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***‘No Child Left Behind’ From a Parent’s
Perspective***

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Educational Studies Senior Research Project

Trinity College

President George Bush said, “The quality of our public schools directly affects us all – as parents, as students, and as citizens. Yet, too many children in America are segregated by low expectations, illiteracy, and self-doubt. In a constantly changing world that is demanding increasingly complex skills from its workforce children are literally being left behind (Bush, 2001).”

Introduction

President George Bush has made as one of his main objectives during his term to fix the education crisis within the United States. This crisis being that many children are not receiving equal educational opportunities, predominantly children of low-income and attending inner city schools, and therefor are being denied essential skills and knowledge for their futures. This unfortunate reality has left many parents and the general public dissatisfied with the public schools in the United States. (Henig, 1994) In January of 2002 President Bush signed into law his ‘No Child Left Behind’ education reform plan. This new law went into effect for the 2002-2003 school year and is currently effecting approximately 8,600 schools in the nation. The schools have been identified as “failing” or “low achieving” by the federal government do not have well performing students based on state test scores or do not have well qualified teachers on staff or, beneficial assistance for struggling students. These schools may also possess a poor physical environments for children to learn in or, may have a high levels of violence as well. (President Bush, 2001)

‘No Child Left Behind’ is over 1,000 pages long and effects many areas of public education which will be discussed more in depth later in this paper. However, a major component of this plan is to grant more power to parents in regards to their child’s

education. Terry Nagel in an analysis about the new law states that, “The ‘No Child Left Behind’ law was designed to empower parents (Nagel, 2002).” From this it seems that the President along with those in his office recognize that the education situation is not only a concern of theirs but also of those who have children directly affected by the school systems in the country. This being said when it comes to education reform it is important for it to be a combined effort, or at least one that incorporates a plan that appeals to the needs and desires of those that it would effect most. The President did incorporate options for parents within the law, but when looking at the plan as a whole the important question to ask is whether or not it is meeting the satisfaction of the parents who have children in the failing public school systems?

Past Plans

Education for many years has been a concern for various administrations and for those in the general public as well. Jeffrey R. Henig in **Rethinking School Choice** writes that, “Dissatisfaction with the performance of United States educational systems has regularly been registered in public opinion polls (Henig, 1994:30).” Henig in his book also discusses past presidential goals for education reform, the most recent which will be focused on including President George Bush Sr. and President Bill Clinton.

President George Bush had campaigned to be the “Education President.” Although he did not necessarily live up to his title according to Henig, he did propose and enforce education related policies. President Bush Sr. proposed, “Federal Grants for State and Local ‘GI Bills’ for Children (Henig 1994, 92).” This enabled four-year grants to be given to states to provide scholarships to low and middle income families. The money provided to these families would allow them to send their child to a public or

private schools of their choice while also have money left over for summer or after-school education programs. Example of these programs became more visible in the early 1990's when there was a concern over segregation that still existed in the schools. Magnet initiatives and the concept of students crossing boundaries of their affiliated school districts became more of a federal focus rather than one that was previously funded more by private institutes. (Henig, 1994) "Wisconsin in 1990 began a program to allow low-income Milwaukee residents to attend private schools with tuition assistance from the government (Henig, 1994:110)." President Clinton also supported school choice for education reform but disagreed on extending choice to non-public schools.

Although there has been a differences in opinion during past presidential administrations concerning what the best type of education reform, there is an agreement that there is need for some type of change. "While Bill Clinton took issue with some of Bush's specific education proposals, he did not challenge the notion that dramatic changes were required (Henig, 1994:3)."

The Plan

Voucher plans were favored by President Bush Sr. as well as President Clinton and is now included as an option in the 'No Child Left Behind' education reform plan as well. A major difference in this plan proposed and now signed by President George Bush Jr. is found right within the title. This being that no child is to be left behind, and that any student within a federally defined "failing" public school has the option of seeking a better education. Any student that is attending these schools despite their family's economic status is given a choice option. While the focus is on low-income the plan can

virtually effect anyone even if a failing school happens to be located within a thriving suburban environment.

As stated earlier the plan in legally documented form is over 1,000 pages in length, however there are many summaries of the law that have been made available, mainly on the web for the general public. Major components of the law include annual testing, annual demonstrated progress by individual schools, teacher requirements, scientifically based curriculums, and school choice. Other background components of this plan include responsibilities of the federal and state government as well as the individual schools. First, each one of these major components will be looked at separately and it is important to notice the grace periods of time that are allowed for each component to be enacted.

Testing plays a large part in how schools have come to be defined as failing. There are already state enforced testing and state standards that schools must meet. Federal requirements are now being added to these state requirements. By the year 2005 schools must test annually children between the grades of third and eighth in the areas of math and reading. “These tests must be aligned with state academic standards (Education Week, 2002).” Starting in the year of 2007 students within the same grades will also be tested in the area of science. (Great Schools, 2002)

Testing also plays a large role in how well a school is demonstrating “adequate yearly progress (Great Schools, 2002).” This component of the plan does not only focus on the student body comprising these schools as a whole but looks at progress of distinct groups including minority students, students coming from low-income families, and students who consider English their second language.

Teachers are essential to the upward progress of schools. This plan requires that all teachers have a bachelor's degree, which is unfortunately not the case right now. Elementary and middle school teachers are required to pass a test in "core curriculum areas." High school teachers are required to have majored in a specific subject area or to pass a test, once again, on a specific subject area. Current teachers must meet these requirements by the year of 2005 and currently all new teachers being hired must fulfill and possess these requirements. (Great Schools, 2002) It is also important to understand that these are qualifications required for only teachers hired through the public schools and with federal money. (Education Week, 2002)

President Bush's reading first initiative has been covered in the news, maybe more so than his entire 'No Child Left Behind' plan has. Scientifically based reading programs, provided through federal funding, are to be implemented in grades K-3. If federal money is not used wisely or correctly to implement plans such as these, or to assist in meetings all the requirements mentioned above, students are then given a choice option. This option allows students are enrolled in "failing" schools that don't demonstrate adequate yearly progress to attend another school of their choice. Schools that demonstrate progress or that are not on the "failing" list are rewarded by the federal government, which is just the opposite for schools that do not. Schools that do not improve despite federal funding and assistance lose their funding. (Great Schools, 2002)

For purposes of this paper Hartford Connecticut is the primary focus. The implementation of the plan in Hartford will be discussed fully but for now it will be used as an example to explain the time restrictions on the schools in terms of improvement. In Connecticut although the plan has been signed into law they are being given a grace

period in regards to granting students choice to attend other schools. The reason for this is because the schools that were placed on the “failing” list for this year are based on results from tests three years ago. However, next year in Connecticut, schools that still make the list will be placed on a clock and will begin facing consequences. Schools that remain on the “failing” list after three years are required to provide “supplemental education services (Great Schools, 2002)” to students attending the school. After four years districts take responsibility of these schools and may replace staff or the curriculum. Five years of a failing status result in state or private management of the schools. (Great Schools, 2002)

Initially federal funding is provided to help the schools improve. Grants are given to the states and states distribute them accordingly to needy schools. Low-income areas are to be the primary target. It is encouraged that this funding focuses on improving the quality of teachers hired, and for after-schools activities. It is also used to reward schools and teachers by providing salary bonuses etc. Responsibility is placed on the schools first and foremost, the states, and then the federal government. However, the federal government can pull out of any “failing” situation if there is no noticeable improvement leaving the responsibility on the states without the assistance of additional funding.

The Plan as it Effects Schools in Hartford Connecticut

In the state of Connecticut twenty-eight schools have been defined as “failing” by the federal government based on the CMT scores of three years ago. Within the city of Hartford eleven schools comprise this list of twenty-eight. <See list of schools attached> Originally the state was going to have to allow students to transfer out, if they so chose to of schools this fall, however based on the out-dated scores they were granted a one year

grace period. “Had the twenty-eight schools remained on the federal list this fall, they would have to allow students the choice of transferring to better-performing schools in the same district, as space permitted (Frahm, 2002).” Some feel that this one-year will decrease the number of schools on the list while others believe additions will be made. (Frahm, 2002)

CMT scores documented from this year will soon answer the question as to what schools in Hartford and in Connecticut will be placed on the time period for improvement as stated in the ‘No Child Left Behind’ education reform plan. The principal of the Sanchez school in Hartford is not concerned about being on the tentative list for this year or for the list for next year because she believes that they’re, “doing everything in their power to improve (Frahm, 2002).” Although this principal is optimistic the plan is real and some schools may feel that they are doing everything in their power now, they may be faced with fulfilling more duties to their students and parents and risk the possibility of losing their current population making up the student body.

Significance

Education reform like other policies that effect the United States come from the federal or state government. These proposed policies that many become laws eventually area created by officials that are in theory supposed to represent the people. Although in writing the United States has a representative government, it is also a capitalistic society. When looking at politics from a sociological perspective such as that of theorist Karl Marx, the United States political system is not what it seems at first glance.

According to Marx, in his super and sub-structure theory, “people’s connections to the economy shaped their lives (Orum, 2001:14).” The capitalists have political power

through connections and it is there ideas that shape society. They have control over everything from politics to educational institutions. (Orum, 2001) “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas (Orum, 2001:14) The ruling class are comprised of or controlled by capitalists not by those of the lower class or those that may have children in the struggling inner-city school systems.

After having personal experience to sit through PTO meetings and work with low-income elders battling the government for assistance on their expensive prescription drugs Marx theory became more and more a topic of consideration. Becoming more aware of the battles that the general public goes through in regards to funding or policies that would ease their way of life or that of their children and not always seeing positive results, it makes America’s representative government questionable. Do those in office really represent the general public or is Marx’s perspective of their dominant ideas becoming those of the general public a reality? In regards to the education reform plan are parents having their requests met for improving the education situation within the United States or are those of wealth and in power passing their ideas and opinions into law? Who’s ideas are being reflected through the ‘No Child Left Behind’ education reform plan.

Unfortunately from past experiences mentioned above, and from studied theorists such as Marx who concentrated on political sociology it is more often the wealthy few that are in power rather than the general public, those most affected by the decisions that originate at the top.

Methodology

While in the beginning stages of this project it became apparent that information regarding the ‘No Child Left Behind’ education reform plan needed to be provided to the

intended population of parents in order to gather their opinions concerning the plan. Approximately twenty to twenty-five parents were targeted for purposes of this research. Opinions were gathered from parents in a variety of ways including that of reading a provided packet and completing a survey, conversations, and by attending PTO meetings held in one of the Hartford “failing schools.” The reason for multiple means of gathering data was a result of difficulty getting into a particular “failing” school. Due to the fact that opinions were being gathered from parents didn’t seem at first that there would be difficulty getting access to them through one of the schools, however the schools proved to be extremely protective of their parents. It also could be drawn from the difficulty that was faced that upon learning about my research they were hesitant to grant access.

Through working with community organizers for the city of Hartford ten parents were provided with packets. These parents were generally knowledgeable about the plan. All parents dealt with for purposes of this research were generally active in their child’s education and/or in the community based on participation in PTO’s and consistent contact with community organizers. The packets provided consisted of a summary of the education reform plan provided by Education Week on the web. Since Connecticut was the targeted state, Hartford Courant articles listing the failing schools in Connecticut and what the plan means for the state was provided. Lastly a survey asking questions concerning their knowledge about the plan, how they felt in general and about specific aspects of the plan and, and open space welcoming any additional comments that they may have had. <See attached copy of survey>

Casual conversations were held with parents filling out the survey and those attending one or both of the PTO meetings that were attended. The PTO meetings were

observed and relevant issues not necessarily about the plan itself, but of aspects raised in the plan were discussed during the meetings. Accurate conclusions could be drawn in regards to how helpful administration was to looking out for the needs of their parents and informing them of pressing issues.

While multiple methods were used for this research as a result of uncontrollable circumstances it proved to add to the depth of the data collected. Through all methods confidentiality has been maintained. Parents that filled out the survey and that participated in informal conversation were made aware of the topic of research and provided consent to be anonymously included. The school at which PTO meetings were attended will remain un-named for purposes of confidentiality as well.

Findings

Data was documented by issues that were most often raised through the survey and conversations. Data collected did and did not resemble what was initially thought in regards to the education reform plan, this being that parents generally are not satisfied. Some parents had issues with particular aspects of the plan while others had issues with completely different aspects. Areas of the plan receiving the most criticism were that of school choice as well as annual testing. Although as stated previously parents contacted and that participated in the survey and casual conversations were generally active and somewhat knowledgeable about that plan, however many aspects of the plan were not fully understood. The school that was observed is populated with about seven hundred students and is one of eleven “failing” schools in Hartford. Their “failing” status is based on CMT (Connecticut State Mastery Test) scores from three years ago, and the school

was not very informative to their parents about the plan and, various conclusions were drawn as to why this might be the case.

Although a summary statement of parents generally not being fully satisfied in distinct offerings and requirements of the plan, not all responses were negative. There was a reaction by one individual that tended to stand out from the rest. This person stated that although they were aware that their school was not performing at necessarily high levels the “failing” title attributed tended to hurt a bit. Although disappointment was expressed over school performance and some but very little knowledge of the plan was known the overarching goal gathered by this person after reading through the packet left a more positive feeling. They enjoyed the responsibility now being placed on the school to improve, and the higher qualifications that teachers now must meet. “I like the goal the plan is trying to achieve, I like that the schools must take responsibility for their actions. I support the positive.” This individual along with about five other parents had a more positive outlook for the future of their schools that the majority of the parents included in the research did not have. Overall, all parents, although not all fully understanding the chain of responsibility of the federal government all the way down to the schools, enjoyed the idea of so many being accountable for the education situation.

The survey provided to the parents did not question parents on all aspects of the plan. It was targeted toward more the hierarchy of responsibility and the option of choice. The survey itself may be at fault for some of the responses of parents who did not choose to go more in depth about other aspects of the plan in the open-ended question provided. However, the majority of parents, those generally not satisfied did take the opportunity to fill in this space and that’s when concerns over the annual testing came up

multiple times. Other less frequent concerns came over an issue that the plan is looking to fix now. The lack of teacher requirements were not necessarily unknown but rather were questioned on how long it has taken to address this issue. One individual extended on their answer concerning teacher requirements and said that, “All teachers should have always been qualified and knowledgeable.”

The opportunity of school choice and annual testing as stated earlier welcomed the most responses. Some again being positive but others were generally not satisfied with the increased testing. This was not a topic that parents were questioned on, however the fact that it raised so much response was not surprising. Parents were generally upset that there was an increase in testing and the amount of class time that would need to be spent on preparing for testing. One particular parent mentioned the frustration that their child has had with the current CMT's and wishes that there could be another way to assess the children. The testing now will not only be assessing individual progress but the progress of the school as a whole, and this parent was concerned with the added responsibility that this may place on the student.

In regards to school choice individual parents that were surveyed and parents attending the PTO's generally were not happy with this aspect of the plan. At one particular meeting the re-drawing of neighborhood lines within the city of Hartford was discussed. One parent stated in question for, “So you're saying even if my child lives right across the street from the school they won't be able to attend that school, which is in our neighborhood anymore?” This reaction was caused by a discussion concerning their child's school, where a line was being drawn right across the street from the school their child was currently attending. Through a conversation with this parent later it was found

out that they were not the family that lived right across the street but were being affected by the re-drawing of lines. If the proposed re-districting was accepted their child would be forced to attend a school outside of the one that they were familiar with and had been educated in thus far. The choice option of the 'No Child Left Behind' plan was mentioned to this parent, who also knew very little about the plan, felt that it would be wrong for them as a parent to change the pull their child out of a school that they are most familiar with. They also stated that their child would probably not like them much if they were to do that.

Other parents were invited into this conversation and mixed responses concerning school choice resembled those gathered from the ten surveys that were filled out. Some parents did hold the same concern of pulling their child out of a familiar environment however the option of choice many felt was beneficial. One parent in regards to what the parent above mentioned stated that her child also would probably not be happy being placed in another school however that it is important for them to receive a good education. If their school was not providing that then they would have to remove their child. Many of the parents attending the PTO meeting were being optimistic that with the added accountability of the schools that they would improve their status. The particular school focused on for purposes of this study were already receiving grants from the government that they were planning on using to add more workshops and after school activities for the parents to stay involved according to the new parent resource rep for the school.

With added responsibility and increased federal funding parents are generally hopeful that "failing" schools will improve within Hartford. Many parents however, have

little knowledge about the plan however, most were not completely ignorant that a new education reform plan did exist. There is optimism by parents at the middle school where PTO meetings were observed, however if the situation does not change parents would reluctantly explore their choices. Parents in general at this particular school were not satisfied with the administration. They felt they were not informing them of issues directly affecting them. This fit in with other responses of critics of the plan asking the question of will children really not be left behind? Parents are not being accurately informed of their choices which leaves not only their children but them behind as well from a plan that is supposed to emphasize parental options and choice for their child. Lack of information and lack of full understanding is most likely what leads to the lack of satisfaction with different aspects of the plan and mixed feelings from parents who will be affected by the plan.

Additional Current Findings

In the very beginning of this paper it was mentioned that the ‘No Child Left Behind’ education reform plan was signed into law at the beginning of the year, 2002. The plan is very new and not much research has been done on the way in which parents feel about their options specifically in regards to this plan. In regards to vouchers in general Henig writes,

“Even under the best circumstances, the neighborhood public school will not adequately serve the needs of every neighborhood child. This can be due to the particular characteristics of the child, the particular limitations of the school, or a simple lack of fit between one and the others. Making it more feasible for the families of such children to choose a different school setting with guidance and support from public officials, can serve legitimate interests of the individual while providing a useful social safety valve (Henig, 1994:206-7).”

Split opinions over school choice offered through the plan come down to the individual.

There may be a student attending a failing school that is performing well on state and

soon to be federal tests, however they may sit next to a student in a classroom that is just the opposite. Satisfaction with the plan and choices that are offered come down to individual families and students combined with lack of information also most likely plays a role in responses about the plan. Also as stated earlier the plan is different from past plans where vouchers are given to individual students who might have to apply for a voucher. This plan guarantees a choice to all students in identified “failing” schools not matter family income, with funding provided by the districts, state, and federal government.

In Education Week there was an article concerning some research done by ACORN (Association of Community Organization for Reform Now) concerning some of the faults of enforcement of the ‘No Child Left Behind’ education reform plan. Catherine Gewertz titles this piece, ACORN Fault Implementation of New ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act). The ‘No Child Left Behind’ plan is legally documented by this name. ACORN conducted a survey of in 23 states and 50 school districts questioning the notification of parents specifically about qualifications of teachers and tutoring services provided by the schools. This study focused on and re-emphasized the fact that, “The president said no child will be left behind, but many are being left behind... The law gave hope to low- and moderate-income parents, but they don’t see anything happening, and they are wondering if this is just another thing the government is saying, and isn’t going to follow through on (Gewertz, 2002).”

The study also looked beyond notification to the parents and looked at how states are struggling with the new provisions and responsibilities granted to them by the federal government. States are asking for more guidance by the federal government as well as

denying that they must implement these tutoring programs because they have not been of “failing” status long enough. “Several states reported that no schools were obligated to offer such services because none had been struggling academically long enough (Gewertz, 2002).” Some of ACORN’S findings are in conjunction with findings for the overall satisfaction or lack there of with the new plan. Lack of notification is raising concerns not only about the plan itself but also because of lack of visibility of programs that were promised to be offered. This plan also goes further to look at the confusion not only held by the parents but of confusion held by the states in implementing what is required of them by the federal government.

Although the perspectives of parents have been concentrated on for purposes of this paper there are outside critics who also hold similar concerns to that of the participating parents in Hartford, Connecticut. The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation developed a pamphlet of various papers that “identify the questions left unresolved by Congress and the many hurdles facing the U.S. Education Department and states, districts, and schools as they try to make this ambitious law a reality (The Fordham Foundation, 2002).” Major issues addressed in these papers included the creation of new tests created for all the states by only four major testing companies. The question is whether these monopolizing businesses can meet the demand of the federal government. Some of the papers also questioned how seriously the states will take the federal government in regards to cutting off funding for education, and there is concern over the understandings of what is expected by the state governments. Other concerns addressed in this paper were over the limited time for schools to show improvement before facing

consequences and testing as a form of assessing progress. (The Fordham Foundation, 2002)

As parents have split views on aspects of the plan that they are satisfied with, all responses were not totally negative and those researching the plan also have differing feelings. While many researchers such as the Fordham Foundation have a concern over the amount of federal funding that is being promised, the idea that the federal government is offering all the funding is looked at positively. Education reform will be an expensive process but one that will help particularly low-income families seek other education options without having to apply for any specific grant. (USA Today, 2002) In regards to testing rather than having a concern as to how all this testing will become a reality, some are pleased that it will help identify problem areas and aid in helping students as a whole master specific skills. (USA Today, 2002)

Conclusion

There is no safe way to identify or encompass how satisfied parents are or are not with the 'No Child Left Behind' education reform plan. However, of all the participating parents, there was not one who did not have a complaint with the current education system or with at least one specific aspect of the plan. The concerns of the parents, for some, come from very little knowledge about the plan. However, with limited knowledge some of their concerns match those of scholars researching the plan such as the Fordham Foundation.

The plan is new and research needs to be ongoing. What can be drawn from this research is that parents are not being accurately informed about the plan or the options. Not all parents read the newspapers so therefore it is the responsibility of the state and the

schools to make parents more aware of their options. They need to be made aware that they are empowered through choice by this plan. Within the city of Hartford, there are many parents who do not speak English as their first language, and many families that are bordering the poverty line. The legal document in regards to their rights is hard to comprehend for the public in general. It is not fair to place all the responsibility on them but rather on the states, schools, and districts to make it easily understandable for all.

Suggestion to be made to ensure that parents become more knowledgeable about the plan, and ways to improve their satisfaction is to hold open discussions with them. After attending a few PTO meetings it became a reality that parents are spoken to rather than given the opportunity to speak. The government while developing the plan needed to gather the ideas and opinions of those directly affected. Now that the plan has been signed into law, parents need to be made aware of their options, which are provided by federal funding to ensure that their interests and the interests of their children are served. “Perhaps the most direct way to find out how the public feels about schools is to ask (Henig, 1994:30).” Parental choice has not been signed into law and now there is a need for it to be enforced.

Tentative List of Failing Schools in Hartford

Batchelder

SAND

West Middle

Betances

Burr

Hooker

Kinsella

M.D. Fox

Milner

Moylan/McDonough

Sanchez

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