

SAMPLE OP/ED: NCLB LEAVES SCHOOL DISTRICTS BEHIND

Californians appreciate the diversity the state offers. It's part of the uniqueness that draws people here to experience beaches and mountains, snow and desert. California's students — all 6 million of them — are just as diverse. Some attend one-school districts, while others have thousands of schoolmates in huge urban districts. Some travel for hours to and from school each day on winding mountain roads or big-city trains and buses. Others stroll a few minutes through their neighborhoods to the school down the block.

Sadly, federal policy-makers in Washington, D.C. have conjured up a far-reaching school "reform" package called The No Child Left Behind Act based on the assumption that all American schools and students are exactly the same. The result?

Federal legislation that's in serious need of repair.

Ensuring that every student obtains a quality education is the highest priority of every California school. The spirit of NCLB supports these efforts but the practical implementation simply doesn't.

A prime example is NCLB's requirement that every student in California, including students who don't speak English, score at the proficient level on state assessments in English. By definition, English learners do not yet have sufficient mastery of the English language to be proficient on the California Standards Tests in English, regardless of their ability to master the content in their own primary language. As each English Learner masters the English language they are no longer classified as English learners. However, the subgroup of English learners continues to be repopulated with students, who have just arrived at California schools, who have not yet learned English. The proficiency requirements of this particular subgroup, therefore, can never be met.

Further, NCLB has resulted in grave unintended consequences for schools and their ability to provide a comprehensive curriculum for all students. Because NCLB requires staggering levels of improvement in only English/Language Arts and Math, many schools have been forced

to focus on those subjects almost exclusively in order to avoid the onerous sanctions required under NCLB. For those of us who believe that arts, science, physical education and history are critical components of a comprehensive curriculum, NCLB's narrow focus has had devastating consequences.

How can we expect a single piece of federal legislation affecting more than 42 million students nationwide to effectively address the unique circumstances and needs of every California student? NCLB must be amended to give local educators — those who best understand their students' needs — the discretion to make decisions on behalf of those students. Hold us accountable — just as California's own accountability system has since years before Congress got into the act. But don't tie our hands and then hold us accountable for decisions made 3,000 miles away from the reality of the situation.

California's 9,000 public schools are responsible for approximately 675,000 special education students and 1.6 million students who don't speak English. NCLB claims not to leave any of these staggeringly diverse students behind, yet applies the same single standard of measurement to all of them — a standardized test.

At the expense of students, NCLB continues to undermine, rather than support, California's more realistic, more rigorous and more manageable accountability and achievement efforts. Schools must now deal with two competing accountability systems and conflicting rules and priorities have thoroughly frustrated and confused schools up and down the state.

NCLB has rightly renewed the vigorous debate over how schools can continue to close the academic achievement gap — but it's leaving many schools behind in the process. Legislation that reduces education reform to the lowest common denominator makes a good sound-byte, but not sound policy. California's children deserve better.