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The Politics of Teaching

In January 2002, President Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act, which was heralded as the most significant education reform in decades. The bill came as an answer to the demands of the stakeholders in education to demonstrate quality through a variety of means. Education has been under the magnifying glass since its inception, with sweeping bills and orders making improvements with each decade. It is no surprise that the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) also makes sweeping changes, beginning with accountability. In this chapter, we will examine the four main aspects of the bill—accountability and testing, flexible use of federal resources, school choice, and quality teachers and teaching—and the implications for you as a classroom teacher.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND TESTING

Accountability is not a new issue in education; where this bill is different is that it calls for more standardized testing than ever before. Why so much testing? Perhaps because so many outside the education community consider testing to be a way

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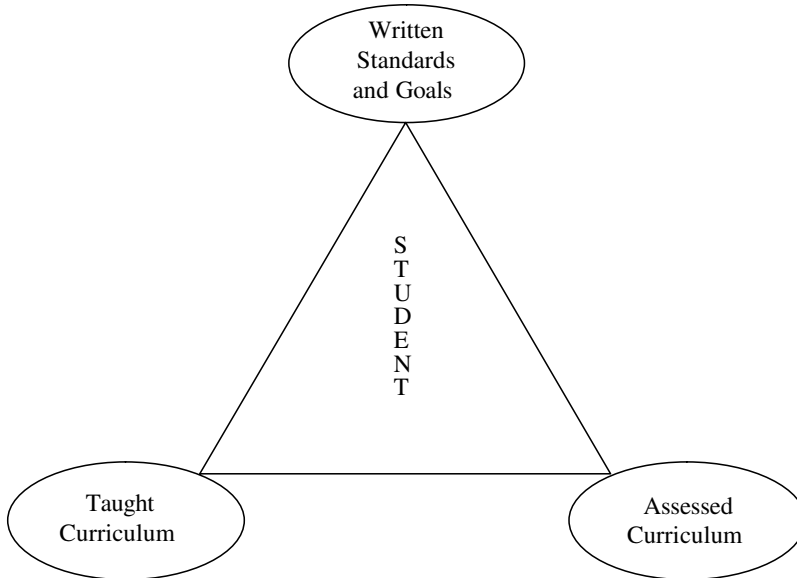
to measure success. The bill calls for annual testing in reading and mathematics for students in Grades 3–8 beginning in the 2005–2006 school year. The bill goes a step farther by requiring states and schools to break down their test data into subgroups to ensure that all students are making progress regardless of ethnicity, race, gender, or economic status. Each group should be making adequate yearly progress. In the past, schools with low ratios of minorities or low instances of poverty could show high test scores simply because the majority group's scores were high enough to offset a subgroup's low scores. When subgroups are examined separately, students are less likely to fall through the cracks. By the year 2013–2014, all students must meet or exceed the proficiency level in mathematics and reading.

Implications for the Classroom Teacher

Accountability today means that teachers must become familiar with standards set by their states for student learning. Figure 1.1 is a diagram of how an aligned instructional program works. At the top of the triangle stands the written curriculum from which we teach. At the heart of that written curriculum should be a set of standards that clearly shows what students need to know (declarative objectives) and be able to do (procedural objectives) as a result of the learning. You can go to your state Website to look at the standards for what you teach.

The second part of the triangle is what we teach. What we teach in the classroom should be directly connected to the state and local goals at the top of the triangle. That means everything that we teach should have a link to state and local standards. If I am teaching students about the Romantic Period in literature or teaching elementary students about weather patterns, I must be able to show the stakeholders the standard that is being met.

The third part of the triangle is assessment. If I am teaching to standards, I should also be testing to standards. That means my teaching plan should directly relate (and list) the standard,

Figure 1.1 An Aligned Instructional Program

my teaching goals, what I am teaching, and how I am teaching it, and the assessment should directly reflect that teaching. I suggest that teachers send this information home to parents or make it available in communications with parents, students, and colleagues.

Wiggins and McTighe (1998) suggest writing the assessment first. What do you want students to know and be able to do as a result of the learning? By writing the assessment or rubric first, the likelihood is greater that the assessment truly reflects the curriculum.

Accountability means that classroom teachers keep accurate and up-to-date records so that they can back up grades, notes, behavior questions, and the like. What Every Teacher Should Know About Instructional Planning (Tileston, 2004b) has examples of ways that the classroom teacher can keep records on all students in a concise and workable format.

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Accountability means that the classroom teacher adequately prepares students for all assessments, including state and national tests. And, no, I did not just imply that we should teach to the test—that would cover only surface knowledge, and we want far more for our students! What I am advising is to teach the information that will make students successful on the test.

If you have read my other books, such as *What Every Teacher Should Know About Learning, Memory, and the Brain* (2004c), you know that motivation is largely influenced by self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the belief that you can be successful because you have demonstrated success in the past. This belief is much more powerful than self-esteem because it is built on fact, on the old adage that success breeds success. We want and need our students to be successful on state and national assessments. They must be in order to take the next step to grade levels, graduation, entrance into the next field, and so on. How do we teach them what is needed on the test? Besides teaching the skills and facts needed to master the test, there is a silver bullet to bringing up test scores now. Here it is: Teach the vocabulary of the test. An example taken from the learning standards for Texas for eighth-grade mathematics follows:

Patterns, relationships, and algebraic thinking. The student identifies proportional relationships in problem situations and solves problems. The student is expected to:

- (A) compare and contrast proportional and nonproportional relationships; and
- (B) estimate and find solutions to application problems involving percents and proportional relationships such as similarity and rates.

Some vocabulary that I would teach my students directly include:

- Compare and contrast
- Proportional relationships (including similarity and rates)

- Non-proportional relationships
- Estimate
- Application
- Percentage

Some strategies that I know from the research (see *What Every Teacher Should Know About Instructional Planning*, Tileston, 2004b) will help my students with this vocabulary include:

- Teach students to build compare-and-contrast models.
- Teach vocabulary using proven methods for teaching.
- Teach students to build attribute models and Mind Maps.
- Use scaffolding.

If you want to know more about how to teach the vocabulary of your state test, go to www.learningbridges.com and look at the sample items on this powerful Website or look at my own Website at www.strategicteaching&learning.com

The fourth implication is that there will be more testing in general and more high-stakes testing. As a teacher, you can help your students lower their anxiety level over testing by lowering your anxiety level. Teach them well and prepare them based on the standards you are given and then instill confidence in them that they know the information.

Richard Bandler (1988), who was the co-discoverer of neurolinguistic programming, says that our brain has three criteria that must be filled in order for it to “know what it knows”: (1) The information must be reinforced in the learner’s preferred modality (visual, auditory, or kinesthetic); (2) the information must be reinforced for the correct number of times (for some that is once and for others it may be multiple times); and (3) the information must be reinforced for a sufficient length of time (for some a matter of seconds and for others, multiple minutes).

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FLEXIBLE USE OF FEDERAL RESOURCES

In their policy brief on No Child Left Behind, Cicchinelli, Gaddy, Lefkowitz, and Miller (2003) say that appropriations for this bill fall “\$5.3 billion short of the authorized funding levels for the Act.” More and more educators are mandated to do more in terms of accountability and reform without the tax dollars to support such efforts. When mandates are made without the funding to carry them out, money must come from somewhere. It is hoped that great thought is put into identifying what works and what does not and that resources are shifted to those programs that are working. This is not always the case, however, and important programs may be cut. Class size may increase, and teachers may be reassigned to another campus or their contracts not renewed. Schools, districts, and state educators need to formulate a plan and timeline for improvement, and they need to share that plan with all of the stakeholders, including the teachers and students who are most affected by change. Cicchinelli and colleagues (2003) quote a significant study by the RAND company:

In an analysis of the cost-effectiveness of various reform initiatives to enhance student achievement, RAND researchers (Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawatta, & Williamson, 2000) found that the cost-effectiveness of specific strategies can vary according to the circumstances of a state’s students. For instance, in states with high proportions of disadvantaged students, lowering student-teacher ratios in grades 1–4 can lead to a statewide score gain of approximately three percentile points per student, at a statewide per-student cost of \$150. To achieve the same gain in a state that serves predominately middle-SES students, the per-student cost rises to \$450. Notably, however, providing teachers with increased funds for instructional materials and other teaching resources at a statewide per-pupil cost of as little as \$110 results in the same three percentile-point gain, regardless of the socioeconomic status of the state’s students.

The choices your school makes to meet the demands of the public through funding affect you and your students. Be proactive. Learn the facts so that you can be a part of the solution for your school and for your students. Keeping up with legislation and solutions is not just for administration and government anymore; we owe it to ourselves and our students to know what our choices are. Go to your government or state education Website to begin to learn about how your state is using resources. Join the professional organizations that provide journals and news briefs to you about the trends and politics of education.

SCHOOL CHOICE

Under the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), parents can make choices about their children's schools if the schools are not performing adequately. What does that mean? It means that when a school cannot show through standardized tests and other means that all students in that school are making yearly progress identified as adequate, the parents can move their children to a school that is making greater gains in achievement. The local district must provide more than one choice for the parents and must provide transportation to the selected school.

Cicchinelli et al. (2003) say that although moving children to another school may be a quick fix, it may not be a good solution over time. They provide these reasons:

- Removing students from low-performing schools does not address the underlying problem of the school.
- Moving students to high-performing schools can overcrowd those schools and thus erode much of the good that is being done there.
- The students who need to move (low-performing, low economic status, or at-risk students) may not be the ones who take advantage of the opportunity since their parents are often not as informed about school choice.

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QUALITY TEACHERS AND QUALITY TEACHING

Under the current federal law, by the end of the 2005–2006 school year all public school teachers who teach core academic subjects must be “highly qualified.” What does that mean? According to the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), *highly qualified* means:

- Teachers are state certified.
- Teachers have passed the state teacher licensing examination.
- Teachers hold a license to teach in the state.
- Teachers must demonstrate subject-matter competence by passing a state test or having a master’s in each of the subjects that they teach.

This is a very controversial part of the act because many argue that just knowing the teaching subject does not guarantee that a teacher can be successful in teaching students. Indeed, one need only examine the reasons why teachers leave the field to discover that knowing the subject is far from being enough. In the future, look for test makers and governments to seek ways to identify good teachers through other means, especially through demonstrated ability rather than paper-and-pencil tests. Remember that pencil-and-paper tests most often test declarative information like facts, dates, times, and vocabulary, while authentic assessment more often tests procedural knowledge such as what we can do with the declarative information through processes (such as teaching).

An important part of the politics of teaching is that teachers are aware of the following:

- They are aware of their role as it applies to the classroom, to the school, and to the community.
- They are part of a learning community.
- They know how to relate to students, colleagues, parents, and the community.

- They know themselves in regard to attitudes, self-concept, sense of mission, and purpose.
- They are self-reflective.
- They are able to work with others toward school improvement.
- They are willing to pitch in and work toward the betterment of the organization.
- They stay informed and actively seek ways to grow in the profession.
- They understand that being a professional means working not only with parents and students, but with the entire community.