## PRINCIPALS' PERSPECTIVE

## High School Reform: "Simple, Neat, and Wrong!"



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"For every complex problem, there is a solution that is simple, neat, and wrong." H. L. Mencken's words are sage advice for those at the federal level who are about to fire their silver bullets of high school reform. One initiative, as advertised, will impose the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) model that is presently driving K-8 school reform. The wrongheadedness of such an initiative is rooted in the absence of any substantive research or evaluation data for NCLB to date. But alas, it is seemingly so simple and neat to impose such a program upon grades 9-12--apparently without any consideration of the reality that NCLB has caused so much consternation, frustration, and misgivings on a national level by elementary and middle school educators.

The main focus of the high school edition of NCLB, as articulated in the president's recently released FY 2008 Budget, will be on testing and holding high schools accountable within the adequate yearly progress (AYP) construct. This misguided intrusion is flawed in several ways. Initially, it is important to point out that if the present assessment model of NCLB is followed, a low-level proficiency standard in reading and mathematics may very well be the height of the bar used to assess the success or failure of a high school education--completely disregarding the comprehensive and highly diversified course offerings that constitute a secondary school curriculum. Second, it is truly needless, and a waste of significant resources and money, to test grade 9 and 10 students when one considers the amount of testing taking place in K-8 education--the results of which have clearly demonstrated that 6-8 million adolescents cannot read with proficiency, and a significant number of students lack the numeracy skills to survive a high school math curriculum. High school reform does not resonate to more testing when you already know the extent of the problem; it resides in providing intensive and sustained tutorial, remedial, and supportive assistance to those students who enter the grade 9 with major academic deficiencies. To further underscore the obsession with testing, a study reported by Education Sector, a Washington DC, think tank, estimated that in 2005, public

schools had given about 33.6 million tests as required by NCLB, and estimated that another 11.4 million tests would be added by the end of 2005–06 school year. How many more tests are needed to evaluate a patient? When will we move beyond assessment and diagnosis and start providing the treatment and interventions that the patient so desperately needs?

The \$1 billion Title I request for high school reform is, at first blush, a significant fiscal commitment, especially when one considers that only 5% of Title I funds are presently available in grades 9-12. However, upon careful review, the celebration ends. The Title I increase is part of the targeted grant, which is set aside for the approximately one-third of the schools with the lowest social economic indicators. If all high schools are to be judged by AYP, what, if any, additional funding will be available for the remaining two-thirds of high schools? Worse yet, these new funds for high schools evaporate when one considers that they come at the expense of other programs that, to varying degrees, impacts on secondary schools: Perkins Career and Technical Education (-\$680 million), IDEA (-\$300 million), Safe and Drug Free Schools (-\$22 million), School Dropout Prevention (eliminated), School Leadership (eliminated), and Smaller Learning Communities (eliminated).

When NCLB was being drafted, the educational community was conspicuous by its absence. When the law was enacted, educators sat passively by and allowed federal lawmakers to dictate the terms, conditions, and penalties to be imposed upon school districts, schools, and educators. Now as the feds are poised to draft high school reform in the reauthorization of NCLB, the question is: Will the education community once again be silent, or will there be a loud and unified voice demanding that school administrators and teachers be actively engaged in the next iteration of NCLB? Horace Mann provides an answer that hopefully will enliven educators to reclaim the school reform playing field: "Let us not be content to wait and see what will happen, but to give us the determination to make the right things happen."



