

EDUCATION SPECIAL REPORT

The landmark law has reshaped public education, closing failing schools and more than 1,000 schools. It's also flawed. Here's our report on the statute—and what's for next.

How to Fix No Child Left Behind

BY CLAUDIA WALLIS AND SONJA STEPTOE

IT'S COUNTDOWN TIME IN PHILADELPHIA's public schools. Just 21 days remain before the state reading and math tests in March, and the kids and faculty at James G. Blaine Elementary, an all-black, inner-city school that spans pre-K to eighth grade, have been drilling for much of the day. At 2:45 in the afternoon, Rasheed Abdullah, the kinetic lead math teacher, stages what could be called a prep rally with 11 third-graders. The kids, who are at neither the top nor the bottom of their class, have been selected for intensive review—as has a contingent from other grades—because their test scores hold the key to putting the school over the top on the pivotal Pennsylvania System of School Assessments (PSSAs). Last year, after a history of failure, the school, under new leadership, managed to meet the federal goal for adequate yearly progress (AYP) on the state tests for the first time. If it does so again, Blaine moves off the dreaded list of failing schools, no longer a target for intensive oversight and sanctions that could include replacing the staff.

Abdullah, who has an easy rapport with students, issues a quick reminder to sign up for "Super Saturday" review classes and then begins his math-athon with a rousing recitation of the school's declaration of education. "We believe that we can learn at high levels," the children chant. "We believe we can reach our learning potential ... We believe that Blaine will become a high-performing institution."

Quite a mouthful for an 8-year-old. And there's more. Abdullah starts pumping his fists as the kids finish with passionate vows.

"I'll never give up!" he shouts.

"I'll never give up!" they echo.

"Even on the PSSA test!"

"Even on the PSSA test!"

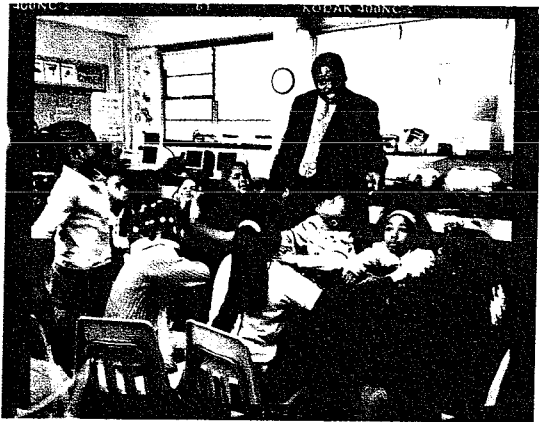
"Cause winners never lose, and I am the best!"

For the next 15 minutes, the kids, divided into teams, compete to win points by solving math problems, with Abdullah acting as a combination game-show host and math coach. There are giggles and cheers and plenty of correct answers, but everyone in the

room knows the fate of the school is at stake.

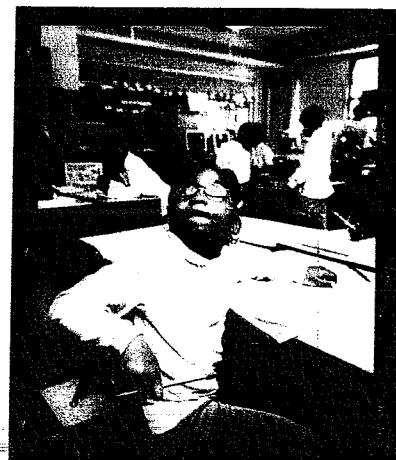
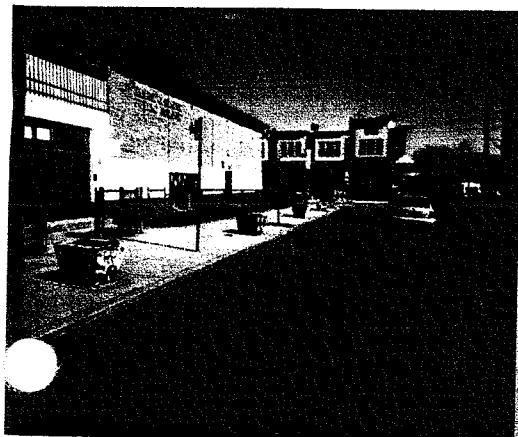
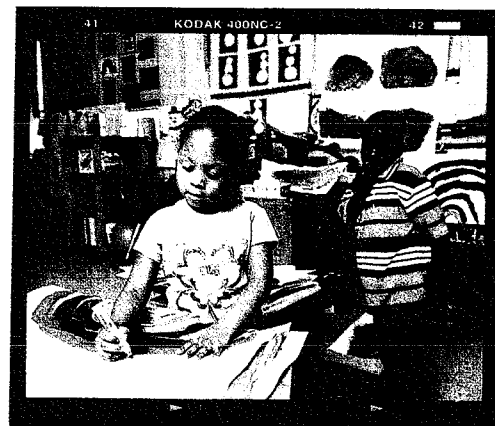
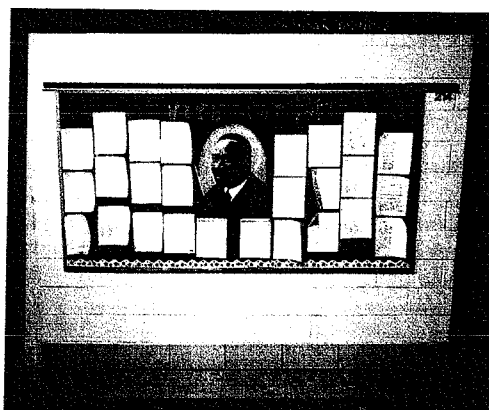
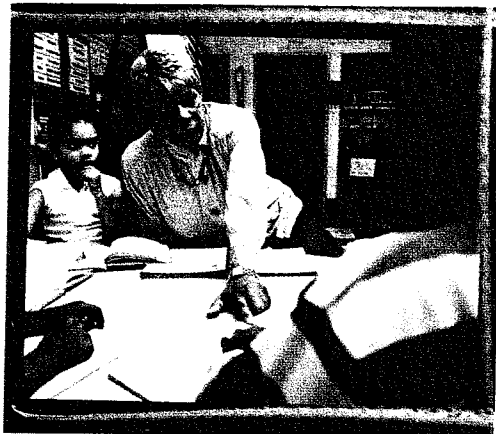
TO UNDERSTAND THE IMPACT OF THE 2001 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, indelibly rebranded as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), you need to visit a school like Blaine. The astonishingly ambitious law, the Bush Administration's proudest domestic achievement, was crafted with high-poverty, low-achieving schools like this one in mind. NCLB proponents and critics alike agree that the law's greatest accomplishment has been shining an unforgiving spotlight on such languishing schools and demanding that they do better. At Blaine, for instance, only 13% of fifth- and eighth-graders were reading on grade level or above in 2004—a number that has since risen to 36%.

Under the law's most visible stipulation, states must test public school students in reading and math every year from third through eighth grade, plus once in high school, and reveal the results for each school or face a loss of federal funds. Just as critical, schools must break out test results for certain

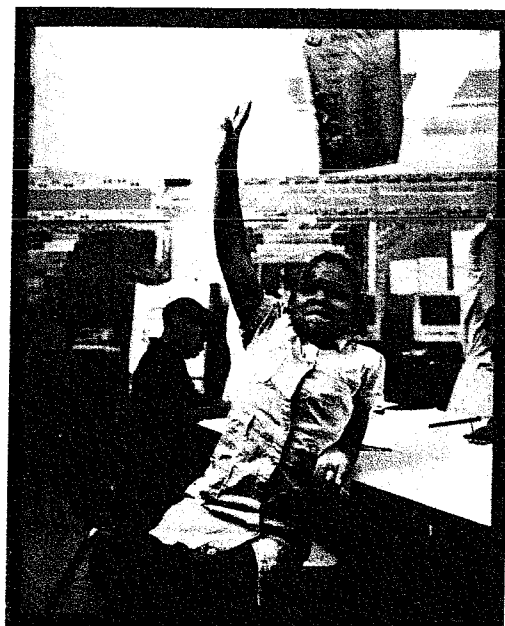


James G. Blaine Elementary

Left to right from top: Principal Sterling Garris talks with second-graders; Mr. Speranza admires a third-grader's work; first-graders get help from Ms. Ellis; Head Start kids try out kinesthetic movement; Mr. Abdullah teaches math with a Clever Catch ball; second-graders vie to be the first to answer; a bulletin board aims to inspire; art time in pre-K; Blaine's dreary exterior; eighth-graders study abstinence; a first-grader learns to write



Early Report Card. The law demands that schools get better, but progress may be in the eye of the beholder



Pick me! Stanton second-grader Qydia Fowler eagerly volunteers to read her writing

that Blaine third-grader would be judged a success—and his teachers and school would get credit for his achievement. “The growth model,” says O’Connell, “is a much more accurate portrayal of a school’s performance.”

Spellings says she appreciates the need for “a more nuanced accountability system,” and her department is testing the growth model in North Carolina, Tennessee, Florida, Arkansas and Delaware. The main sticking point, she says, is having a data-management system that can accurately track the performance of individual students statewide. Another sticking point, she says, is ensuring that growth doesn’t replace the goal of moving kids up to grade level. “Growth models have to be within what I call the bright-line principles of the law, which is grade-level proficiency by 2014. Moving the goalposts is not what we are talking about.”

CAN WE TRUST THE STATES TO SET STANDARDS?

BUT MOVING THE GOALPOSTS MAY BE INEVITABLE. Decreeing that all kids (except 1% with serious disabilities and an additional 2% with other issues) must be proficient by 2014 is a little like declaring that all the children are above average in the mythical town of Lake Wobegon. California has some of the toughest K-12 curriculum standards in the nation, and O’Connell despairs of hitting the 2014 goal. “Today we don’t have any of our schools with 100% student proficiency, and I will predict that we won’t by 2014,” he says. “Right now about one-quarter of our kids have to be proficient [to make AYP], but soon it’s going to be increased 12% a year until 2014. You have to question the accountability system when 100% of your schools are going to be failing, by definition.”

There are, however, two surefire ways to hit the 2014 target. One is for schools to cheat on the tests—a frighteningly common-

place solution, according to David Berliner, a respected education scholar at Arizona State University and a co-author of a new book, *Collateral Damage*, that documents the cheating trend. The other solution is to make the state tests easier, a phenomenon known among educators as “the race to the bottom.” Philadelphia’s Vallas likes to joke that there are two paths to success for his city’s schools: improve instruction for students “or give them the Illinois tests.”

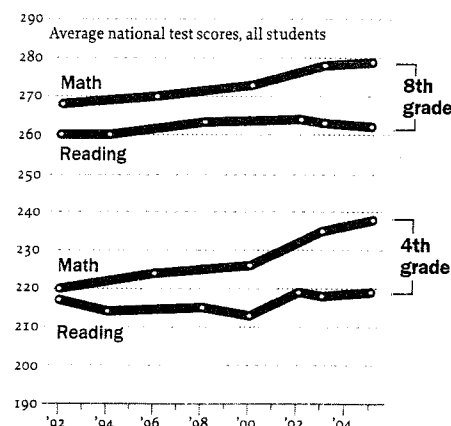
Or better yet, Mississippi’s. In 2005, 89% of fourth-graders in Mississippi were rated proficient in reading—the highest percentage in the nation. But when Mississippi youngsters sat for the rigorous NAEP—the closest thing to a national gold standard—they landed at the bottom: just 18% of fourth-graders made the grade in reading. States that have a tough curriculum and correspondingly tough exams—such as California and Massachusetts—are delivering a more rigorous education, but they’re setting themselves up to fail in NCLB’s terms.

No wonder so many states have watered down their expectations. An analysis by researchers at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, a Washington-based nonprofit, found that the quality of educational standards—which are detailed, grade-by-grade, subject-by-subject learning goals—declined in 30 states from 2000 to 2006. That includes the four states—Delaware, Kansas, North Carolina and Oklahoma—said to be on track for 2014. Overall, only three states earned an A from Fordham on curriculum standards—which are also the basis for state tests; 37 rated C— or below.

In European countries, for example, such weak and uneven expectations aren’t a problem because most have a uniform national

1. SLOW GROWTH OVERALL

Under the No Child Left Behind Act, schools must show improvement. The goal: to have all students proficient in reading and math by 2014. Math scores are creeping up, but reading scores are flat.



curriculum and national tests. But that approach has been politically unacceptable in the U.S., where schools are largely funded and controlled at the state and local levels. Besides, says Spellings, “do you really want me sitting in Washington working on how we teach evolution or creationism? I don’t want to!”

Her department has instead proposed a new requirement that every school, in addition to publishing its results on state tests, provide parents with the statewide scores on NAEP. The idea is that parents would complain if the state falls too far behind the national standard. It’s a sensible start, but few experts think it will be enough to ensure high standards in all the nation’s schools.

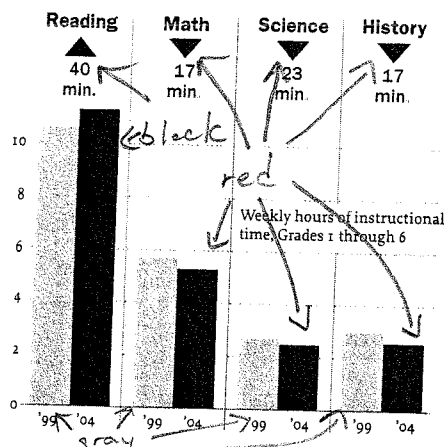
TOO MUCH READING AND MATH?

SINKING STATE STANDARDS ARE NOT THE ONLY UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCE OF NCLB. Because the law holds schools accountable only in reading and math, there’s growing evidence that schools are giving short shrift to other subjects. In a survey of 300 school districts conducted by the Center on Education Policy, 71% of local administrators admitted that this was the case in their elementary schools. Martin West of Brown University found that, on average, from 1999 to 2004, reading instruction gained 40 min. a week, while social studies and science lost about 17 min. and 23 min., respectively.

But the decline of science and social studies is often much steeper in schools struggling to end a record of failure. At Arizona Desert Elementary in San Luis, Ariz., students spend three hours of their 6½-hr. day on literacy and 90 min. on arithmetic. Science is no longer taught as a stand-alone subject. “We had to find ways to embed it within the content of reading, writing and math,” says principal Rafael Sanchez, with some regret. Social studies is handled the same way. The payoff for this laser-like at-

2. LESS SCIENCE AND HISTORY

Because state assessment tests focus on reading and math, other subjects get squeezed out. A recent study looked at how elementary-school teachers apportion their time each week:



tention to reading and math: the school went from failing in 2004 to making AYP and earning a high-flying "performing plus" designation by the Arizona department of education last year.

But reading about science isn't the same as incubating chick eggs and watching them hatch. And cutting out field trips to Civil War sites and museums to drill social studies vocabulary words is not the way to build a love of history. Hands-on activities are, for many kids, the best part of school, the part that keeps them engaged. The scope of education isn't supposed to be based on what's tested; it's the other way around, says P. David Pearson, dean of the University of California, Berkeley, graduate school of education. "Never send a test out to do a curriculum's job," he says.

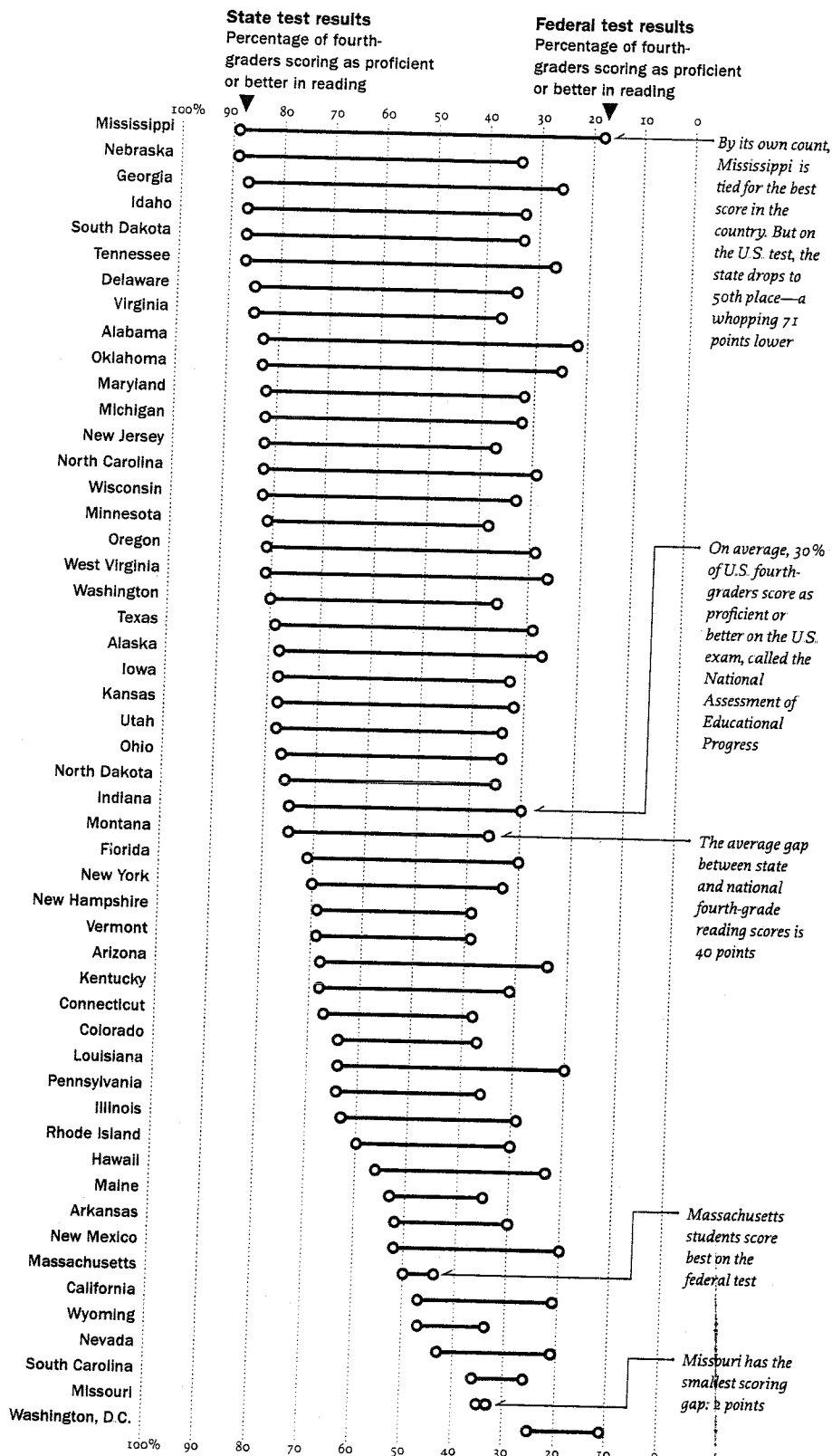
FIXING FAILING SCHOOLS

AS EVIDENCE THAT NCLB IS WORKING, FANS of the law love to point to schools that have reversed a long record of failure. Not far from Blaine, in a crime-infested part of town, sits M. Hall Stanton Elementary, everybody's favorite Philadelphia story. In 2002, only 12% of Stanton's fifth-graders were reading at grade level, and the third- and fourth-graders were engaged in what teachers called "gang wars." By 2006, 70% of fifth-graders were proficient readers, and the school was a model of decorum and learning, hitting its AYP goals three years in a row without sacrificing art, music or social studies—an achievement that has earned it national coverage and a visit from Spellings. Today the place pulses with purpose: hallways are bursting with murals, math games and word challenges, as if every square inch of the school were devoted to instruction.

But it's hard to say how much of the transformation can be attributed to NCLB. Much is due to changes made to the cur-

3. LOWER STATE STANDARDS

Federal law requires that students be tested annually to determine their reading and math skills but leaves it to each state to devise the exam. The result, critics say, is that some states make their tests easier so it appears that their students are doing well. The evidence: huge gaps between state results and scores on national standardized tests.



By its own count, Mississippi is tied for the best score in the country. But on the U.S. test, the state drops to 50th place—a whopping 71 points lower

On average, 30% of U.S. fourth-graders score as proficient or better on the U.S. exam, called the National Assessment of Educational Progress

The average gap between state and national fourth-grade reading scores is 40 points

Massachusetts students score best on the federal test

Missouri has the smallest scoring gap: 10 points

MORE SCORES To see how your state scored in math, visit our interactive map at time.com/nochild
 Note: State-by-state scores for both tests are for 2005, the latest complete year available. The Washington, D.C., reading score is for fifth-graders.
 Sources: National Center for Education Statistics; the Education Trust; *Testing, Learning and Teaching* by Martin West, Brown University

riculum in Philadelphia and even more to Stanton's dynamo principal, Barbara Adderley. Certainly, she is a big fan of testing and accountability. She holds grade-level meetings with teachers in a room with two long assessment walls, which display the latest test results for every student. The walls show, at a glance, who's making progress and who isn't, and if it's the latter, Adderley and her team have a million creative ideas on what to do about it.

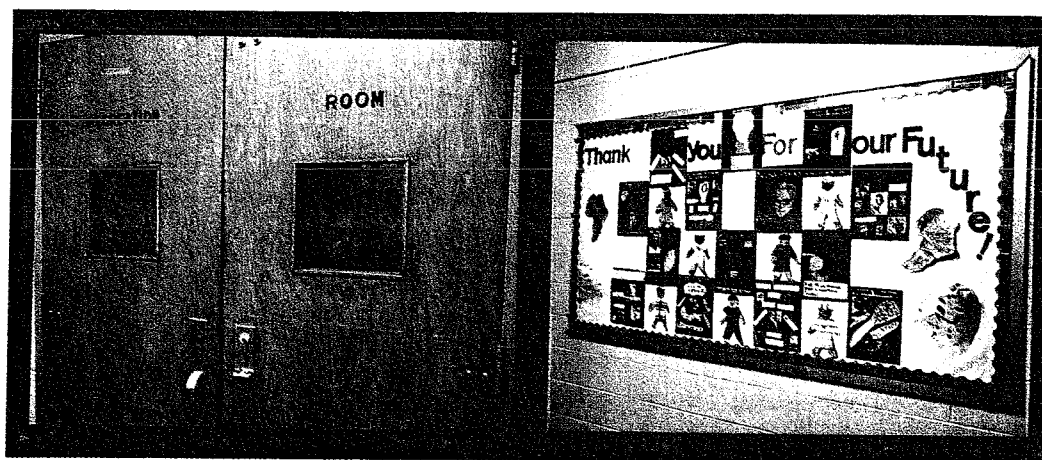
No one likes to talk much about the fate of failing schools that continue to founder. Under NCLB, such schools face escalating interventions. If they miss AYP two years in a row, they must offer students a chance to transfer out. After three years, they must provide tutoring services. After five years of failure, the law says the school must be restructured, which means replacing the staff, converting to a charter school, having the state or a private company take the reins or some other intervention.

None of these remedies are working very well. In the 2003-04 school year, only 17% of the 1.4 million students who were eligible for tutoring got assistance. Of the 3.9 million eligible to transfer out of failing schools in 2004-05, only about 1% did so. In many cities there just aren't enough good schools to go around. In the Baltimore school system, for example, says Kate Walsh, president of the National Council on Teacher Quality, "the vast majority aren't schools where anyone who has a choice would want to send their kid."

And no one knows what to do about the 2,000 U.S. schools that have failed to make AYP five years in a row. "Research shows that the path most often chosen is 'other,'" which often means minor tinkering, says Kati Haycock, director of the nonprofit Education Trust. But school districts say the more radical federal options aren't always feasible or affordable. Nor is it clear that turning a school over to the state or making it a charter will raise its performance. "None of these remedies have any basis in reality or research," says Diane Ravitch, research professor of education at New York University.

REVISING NCLB

THERE IS NO SHORTAGE OF IDEAS FOR IMPROVING No Child Left Behind. Senator Edward Kennedy, who chairs the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, and Congressman George Miller, Kennedy's counterpart in the House, are sorting through a mind-numbing number of proposals to address AYP's shortcomings,



Upward bound Sariah Conover, Grade 3, peers from a window during gym class; a bulletin board of student art reads *THANK YOU FOR OUR FUTURE!*

lackluster state standards, curriculum narrowing and remedies for failing schools as well as issues concerning the law's requirement for a "qualified teacher" in every classroom and other concerns.

Miller and Kennedy hope to pass a new and improved version of the law by year's end. If that doesn't happen, the current law—with all its flaws—will remain in force, probably until a new Administration tackles the matter.

No one has all the answers to America's

Grading the Program.

Overall, we'd give a C to No Child Left Behind

Informing the public on school failure

A

Spotlighting schools that fail to educate all their children, including minorities, poor and disabled kids, is NCLB's greatest achievement

Raising student achievement

Incomplete

Though some districts are reporting significant gains, results on national math and reading tests are mostly flat—so far

Measuring school improvement

C-

The law's reliance on a single, pass-fail system for assessing "adequate yearly progress" is one of its weakest points

Raising standards for teachers

B

NCLB is the first federal statute to require that teachers actually know the subjects they teach, though there are still some loopholes

Helping schools improve

F

Even the Department of Education concedes that its remedies for chronic school failure are not working

challenges in education, but in revising the law, Congress would do well to focus on the things the Federal Government can handle successfully and steer clear of long-distance micromanagement. A few suggestions:

More daylight Maintain the reporting requirements of NCLB but encourage states to provide a fuller picture of school quality than the bare bones of AYP. Congress should offer incentives—carrots, not sticks—for school districts to provide more information to their communities, including high school graduation rates, measures of student growth, participation in gifted and talented programs and achievement in the arts.

One nation, one test Create strong incentives for the states to move away from 50 different standards and 50 different tests and instead converge on NAEP or some other gold standard—perhaps Massachusetts' high-quality exams—as the national assessment. This would stop the states from watering down their standards—one of the most damaging side effect of NCLB and one the nation can't afford in a globally competitive economy. The estimated \$600 million a year now spent on state testing programs could be used to improve instruction.

Local solutions Back off from the business of slapping failure labels on schools and imposing remedies. Leave school turnaround to the people who are closer to the students, but fund research into what works.

Better teachers for bad schools Improve federal-funding formulas so that schools in poor neighborhoods have the resources to address their weaknesses and, most especially, could afford to hire experienced teachers. This is the best way to address the achievement gap between rich and poor.

MOST IMPORTANT, FEDERAL POLICYMAKERS need to listen hard to the people who are working in the nation's schools every day. It's the only way to ensure that policies that sound great in Washington aren't leaving educational reality behind.