

One other provision in the NCLB law that hasn't been met is that the schools have to be safe. There's a safe school provision in NCLB which also triggers choice if, in fact, the school is deemed to be unsafe. It's a far more daunting task that No Child Left Behind presents for urban superintendents and schools than some other places.

Having said that, I think it's also the right thing to do. No Child Left Behind is a significant advance in helping people know more about schools. There is an underlying assumption in this law that is very different from other ed reform laws.

In the mid-1980s, Massachusetts was engaged in the reform act referred to as Chapter 188. That law was premised on the idea that the teacher was the change agent. The law involved a great deal of money and was spectacularly unsuccessful.

The Ed Reform Act of 1993 had a very different perspective—the superintendent is the change agent. We did a variety of things: put more resources into schools, established standards at the local and state level, and we vested the authority with the superintendent to decide personnel issues, which is essential for change.

No Child Left Behind endorses the perspective that the parent is the change agent. Now, as great as that may be, the problem is that we don't have the kind of educated consumer out there to make these kinds of decisions. With its require-

ments about testing, its requirement of disaggregated information about subgroups, its requirements about information on teachers and their backgrounds and whether they're highly qualified, NCLB is going to create a better educated consumer public. That is an essential part of this change process.

The preferences that people had for smaller schools, for private schools, for religious schools, I think, raises an interesting issue. We don't have a common ground of data or the ability to analyze performance among all schools. At some point, we're going to need that. We do know that in some states, some private schools are beginning to ask whether they can participate in state testing programs. They think their program is better, and they want to be able to demonstrate that both to parents who have children in their school and to the public at large.

No Child Left Behind is a significant advance in helping people know more about schools. There is an underlying assumption in this law that is very different from other ed reform laws. [It] endorses the perspective that the parent is the change agent.

—Michael Santance

I completely agree with Dr. Howell's assertion that we have to do a better job getting information about options out to people. I've talked to the Assistant Secretary of Education for the Office of Innovation, who is involved with making sure that supplemental services and choice are available to people. I've spoken to a private concern working with schools to provide tutoring and other supplemental services. People need to collaborate more to make sure that people have information about what is available, and make sure that the private sector steps forward for this.

I also agree with Dr. Howell's assertion that the law probably should allow for all schools to be open to choice. If you want to buy a Corvair, you should be allowed to buy a Corvair. You should also bear the risk of buying a Corvair. You should allow for all possibilities—although a school has been identified as needing improvement, it may be a superb school in certain respects. A parent may find it acceptable and something they can embrace. To make an analogy to professional sports, the Boston Red Sox are a superb and fairly successful baseball team. They are also a team in need of improvement. But that doesn't mean we should abandon them.

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