



# Improving Your Schools: A Parent and Community Guide To **No Child Left Behind**

Companion to: USING NCLB FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT FACT SHEETS



## What's in this guide?

- Why the Law is Important
- "No Child At A Glance": Brief Summary of the Law
- Information You're Entitled To
- School Improvement
- Fact Sheets: Understanding the Law

## Who can use this guide?

Anyone interested in learning more about schools and how to improve them.

- Parents and parent group leaders
- Advocates for children and public education
- Leaders of community based organizations
- Members of community based organizations
- Educators
- Any citizen concerned about the state of public schools

# Why The Law Is Important

Used effectively, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) can be an important tool for improving achievement and closing the achievement gap. There is an achievement gap because we have held some students to high standards but not others. Yes, some students enter school behind. But instead of working hard to help these students catch up, our schools often make them worse. Low-income students and students of color have consistently been short changed. They've had the least qualified teachers, the least challenging curriculum and the poorest equipped schools.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) holds states responsible for making sure that all students are held to high standards. Irrespective of where students live and how much money their parents make, their schools must be staffed

by highly qualified teachers, academic standards must be challenging, and curriculum must match those standards. In addition, parents are entitled to the honest information they need to monitor their child's progress and hold schools accountable.

NCLB uses standards as a way to equalize educational opportunity.

NCLB doesn't stop at standards—it adds other tools to the advocates' kit. States must publicly report on students' progress and their access to qualified teachers. **Most important, they must hold schools and districts accountable for getting ALL students to proficiency within a specified timeframe. That timeframe is challenging, but it is not unrealistic. Already, there are literally thousands of high poverty schools that are on-track to meet these goals.**

To assist school improvement efforts, NCLB provides over 11 billion dollars to help schools that educate students from low-income families, and another \$3 billion to help recruit and train teachers in these schools. In exchange, states have to make sure that high poverty schools have high quality teachers to deliver challenging curriculum.

Public education is at a crossroads. We can take the hard path to a high quality education for all students—or we can take the easy path that allows the system to continue relegating too many students to an inferior education. No law is perfect, but NCLB can be used as a powerful tool by parents and education advocates to advance us on the path toward educational equity. Even if there are aspects of the law you think should be different, it's important for community advocates to know how they can use NCLB to bolster their efforts.

The Education Trust is committed to helping teachers, parents, and community advocates who are working to help public schools more effectively teach all students. We prepared this guide and other materials to help your community use NCLB to make your schools successful.

The next section of this guide shows you "NCLB at a Glance." It's a summary of the important points in the law. All through this guide we will refer to other materials that you can use to deepen your understanding of the policies in the law. The Fact Sheets will give you more information on each of the topics that you'll get at a glance.

Together, communities, schools and parents can use the tools provided by NCLB to advocate for all students. We don't have time to waste, so let's get started!



# No Child Left Behind At A Glance

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) was signed into law January 8, 2002, with the overwhelming support of both Democrats and Republicans. NCLB is the most recent reauthorization of the federal government's biggest K-12 program, which began in 1965. The information below specifies what states must do to implement NCLB. The most important points of NCLB are:

## Standards

States must adopt and define challenging standards for what children should know and be able to do. The standards are public documents you can get from your school, district or the state department of education. They will help you know what your child is expected to learn in school.

## Testing/Assessments

Every state currently tests its students at various grade levels. Starting no later than the 2005-06 school year, students must be tested each year in grades 3 to 8, and once in grades 10-12 in reading and math. All students in the same grade level throughout the state take the same test once a year. Yearly testing will enable us to tell how well teachers are teaching and students are learning. States must adopt high-quality assessments that are aligned with their academic standards—this makes sure that students are tested on what the standards indicate they should know and be able to do.

## Public Reporting/Data

For the first time, states, districts and schools across the coun-



try must publicly report data that has been nearly impossible for parents and advocates to obtain in most states. They must report how all groups of students are progressing toward meeting standards: by race, poverty level, children with disabilities and English language learners. States must define what constitutes a highly qualified

teacher and report the definition to the public. States, districts and schools have to report differences in teacher qualifications in high-poverty versus low-poverty schools.

## Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Accountability

For the first time, NCLB puts some muscle behind federal accountability provisions to ensure that states, districts, and schools effectively teach all students. States must

set clear timelines for improving student achievement, with particular emphasis on closing achievement gaps between low-income and minority students and their peers. Setting the same high standards for all students and schools is crucial for fairness and equity. You can't close achievement gaps by setting lower expectations for previously low-performing schools. To get all students to proficiency, states have to accelerate their progress with the students that are farthest away from meeting standards.

States must publish a formula called Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as to how they will determine how much progress schools need to make each year. If schools don't make their AYP targets, states must provide help. If schools don't improve after 6 years, fundamental changes need to take place. The goal is for all students to meet the state definition of "proficient" in reading and math by 2014.

For more detailed information see the Fact Sheet on AYP.

### School Improvement

A school is designated as needing improvement when state assessment data reveal after



two years in a row that one or more groups of students are not making enough progress toward meeting standards.

The state, school district and the school collaborate on a two-year plan to spell out exactly what each will do to improve student achievement. This is called a "School Improvement Plan." The plan should not only specify what educators will do, but should include how parents and community agencies will participate in developing and implementing the plan.

### Teacher Quality

**Students can't learn what their teachers don't know how to teach.** States must define a "highly qualified" teacher. The law defines a "highly qualified teacher" as at least having a college degree, demonstrating content knowledge in the subjects he or she is teaching and satisfying state certification and licensure requirements. States can add to this definition. States determine the tests they will use

for teacher certification and the level of proficiency on the tests that define "highly qualified." The state must collect and publicly report data on teacher quality.

States must report whether low-income and students of color are assigned more than their fair share of inexperienced, unqualified, or out-of-field teachers. If so, the state must develop a plan to fix this problem and publicly report on its progress.

### Parent Involvement

**"Before we had to fight, now it's our right."** Parents now have a right to school, district and state data on academic achievement, graduation rates, and the qualifications of their children's teachers. Now, schools must inform parents on the performance of their school and whether their children are being taught by under-qualified teachers. NCLB requires that parents be actively involved in the decision making process at their school.



## Title I Requirements in 1994 version and in NCLB

	Old Law	New Law
<b>Standards</b>	States required to adopt state-defined standards, develop assessments, and identify schools in need of improvement.	Same.
<b>Student data collection</b>	States and schools required to collect data on achievement of different groups of students by poverty, race, limited-English proficiency and disability status.	Same. <b>But for the first time, states required to publicly report achievement data by different groups – known as disaggregated data.</b>
<b>Testing</b>	Required three times: once in grades 3-5, once in grades 6-9, and once in grades 10-12.	Beginning in 2005-06, required each year from grades 3-8 and once in grades 10-12.
<b>Accountability</b>	States set up their own accountability systems. No requirement to establish timelines for full proficiency. No requirement to focus on closing the achievement gap.	Every state and school district is responsible for ensuring that within 12 years all students will meet the state standard for proficient in reading and math. Schools must use disaggregated data to ensure that ALL groups of students are making adequate progress.
<b>What happens when schools don't meet their goals?</b>	States were supposed to develop systems for requiring change in low-performing schools, but little change actually occurred.	<b>Local leaders choose what form change should take, but real change must be implemented.</b> States, districts, and schools are required to focus additional attention and resources on schools needing improvement. Parents have options to transfer their children to higher performing schools or to receive supplemental education services paid for with federal money.
<b>Highly Qualified Teachers</b>	Not covered.	Requires states to define a qualified teacher and to ensure that low-income and minority students are not taught disproportionately by inexperienced, unqualified, or out-of-field teachers. States have until 2005-06 to get all teachers to state standards.

**K**nowing why the No Child Left Behind Act is important and what it says is just the beginning. These next sections will provide more detail on how NCLB is designed to bring all students to the level of proficiency by the year 2014 and what you, as parents, are entitled to.

### Information You're Entitled To

No Child Left Behind gives you leverage to make sure your child receives a high quality education.

The following is a summary of your rights to information under No Child Left Behind:

#### ABOUT YOUR CHILD'S ACHIEVEMENT:

- You have the right to receive a report of your child's academic performance, with clear information about any needs which may have been identified for your child. You can then work with your child's teachers to address those needs.
- The state and district must release school-level, district-level, and state-level report cards, which you can use to compare your child's achievement levels to those of other children in your school, district and state.

#### ABOUT TEACHER QUALITY:

- You have a right to know if your child's teachers have emergency or temporary credentials.
- You have a right to know if teachers in your school are cer-

tified in the subject areas they are teaching.

- You should receive a notice if your child is being taught by a teacher's aide, and if so, what qualifications they have.
- You should receive a notice if your child has been taught for more than four weeks in a row by a teacher who is not highly qualified.
- You have a right to see the principal's certification of compliance with the teacher quality provisions of NCLB.
- You have a right to see the district's plan for increasing teacher quality.
- You have a right to see the district's plan for making sure that low-income students and students of color get their fair share of qualified and experienced teachers.

#### IF YOUR SCHOOL IS IDENTIFIED AS "IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT" YOU HAVE A RIGHT TO KNOW:

- The specific areas the school needs to improve.
- What specific steps the state, district and school will take to improve student achievement.
- How you or other parents can be involved in the school improvement plan.

- Your school choice options and how to obtain supplemental services for your child (only children from low-income families are eligible for supplemental services).

#### ABOUT PARENT INVOLVEMENT:

- The school must set up programs and activities to increase parent involvement.
- If parents ask, the school must hold regular meetings to discuss parent concerns.
- Parents must be consulted on the writing of a school district parent involvement plan.
- Once the plan is adopted, all parents must receive a copy of the school improvement plan, and this plan must contain specific plans for increasing parent involvement.

### Our Children Shortchanged

For far too many years, children living in poverty and children of color have been shortchanged by this country's educational systems.

- In the United States, 61% of African American fourth graders and 57% of Latino fourth graders cannot even read at the basic level. Nationally, 54% of fourth grade students from poor families are below basic readers, compared to only 24% of fourth graders from more affluent families.
- The picture is similar for eighth grade math: Nationally, 68% of African American and 60% of Latino eighth graders cannot do basic level math. And while 24% of eighth grade students from non-poor families fall below the basic level in math, 56% of eighth graders from poor families do.



- Nationally, African American and Latino high school seniors have identical reading and math skills as white eighth graders.

**The evidence is clear: there are huge achievement gaps among different groups of children.**

### Four Factors that Contribute to the Achievement Gap

Some children – especially those growing up in poverty – may arrive at school behind. But many times the schools cause the gap to widen. Why?

- **LOW STANDARDS**— In high-poverty schools, students often aren't held to high standards, so they are given "A"s for work that would earn a "C" in a more affluent school.
- **LOW LEVEL CURRICULUM**— Schools often have low expectations for students living in poverty and students of color, so those students aren't taught with a challenging curriculum that will push them to do their best.
- **LEAST QUALIFIED/EXPERIENCED TEACHERS**— High poverty schools have more than their share of inexperienced, unqualified, and teachers teaching outside of their field of expertise.
- **FEWER RESOURCES**— High-poverty schools often don't have well equipped libraries, science labs, or the most current textbooks and instructional materials.

**The fact is, all too often, children who need the most usually receive the least from their schools.**

### Four Ways NCLB Seeks to Close the Gap:

- Establishing clear and consistent goals for student learning;

- Measuring whether students are reaching the goals and providing clear, public information on the results;
- Getting highly qualified teachers in every classroom; and
- Providing teachers with training and support, then holding schools accountable for raising student achievement.

**No Child Left Behind focuses on what schools can do to ensure every child has the opportunity to learn.**

### NCLB Gives Parents Powerful New Advocacy Tools By:

- Requiring states to set consistent goals for student achievement and making information on student achievement readily available;
- Making states and districts promise to provide qualified teachers to ALL students and making information on teacher quality readily available;

- Mandating that every school give parents a copy of the school report card;
- Sending notices home of important meetings that concern policy related issues;
- Assisting parents with their choice of schools, when applicable; and
- Making parents full partners in the school improvement process.

The good news for parents and communities is that the data is clear – **schools can and do make a huge difference.** There are thousands of examples all over the country of schools where children living in poverty and children of color are achieving at very high levels. The goal of NCLB is to make these schools the rule. **Parent and community involvement is an essential element in ensuring that our schools become high-performing successful places that prepare our children to meet the challenges ahead.**



**T**his guide will help you to learn how to use the No Child Left Behind Act to improve the quality of education your child receives by taking you through a step-by-step process examining the important aspects of the Act and providing useful “Fact Sheets.”

**The School Improvement Plan:**

A PROCESS FOR IMPROVING ACADEMIC INSTRUCTION

The School Improvement Plan is

key to using NCLB to improve low performing schools. But schools have always had to develop plans and involve parents, so what makes this school improvement plan process differ-

ent from previous plans? The chart below shows major differences between previous school improvement requirements and those in NCLB.

In the end, a plan is only as good as its implementation. It is your right and responsibility to make sure that schools follow through and make the changes that are promised in the plan.

**What goes into the School Improvement Plan?**

When a school finds out that it has not made adequate progress for two years in a row, it needs to

**Old and New School Improvement Plans at a Glance**

Old School Improvement Plans	NCLB School Improvement Plans
No requirement to disaggregate test results or to identify which students need the most help.	Requires schools, districts and states to use disaggregated data by race, poverty, limited English proficiency and disability.
No time certain requirement for getting students to meet standards.	Requires states to specify time lines for academic improvement for each group of students to reach proficiency on state standards in 12 years.
No requirement to report data to the public.	Requires schools, states and districts to publicly report on student achievement at regular intervals.
No specific help from state.	State has to provide help to individual schools and districts. States get extra federal money to help make school improvement work.
Weak requirements for professional development.	Requires professional development for teachers in the academic subjects in which students aren't meeting progress goals. 10% of a school's Title I funds must be spent on Professional Development.
Weak consequences for schools that don't make improvement.	A demand for meaningful change, based on specific plans and timelines, for schools that do not make improvement.



immediately notify parents and start the process of developing a school improvement plan. Within 3 months after being identified, the school must develop its school improvement plan in consultation with parents, school staff, the central office, and outside experts.

The improvement plan should explain how the school will work to improve the academic instruction in order to raise student achievement. The plan must cover a 2-year period and incorporate strategies that have demonstrated success in raising student achievement. The plan should identify the specific areas of instruction that need improvement and explain what changes the school will make.

The plan should also explain what assistance will be provided by the district and the state. One of the goals of NCLB is for states and school districts to take more responsibility and play a more active role in helping schools that aren't meeting their goals. Each state gets federal money specifically to help schools implement improvement plans. You should ask what the state and district are doing to help your school.

In order for learning to improve, instruction must improve. NCLB requires schools in improvement to give teachers professional development that helps teachers learn more effective strategies in the specific areas where students are struggling. To make sure that new teachers get the support they need, schools in improvement must develop a teacher mentoring program.

Finally, the plan has to spell-out the role of parents and the community in helping the school to improve. School improvement is hard work, but when the whole

school community focuses on the common goal of raising student achievement, real progress can be made. To make sure that school improvement plans really affect change, parents need to stay involved.

Every school improvement plan should answer the following questions:

### **What does the data tell us about the area that needs to be improved?**

All data about student achievement—test scores and other measures—must be broken down by race/ethnicity, by children living in poverty, by children with disabilities and by children who are English-language learners. This is useful in determining how well all children are being taught. The data will also be broken down by subject and usually by grade level.

This data will tell us which children require additional help and in which areas. Additionally the data:

- Will tell us if math scores are improving but reading scores are not.
- Will tell us if academic performance varies among different ethnic groups.
- Will show us whether gaps between groups of students are getting narrower or wider.
- Will help determine the type of assistance needed by students not at grade level.

Student achievement data are more than just scores. When educators look at student test results, they should be able to identify the specific skills students have learned and detect where additional help is needed. With the help of all this data, a school can concentrate its efforts for maximum impact.

### **What strategies will be used to raise achievement?**

After the plan identifies where efforts need to be focused, the plan should also say precisely what the school will do to meet those needs.

If, for example, reading scores are very low in a school, the school should investigate what reading programs have been successful in other schools. Here are some examples of what the school might do to improve reading scores:

- Adopt a research-based reading program with strong evidence of results with similar students;
- Give longer blocks of time to reading instruction;
- Hire a literacy coach to help teachers learn how to use more effective reading methods in their classrooms;
- Provide extra time and support to the students who are farthest behind; and
- Hire a school reading specialist to work with children who have difficulty with reading.

Whatever strategies the school selects, the actions must be directed toward the areas of highest need.

### **What professional development will the school provide to its teachers?**

All professionals—including doctors, lawyers, and engineers—need continuous training throughout their careers. This is called professional development, and teachers and principals are no exception. Professional development is essential to teachers and principals since we are constantly learning more about the most effective ways to educate children. NCLB provides

almost \$3 billion for schools to focus on professional development.

Effective professional development should provide content knowledge for teachers and focus on improving classroom instruction. Professional development should focus on the specific areas where students need help and on specific strategies for raising the quality of curriculum and instruction.

New teachers and administrators have a special need for extra support. Every school with an improvement plan should describe a mentoring program. The plan should explain specifically how more experienced teachers will help their newer colleagues.

### How will the school get help from the district and state?

Schools should not be expected to improve without assistance. States and districts have a responsibility to help schools that need to improve. For example, if the school is having trouble recruiting or retaining highly qualified teachers, the school district should provide extra training and support to the current teachers and help to recruit more qualified teachers. The school district should look at the school's budget to see if money is being spent on activities which are most likely to improve student achievement in the areas that most need help. The state or school district should also look at the school's curriculum and recommend more effective teaching strategies, when applicable.

Some states have created school improvement teams with expertise in raising achievement in struggling schools. In addition to their own resources, states receive federal money (\$234 million in 2003 and at least double that amount in 2004) to help schools effectively implement their improvement plans.

### How will parents be involved in the school improvement process?

No Child Left Behind says that schools must make special efforts to involve parents. Parents should be notified as soon as a school is identified as needing improvement.

Parents must be involved in developing the school improvement plan and in the implementation of the plan where possible. The school should work with parents in making sure their children are provided with the extra support/resources they need. Parents should be notified when meetings are held to assess the progress of the school, according to the improvement plan.

FOR EXAMPLE:

- The school should reach out to parents and make special efforts to make sure that parents are informed and involved. The school should not simply send out notices to parents and assume that those who do not respond or attend are not interested.
- All notices from the school should be understandable—not filled with technical terms. And all notices should be translated into languages that the parents in that community understand.
- The school can use federal funds to offer reading classes to parents, perhaps for parents who speak English as a second language or for parents who would like to improve their own literacy skills.
- The school can use federal funds to pay for childcare to allow parents to attend school programs.

**What is your child's school doing to encourage parent participation? What are you and your community doing to connect with your schools?**

This guide is designed to assist Community-Based Organizations in providing parents and community members a better understanding of the No Child Left Behind Act. This will hopefully enable them to advocate more effectively to improve the education of all children.

Used correctly, the No Child Left Behind Act is the muscle parents and other advocates need to move their school and school district to provide them with information about student progress and opportunities for learning. Parents must be able to determine the effectiveness of the educational instruction their children receive. Only then can they play a meaningful role in the educational process.

This law can be effective when the efforts of key stakeholders, coupled with the determination of parents and students, combine to make meaningful school reform a reality. NCLB provides powerful leverage for ensuring that all children have an opportunity to learn a high quality curriculum delivered by highly qualified teachers with high standards as the expectation for all.

*We hope this guide and the accompanying Fact Sheets will bring about a clearer understanding of the NCLB law. The law is paper; implementation is people. Our aim is to help parent and community groups to make the law an effective advocacy tool. There is no time to waste. Children take only one trip through public education.*

**The enclosed Fact Sheets are designed to provide more detailed information to assist you in using the law to help improve the quality of education your school delivers to your child.**



# GLOSSARY

**Accountability-** Policies developed to hold schools and school systems responsible for the academic results of their students.

**Achievement Gap-** The difference in school achievement among different groups of students, such as racial/ethnic groups, income levels, etc.

**Assessment-** Measuring student performance. This term is often used the same as testing.

**AYP/Adequate Yearly Progress-** A signaling system to tell whether schools are on-track to teach all students what they need to know in each school year.

**Content Standards-** Statements of what students from kindergarten through 12th grade

should know and be able to do in the core content areas. For example: English/Language Arts, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies.

**Curriculum-** The subject material that teachers cover with students in class.

**Data-** Facts or figures from which conclusions can be made; information.

**Disaggregate-** To breakdown information by different groups, either by race, ethnicity, income levels, gender, etc.

**LEA/Local Educational Agency-** A school district.

**LEP/Limited English Proficiency (ELL/English Language Learners)-** Individuals whose primary/native language is not English.

**Opportunity Gap-** Differences in resources available to different schools, for example buildings, money and teachers, and other resources such as those in the community and at home: neighborhood libraries, personal computers, home reference materials.

**Professional Development-** The on-going training of teachers.

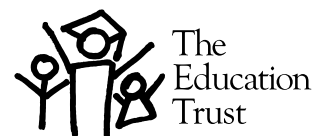
**Proficiency-** Means a student is able to do something he or she is supposed to do at that age and grade level.

**Supplemental Services-** Services provided outside the regular school day to help students reach proficiency. These are paid for with Federal Title I funds.

## About The Education Trust

The Education Trust, Inc. was created to promote high academic achievement for all students, at all levels—kindergarten through college. While we know that all schools and colleges could better serve their students, our work focuses on the schools and colleges most often left behind in education improvement efforts: those serving Latino, African American, Native American and low-income students.

The Education Trust works side-by-side with policy makers, parents, education professionals, community and business leaders—in cities and towns across the country—who are trying to transform their schools and colleges into institutions that genuinely serve all students. We also share lessons learned in these schools, colleges and communities with policy makers.



202-293-1217 • 1725 K Street, NW • Suite 200  
Washington, DC 20006  
[www.edtrust.org](http://www.edtrust.org)