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By John M. Beam

The bipartisan "No Child Left Behind" Act of 2001, which updates the 1994 version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, has begun lurching into implementation. Will the children encompassed by its sentimental title—a phrase purloined from the Children's Defense Fund—not be left behind because this new and improved national educational vehicle brings every public school student along, or because it never leaves the station? Will parents and their community organizations have to get out and push to make sure the program keeps rolling down the right track?

Can parent and community groups keep the 'No Child Left Behind' Act on track?

According to the U.S. Department of Education, the No Child Left Behind Act is built on a foundation of four concepts that may or may not add up to a real strategy:

"These include increased accountability for states, school districts, and schools; greater choice for parents and students, particularly those attending low-performing schools; more flexibility for states and local educational agencies in the use of federal education dollars; and a stronger emphasis on reading, especially for our youngest children."

Let's look at the elements of this "strategy" for a moment, starting with choice. (We will return to accountability and how it is really enforced.)

- Increased choice for parents and students, particularly those attending low-performing schools. The legislation confuses information with choice. Information does not necessarily equate with increased options. True, attentive parents will have more

information available to them about how well their children's schools are or are not doing. After a school is in school improvement or corrective-action status for a year, its Title I parents also supposedly have a choice of sending their children to a better-performing school in their district. On a practical level, however, where is the choice for Chicago parents when, according to the estimate of one community organization, students in 265 of 491 elementary schools this fall will have the right to go to the remaining 226 schools?

Of course, given a shortage of alternatives within a district, school administrators are authorized to make deals with neighboring districts. But after watching suburban schools refuse the vouchers distributed to Cleveland public school students, is anyone taking bets that Evanston or Oak Park schools will throw open their doors to thousands of Chicago's Title I-eligible children?

- More flexibility for states and local districts in how they spend federal education funding. Is flexibility of funding the issue so much as quantity of funding and creativity in its deployment? Haven't many districts been "flexible" in their use of Title I funding for years, nonsupplantation requirements notwithstanding, even without official blessing from Washington? New flexibility in this case refers to permission to lump previously separate funding streams together, permission that state and local governments may appreciate but that can easily complicate both equity and accountability.
- An emphasis on preschool and early-grades reading. What's not to like? Hasn't the emphasis always been on reading? The academic wars have been over *how* to teach reading. This legislation pushes a new national reading program that is actually just a funding mechanism and provides categorical support for "scientifically based" strategies meeting criteria that emphasize phonics and other traditional basics.

Given the relatively short list of available research-based reading programs, some of which are still quite controversial, is this a limited-option, quick-fix tactic? Can a cookie-cutter approach actually meet the extensive prescribed criteria that reading programs successfully serve special-needs students, including those in special education and English-language-learner classes?

- Increased accountability for states, school districts, and schools. While the bill includes a bunch of carrots, the only stick is the ability to withhold portions of Title I funding, unless we accept the premise that there are enough desks in good schools to accommodate a mass exodus from unsuccessful schools. If politicians and voters at the state and often district levels continue to be willing to underfund central-city public schools, how will the threat of losing a little more money, which, after all, is only for poor kids, motivate them?

The bill confuses information with accountability. Accountability—let alone comprehensive school reform—does not equate to greater access to information. The Campaign for Fiscal Equity spent eight years in state court carefully documenting in great detail how state funding mechanisms do not support a constitutionally adequate public school education for New York's public school students, particularly those in larger cities. For well over a year, the governor, who is up for re-election and leading in the polls, has defied the court order to correct the situation and, moreover, has engaged in brinkmanship with the legislature that has actually further slashed available funds for public schools.

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The No Child Left Behind Act is laced with requirements that information be provided in formats that are accessible and language-appropriate for parents, and offers up the optimistically labeled Title V—Promoting Informed Parental Choice and Innovative Programs, complete with its own budget line. But "initiatives to generate, maintain, and strengthen parental and community involvement" compete for funding with 26 other "innovative local-assistance programs," including charter and magnet schools, finance education, and cardiopulmonary-resuscitation training. More substantive-*sounding* elements of the parent-involvement section of Title I actually give parents a role in planning or evaluating parent involvement ... *not* their children's education. Moreover, when the words "parent" and "decision" share a sentence, qualifiers like "appropriate" usually accompany them.

In short, any interpretation of the legislation, which, after all, defines familial relationships among multiple bureaucracies, that suggests any of these bureaucracies are particularly accountable to low-income parents and students is disingenuous or naive.

On an individual level, most urban parents, especially low-income parents, are powerless to affect the quality of education provided in their children's schools. Even middle-class parents who have a political impulse or financial incentive to keep their children in public schools are frequently reduced to gaming the system to make sure their children are enrolled in the magnet school or transported across town to their district's rare successful middle school. So, as Mother Jones, the principal of the school of hard knocks, told us: "Don't mourn. Organize."

Fortunately for the future of public education, community organizations across the country are doing just that. The past few years have seen a sharp increase in the number of local groups—some of them stand-alone, some of them affiliated with national networks like ACORN or the Industrial Areas

Foundation—that have added school issues to their agendas. Even then, as research by the Indicators Project on Education Organizing, a joint research project of the Chicago-based Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform and Research for Action in Philadelphia, points out:

"The groups themselves have found that the deep entrenchment of bureaucratic practices and relations in schools resists the organizing. Bureaucratic organization, in combination with the professionalization of education, makes it particularly difficult to penetrate schools."

Ironically, the encoding of the national rhetoric of accountability into policy has fueled the need for local schools' organizing. Work by the Institute for Education and Social Policy suggests that "local-, state-, and national-level education initiatives are creating new accountability systems that demand higher student performance without providing adequate resources and supports students need."

The increasingly blatant racial dimension of public education policy has also upped the ante for many communities. The courts have limited parent and student ability to leverage Department of Education action against discrimination by schools and districts. Attacks on affirmative action in California handicapped students of color, whose high schools were more likely to lack the Advanced Placement courses that now weight scoring of college applications. A recent study of dozens of community groups by the National Center for Schools and Communities at Fordham University found that 53 percent were organizing around issues that dealt with race and racism. That figure includes a category labeled "lockdown" that encompasses opposition to school budget lines for shotguns and tasers and campaigns to keep police dogs out of schools.

The No Child Left Behind Act notwithstanding, we still lack a national consensus that every child deserves a high-quality public education, regardless of her or his color, language, or income. At the community level, however, organized parents, youths, and their allies are using actions, studies, demonstrations, boycotts, lobbying, and press events to make concrete changes. They are winning community-controlled schools; more full-time, licensed teachers and fewer unlicensed substitutes; reading programs (yes, research-based); textbooks; professional development for teachers; and other victories that improve the safety, climate, and quality of public schools.

With the help of action-research centers like the National Center for Schools and Communities and the Institute for Education and Social Policy in New York, the ERASE project

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of the Applied Research Center in Oakland, Calif., and the Center for Community Change in Washington, local activists are documenting inequitable distributions of teaching and program resources, developing parent leaders who can evaluate their schools, confronting racist discipline policies, and trying to figure out how to connect school-specific grievances to improving entire school systems.

quality public education, regardless of her or his color, language, or income.

Federal, state, and local governments have a role to play in ensuring adequate and equitable funding for schools, addressing the market failure in distributing top-flight teachers, and protecting the safety and civil rights of all students. They have yet to perform that role well, let alone address what actually happens in most classrooms.

Joined by a handful of progressive foundations, grassroots groups and the policy-advocacy organizations represent the nascent infrastructure of an education justice movement. That movement is what ultimately will have to make sure that no child is left behind.

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