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As of this hour, America's schools will be on a new path of reform, and a new path of results. (President George W. Bush, signing of NCLB, January 2002)

The NCLB Act of 2001 was the federal government's attempt to improve the academic achievement for students, specifically in literacy. This study examined No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the attempts to increase literacy achievement. The specific questions examined were: 1. What were the educational, policy, and political issues that *NCLB* set out to address? 2. What were the successes of *NCLB*, associated law, and policies in addressing literacy achievement? 3. What were the challenges associated with *NCLB*, associated law, and policies in addressing literacy aims? 4. What are the recommendations for policy creation aimed at supporting literacy proficiency? The study employed a policy analysis approach using Bardach's 8-step method to investigate the research questions.

The findings from this study yielded inconsistent literacy performance over time with continual gaps for students with disabilities and students from low-income families. The inconsistency of results leaves questions to linger about the federal strong-arm approach at the expense of the arts, science, and civics education. Future policy development recommendations include the development of a more extensive research base for initiatives aimed at improving results and more robust measures of evidence that align with knowledge of effective teaching and learning pedagogy.

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND AND LITERACY: PROGRESS AND PITFALLS

by

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

This dissertation is dedicated to  
my family  
whose continual support and encouragement never wavered.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by Marcy N. Roan, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

As of this hour, America's schools will be on a new path of reform, and a new path of results. (President George W. Bush, signing of NCLB, January 2002)

This is a defining issue about the future of our nation and about the future of democracy, the future of liberty, and the future of the United States in leading the free world. No piece of legislation will have a greater impact or influence on that. (Senator Edward Kennedy, signing of NCLB, January 2002)

In January 2002, Rudalevige (2003) reported that the scene was a civics text come to life. Flanked by jubilant members of Congress and standing in front of a cheering crowd, President George W. Bush declared the start of a "new era" in American public education with the signing of the No Child Left Behind Act (p. 63).

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of many policies is to influence actions and outcomes. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was one such policy aimed at influencing the materials used to instruct students and the means in which students, schools, and districts were held accountable for the results of that instruction. The examination of policy is important to inform future policy creation, specifically as it relates to literacy, and was the goal of this study.

NCLB was an extensive piece of legislation aimed at improving many areas of education and as such was too large a scope for the purpose of this study. The focus of

this examination of NCLB was through the lens of literacy and those aspects of the policy aimed at improving literacy, predominately for students in marginalized groups such as students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged students, and students of color.

In order to determine appropriate recommendations for future policy creation, it was important to understand the context, both historical and political that framed the mindset and drove decisions around the development of the policy. This chapter provides such context. The chapter begins with an overview of NCLB legislation. A context for literacy to support and frame the analysis and subsequent recommendations follows the legislative background. The chapter concludes with a description of the problem, associated research questions and methodology used to examine NCLB.

### **Political and Historical Context**

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 “was a sweeping reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)” of 1965, which was one aspect of the War on Poverty enacted under then-President Lyndon Johnson (Rudalevige, 2003, p. 63). The focus of NCLB (2001) was ensuring equitable education for all students with a special focus on students who came from low socioeconomic backgrounds, were from minority ethnic and racial backgrounds, had disabilities, and whose parents were English as Second Language (ESL) learners. When the reauthorization of ESEA came up in 1999, conservatives supported the idea of flexibility for states, combined with goals for performance. However, they also desired a block grant approach that was much broader and would provide a greater amount of discretion in federal education fund spending (Rudalevige, 2003).

NCLB was adopted as a policy framework intended to hold schools accountable for their performance. As a reauthorization of the ESEA, NCLB represented substantial changes for the federal government's mandate in K-12 education. Before 2001, the federal government largely relied on the equal protection clause of the Constitution to enhance learning and literacy for disadvantaged students and protected groups. The entire process was implemented in close collaboration with ESEA Title 1 grants to schools that served minority and from low-income households.

Under NCLB, all state schools were required by the federal government to test their students annually in Grade 3 through Grade 8. Also, the federal government under NCLB required all states to test learners once in high school in reading and mathematics and also to set yearly achievement goals to assure 100% of all the students would be on track to attain academic and literacy proficiency by 2013-2014. The goal towards the 100% proficiency was intended to be measured through the adequate yearly progress (AYP) initiative, and schools unable to achieve this goal were subject to consequences. The AYP requirements not only applied to the average of all students in every school but also to special subgroups defined by disability, racial, second language, ethnicity, and economic characteristics. Each state was to set its individual proficiency standards and design its own tests. Under NCLB, core subject teachers were also required to be highly qualified with a minimum of an undergraduate degree and specialized subject knowledge (NCLB, 2002).

NCLB was bipartisan and was largely approved by the Congress as a representation of three social and political concerns. The first concern was calls for

systematic reforms by O'Day and Smith (1993), which included a standards-based education reform movement for American learners that required higher and more ambitious education standards that would make them equally competitive in an increasingly knowledge-based and globalized society. The second concern was attributed to the purported inefficiencies in the American education system that made American students less competitive compared to their peers across the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (Dee & Jacob, 2010, 2011; Griffith & Scharmann, 2008). Third, there were growing concerns from civil rights groups about huge learning gaps and educational disparities across student groups defined by income, race, or ethnicity with minority groups being more disadvantaged in literacy performance (Heinrich, Meyer, & Whitten, 2010; Jennings & Rentner, 2006; Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey, & Stecher, 2000; Krieg, 2008).

Although NCLB was repealed in 2015, many of today's secondary school students have spent most of their academic careers being influenced by its provisions. As a result, NCLB is still influential to the literacy of many students. The focus of NCLB on research-based instruction for literacy is still part of the practice of many districts in selecting curricula for literacy instruction. Services for students who struggle to obtain basic literacy skills can still be found in the scheduling of courses and placement of students in classrooms and assignments to teachers. The objective of this research is to examine NCLB policy and to scrutinize its implications, track achievement gaps, and postulate appropriate recommendations to overcome pitfalls that resulted from NCLB implementation.

### **Literacy Context**

Murnane, Sawhill, and Snow (2012) reported that the literacy challenges facing today's educational system begin with problems in defining literacy. They stated that "a new definition of literacy is required—one that highlights the skills that children need" (p. 6) to keep up with the demands of the contemporary and pluralistic society. This is because reading assessments utilized so widely are such that they

typically treat it as a relatively shallow process—one that involves being able to remember (or quickly find) information read, to summarize a paragraph, to identify the main idea of a paragraph and perhaps to make simple inferences from information in the text. (Murnane et al., 2012, p. 7)

It is this shallow process that researchers believe fails to prepare students for the cognitive demands of a literate society as literacy is considered a foundational skill upon which other thinking and skills reside. Researchers further assert that "knowledge creates the framework on which reading comprehension builds" (Murnane et al., 2012, p. 7). Regardless of the identified importance of literacy, Murnane and colleagues (2012) also note, "Observations suggest that primary grade instruction devotes remarkably little time to science, civics, current events, or social studies, perhaps because of the accountability pressures to ensure that all students leave third grade reading at the third-grade level" (p. 9).

"Developing reading skills in primary schools has focused on skills necessary for proficiency on reading assessments and has failed to give adequate attention to the development of the student's vocabulary, comprehension, and conceptual knowledge" (Murnane et al., 2012, p. 11). An additional reason for the slowdown in literacy skill



development following third grade is reported by Reardon, Valentino, and Shores (2012) to be less effective curricula and literacy instruction in the middle school years.

### **Research as a Basis for Literacy Policy**

Since the latter part of the 20th century, research has become a cornerstone in the development of reading policy in the United States. In his Special Message to Congress in early 1970, then-president Richard Nixon called for “a re-examination of our entire approach to learning” (Nixon, 1970, para. 3). As part of this re-examination, the Nixon administration created the Right to Read program which convened experts who disseminated information about good reading instruction (Long & Selden, 2011).

In 1978, Congress passed the Reading Excellence Act to promote the instruction of reading using research-based practices. However, the Reading Excellence Act provided no direction in the legislation that told school systems what or how to teach. The onus was on school systems to prove the methods they were using were in fact research-based. Under these conditions, schools and teachers largely determined what was taught in classrooms in the area of literacy. In turn, they also determined how students who struggled with reading and literacy would be supported or provided intervention. Nonetheless, this set-up does not suggest an ongoing practice of teaching in isolation or a lack of district/school mandates and directives pertaining to teacher practices in literacy. To the contrary, in the decades between 1970 and 1990, federal education policy and the federal government’s active role in education expanded with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* and the implementation of ESEA Title I (McDonnell, 2005).

Dating back to 1976, the Office of Education Policy convened panels to make various recommendations in the areas of reading and reading instruction. Several research projects were pulled together in a central hub as a result of these panels, including the Center for the Study of Reading located at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (Long & Selden, 2011). This focus on reading instruction and the parallel direction with federal policies aimed at improving literacy performance in schools formed a platform from which NCLB was created.

As a result of the Education Summit that convened in 1989, the George Herbert Walker Bush Administration established National Education Goals, two of which addressed literacy (National Education Goals Report, 1991):

1. All students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including English.
2. Every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. (pp. xiv–xv)

Another outcome from the efforts to give reading research prominence in literacy instruction was the standards movement from 1990 to 2000. In a summary report of the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Act, the author(s) noted that the program recommended that instructional reform efforts employ, in part, “innovative strategies and proven methods for student learning, teaching, and school management that are based on reliable research and effective practices and have a comprehensive design for effective school functioning, including instruction” (United States Department of Education, 2000, p. 7).

Current policies in the United States rely heavily on research and standards to guide states and school systems to increased performance. Attempts at influencing literacy achievement through the use of standards and scientifically based reading instruction begin to link the achievement of students in literacy with the instruction that happens in classrooms. NCLB began to solidify this link and based many of its criteria for states on a research review of beginning reading, *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction* (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). This report that became foundational for the NCLB requirement of scientifically based research was conducted by a Congressionally mandated panel of experts, referred to as the National Reading Panel. Since the passage of NCLB, many expressed opposition to the claims made in the report and the recommendations provided (Camilli, Vargas, & Yurecko, 2003; Cunningham, 2001; Garan, 2002, 2005).

### **Disconnect between Policy and Practice**

Research around the disconnect between policy and practice is also important context for this study. In his article, “Reading Policies: Ideologies and Strategies for Political Engagement,” Edmondson (2004) provided a possible reason for a disconnect between policy and practice as she stated, “policies reflect negotiations and shared values and ideologies that can cross political groups” (p. 424). As such, policy makers should pay particular attention to the “dominant views” they legitimize as they strive to, “define truth . . . and validate their own ideologies” (p. 419).

Other researchers, spanning the decades, have focused on the apparent disconnect between policy creation and classroom implementation. As far back as 1975, Anderson observed that “policy is made as it is being administered” (as cited in Young & Lewis, 2015, p. 79). Coburn (2001) echoed this perspective, claiming, “messages about reading are thus ‘carried’ by policy at all levels of the system and through reform programs” (p. 146). Finally, Young and Lewis (2015) recognized “there are a small sample of implementation studies in education” (p. 3). This is problematic and perpetuates the continued disconnect between the making of educational policy and the implementation of policy.

### **Shaping Reading Instruction and Policy**

The reading policies of two states, Michigan and California, helped shape reading instruction and policy (McGill-Franzen, 2000). In 1985, the Michigan Reading Association and State Board of Education approved the following definition of reading, “Reading is the process of constructing meaning through dynamic interaction among the reader, the text, and the context of the reading situation” (as cited in McGill-Franzen, 2000, p. 4). This definition prompted the revision of the state assessment program in Michigan and, subsequently, how reading was taught there. California was also working on systematic state education policy (Carlos & Kirst, 1997) and adopted the English Language Arts Framework in 1987, a policy that supported the meaning-making function of literacy and a literature-based focus on instruction. Assessments were developed or redesigned to support the policy requirements, and professional development was provided for teachers. However, when the NAEP results for 1992 and 1994 were

released, they showed that California children ranked lowest in the nation in reading achievement. Consequently, the policy took the blame.

Lofty educational policy goals do not always yield matching productive implementation at the local levels. In his article, “Reading Lessons and Federal Policy Making: An Overview and Introduction to the Special Issue,” Richard Allington (2006) addressed the term “surveillance” (p. 9) as a major theme of Reading First. Allington (2006) noted that an unintended consequence of federal policies such as Reading First positions school systems in the role of compliance monitors rather than benevolent observers of quality reading instruction practices intended to effect positive change.

### **Standardizing the Instructional Process**

This idea that standardizing the instructional process using research-based instruction would lead to greater gains in literacy performance was not readily accepted by the research community as some addressed the negative influence of mandating instruction and achievement. Cuban (2009) asserted the negative influence of standardized instructional policies and testing practices relative to school-based implementation, writing, “[i]n schools under the threat of state or federal sanctions, principals and staffs [use] test scores to game the system; that is, they focus on particular groups of students in particular grades to lift scores for the next test cycle” (p. 21). Cuban (2009) also addressed the influence of policy on two teaching traditions, teacher-centered instruction versus student-centered instruction. Based on his research and experiences pertaining to policy development and implementation, Cuban (2009) suggested that teachers use less student-centered approaches as a result of the pressure placed upon them

relative to teacher accountability for their students' achievement levels on standardized tests.

Policy driven by research-based practice continued through August of 1996 when President Clinton announced the America Reads Challenge, the purpose of which was to

ensure that every child can read well and independently by the end of 3rd grade. And he called on all people in America—parents, teachers, libraries, religious institutions, universities, college students, the media, community and national groups, business leaders, senior citizens—to join the effort to meet this challenge. (Clinton, 1998, p. 6)

### **Continued Attempts to Direct Policy in Literacy**

On the heels of President Clinton's challenge, Congress passed the Reading Excellence Act (REA), a competitive grant designed to support K-3 reading instruction. The Reading Excellence Program was "designed to improve reading for children in high poverty schools and in schools needing improvement by supporting research-based reading instruction and tutoring" (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p. 20882).

Following is a list of purposes that underscore the passage of this legislation.

1. Teach every child to read by the end of third grade.
2. Provide children in early childhood with the readiness skills and support they need to learn to read once they enter school.
3. Expand the number of high-quality family literacy programs.
4. Provide early intervention to children who are at risk of being identified for special education inappropriately.

5. Base instruction, including tutoring, on scientifically based reading research (Federal Register, 2000).

This legislation symbolized a critical stance for policy and education as it was the first legislation to “explicitly identify and define reading and research through education policy” (Eisenhart & Towne, 2003, p. 31). In his article “Reading Wars,” David Pearson (2004) wrote, “reading instruction and reading research have been shaped by political forces desiring to privilege particular approaches to instruction or particular combinations of methodological . . . perspectives on research” (p. 216). In this article, Pearson (2004) decidedly placed reading policy development on the right side of the spectrum where scientific research practices predominate, while positioning reading research for classroom practice, which is often qualitative, on the left side of the research spectrum. According to Allington (1984), “the structure of compensatory reading programs has seldom been guided by research on effective instructional practice and more often influenced by policies designed to ease evaluation of compliance to program regulations” (p. 2).

The increasing role of the Federal Government in education created a context for literacy policy and instruction for decades. The 1958 launch of Sputnik by the Russians prior to an American space launch provided supporters of more federal responsibility in schools a predominate platform as they were able to use the event to sound the national alarm to debate the federal role in education. Moving into anti-poverty and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s increased the attention for the education of student of color and students in poverty. This context, coupled with limited literacy performance,

created policies and legislation designed to improve literacy achievement nationwide. As the national debate surrounding federal involvement surged, how literacy instruction was to occur in classrooms was also spurring debate. Researchers and thought leaders argued about the best literacy methods to raise achievement. The need to increase performance nationwide and a focus on researched based instruction created the context for continued attention on the federal role in education performance and the basis for the use of researched based practices in literacy instruction.

### **Problem Statement**

Students in the United States underachieve on large-scale literacy assessments (Baldi, Jin, Skemer, Green, & Herget, 2007; Goldman, 2012; Reardon et al., 2012). According to Reardon and colleagues (2012), among middle school students in the United States, only 33.3% demonstrate reading literacy proficiency. The researchers argue that literacy levels of close to 10% of students aged 17 years are similar to literacy levels of 9-year-old children. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a 34-country think tank for the development of economic and social policy, observed that the literacy level among U.S. students is lower than that of students from the OECD countries (Baldi et al., 2007). Reardon and colleagues (2012) also note that there is a wide literacy gap between students from different ethnicities, with African American and Hispanic students underachieving significantly in many areas. Research also shows that family income level influences the US literacy pattern, with students from the low-income families having literacy levels five years behind those from higher-income families (Lesaux, 2012; Reardon & Robinson, 2008). Disparities exist



from across the board, yet accountability for teaching students the literacy skills required for achieving success is a primary objective in public education.

Given contrasting views regarding the effectiveness of NCLB and its subsequent effects on schools throughout the country, there is a need to carry out further analysis to detail insights regarding the role the legislation has had for enhancing literacy. Critical examination of NCLB legislation is based on understanding related policies and how they impact literacy. The policies that guide the implementation process include teacher quality, accountability, assessment, school choice, and the supplemental service policies (Crawford, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2000; McMurrer, 2007; Shaul, 2006; Zhang & Cowen, 2009). This policy analysis was directed at the policy elements related to the improvement of literacy achievement. As such, the analysis focuses on the NCLB provisions for assessment, accountability, academic achievement, and teacher quality. The deliberate decision was made to exclude school choice and supplemental education services as these are retroactive to the implementation of legislation, more specifically, school choice and supplemental services are actions taken by schools and districts as a result of low achievement. While this decision does not negate the potential influence of these provisions on overall literacy achievement, the scope of this study focuses on initial policy implementation and creation.

### **Research Questions**

The passage of NCLB assumed that improvement of proficiency rates in literacy would result from holding schools and local and state education agencies accountable for the learning of all students. This study examines the challenges and successes of the

legislation in efforts to inform the field for future policy creation designed to increase literacy proficiency for students. The research questions addressed in this study include:

1. What were the educational, policy, and political issues that NCLB set out to address?
2. What were the successes of NCLB, associated law, and policies in addressing literacy achievement?
3. What were the challenges associated with NCLB, associated law, and policies in addressing literacy aims?
4. What are the recommendations for policy creation aimed at supporting literacy proficiency?

Researchers have raised various questions relating to how each of the policies helps in addressing the literacy problem in the U.S. Concerns relating to the rigidity of the policy, as well as its failure to consider specific challenges faced by different schools, in the process have been raised (Collier & Thomas, 1989; Brown, 2004; Crawford, 2004). Questions have also been raised about the effect of the expectations imposed by the accountability policy on the achievement of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Fitzgerald, 1995; Crawford, 2004; Abedi & Gándara, 2006).

Given contrasting views regarding the effectiveness of NCLB legislation and its subsequent effects on schools throughout the country and continual gaps in the performance in literacy for students in all sub and socioeconomic groups, there is a need to carry out further analysis to develop new insights regarding the role the legislation has had for enhancing literacy. By studying federal legislation aimed at improving literacy in

addition to state specific legislation, I am able to provide considerations for policy creation with considerations of the potential influence policy creation has on literacy achievement. By using a Bardach's 8-Step process for policy analysis, the study is able to show specific aspects of the policy supporting ease of interpretation and usefulness in the creation of future policies.

### **Methodology**

The research in this study was conducted using policy analysis. A policy analysis provides a structured approach for examining policy from a variety of lenses. Policy analysis provides stakeholders and policy creators with a means to evaluate policy for future policy implications and creation. The methodology of this research involved examining NCLB and Literacy First Policy for North Carolina in light of Bardach's 8-Step policy analysis method taking into consideration the formulated research aim and research questions. The adoption of this methodological approach enabled the study to use existing policy documents and official statistics to critique the policy and assess the possible alternatives, with the aim of developing appropriate recommendations to address the identified policy issues. Recommendations rest upon the skeletal framework remaining from NCLB, specifically as it related to improving literacy.

### **Bardach's 8-Step Approach**

The study presents an in-depth discussion policy analysis and its approach to the proposed study's research questions. The discussion includes a theoretically-based introduction to policy analysis, a description of the methods, how data will be acquired, and the analysis process. The framework used was adapted from Bardach's (2012) 8-Step

Analysis and provided a step-by-step approach for NCLB analysis. This approach provides valuable information to scholars and practitioners with less time, experience, or resources to undertake education policy analysis research in North Carolina. The 8 steps proposed by Bardach (2012) include:

1. defining the research context;
2. stating the problem being researched;
3. searching for relevant evidence on the research context and identified problem;
4. considering different potential policy options;
5. projecting and predicting the potential outcomes of the alternative policies compared to existing ones;
6. applying an evaluative criterion;
7. weighing potential outcomes; and
8. making the final decision based on previous steps.

According to Bardach (2012), “policy analysis is more art than science” (p. 17). This belief is rooted in Bardach’s claim of the variability in subject matter, which often concern the “lives and well-being of large numbers of [their] fellow citizens” (p. 17) and often includes the involvement of additional professions and parties. It is with the perspective that Bardach’s 8-Step Analysis is suited to a study of NCLB and the state specific example of North Carolina and potential influences on the literacy achievement of millions of the Nations school-age children. According to Bardach (2012), there are three conditions which determine if the problem identified requires further research including:

1. There is a potential discrepancy between NCLB and the planned or ideal condition. That is, there is a discrepancy between NCLB expectations among policymakers that enacting the legislation would boost the overall student achievement and reduce gaps between the advantaged student subgroups and their more disadvantaged counterparts;
2. The reason for the differences between existing policy guidelines and the anticipated outcomes should be unclear, and
3. There should be more than a single solution to the identified problem.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection for information regarding No Child Left Behind and North Carolina literacy policies were found through Internet search engines, university libraries, and archived document sites for both federal and state governments. North Carolina also houses documents, relevant presentations, and training materials on LiveBinder and Wiki pages for public school personnel and, in some cases, public access. Additional documents were found on sites such as The U.S. Department of Education: Archives, The General Assembly of North Carolina (<http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/>), and the State of North Carolina (<http://www.nc.gov/>).

In *A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis*, Bardach refers to his 8-Step policy analysis method as the “Eightfold Path” (p. 1). He explains the path as a way to simplify the policy analysis process. Bardach states, “analyzing public policy is a complex activity. It is easy to get lost, waste a lot of time, be demoralized” (p. xvi). It is the hope that efficiency drives the outcome of the analysis and not the semantics of getting policy

analysis “right” (Bardach, 2012). What follows is a summary of each step used in process.

### **Steps 1 and 2: Define the Context and State the Problem**

The first two steps in Bardach’s analysis are to define context and state the problem. This initial step appears obvious or that it would be already known prior to embarking on a policy analysis. Bardach contends that there is more to it than simply wanting to find something out. This initial step “gives you (1) a reason for doing all the work necessary to complete the project and (2) a sense of direction for your evidence-gathering activity” (p. 1). Defining the problem is a multifaceted approach. Three key elements of defining the problem that are useful in this study include: (a) examining deficits and excesses, (b) looking for conditions that cause problems, and (c) not overlooking opportunity, as “missing opportunity is a problem” (p. 5).

While much of Bardach’s explanation of examining deficits and excesses focus on the process as examining policy through market failure, this has specific connections through the lens of education. Educators frequently examine practices and data with this deficits and excesses mindset. Awareness of marginalized populations and disadvantaged groups are often considerations necessary for effectively educating all children. This apparent alignment is another factor in the suitability of the 8-step method to this educational policy analysis.

### **Step 3: Assemble Evidence**

Bardach’s analysis is well-suited to this policy as it relies on the logically minded. The data collected refers to facts that not only consist of statistics but also “information

that can be converted into evidence that has some bearing on the [problem]” (p. 8).

Bardach defines evidence as “information that affects the existing beliefs of people

(including the [researcher] about significant features of the problem you are studying” (p.

8). According to Bardach, the evidence is needed for three principal purposes:

to assess the nature and extent of the problem(s) you are trying to define, to assess the particular features of the policy situation you are studying, and to assess policies that have been thought, by at least some people, to have worked effectively [before]. (p. 9)

#### **Step 4: Construct Alternatives or Consider Options**

The idea of alternatives is broadly defined as ‘options’ or interventions (Bardach, 2012). The important factors for designing alternatives is in the explanation provided for the alternatives presented. This is the broadness provided by the selected methodology as alternatives can mean a recommendation for policy overhaul or could result in a shift in how the policy is implemented. The identification of the alternatives was completed through first identifying the various alternatives that may exist for the support of literacy achievement nationally and in North Carolina. The alternatives considered include the interventions to solve the problems associated with NCLB or alternative environment where the existing interventions would work best. The identification of alternatives was carried out using an evolutionary model, which as described by Bardach, (2012), is a description of change through a long span of time. The longitudinal concept description is found in Chapters I and II while Chapter V uses this context to frame the policy alternatives.

### **Step 5: Project Potential Outcomes**

Bardach presents outcome projections as another way of saying “be realistic” (p. 28). He further explains that making policy imposes a ‘moral burden’ as we would “rather believe that our policy would actually accomplish what [we] hope” (p. 28). This integration of logic using the evidence generated is the core of this step outlined by Bardach. Possible questions that support a researcher’s conclusions for this step include, “how reasonable is it to believe that condition X will produce [outcome Y]?” (p. 32).

### **Steps 6 and 7: Confront the Trade-offs and Weigh Potential Outcomes**

The trade-off of Step 6 is a part of the path conditional upon the outcomes in Step 5. Bardach (2012) identifies this as a potential trade-off of policy analysis for analysts that consider trade-offs as being across “alternatives rather than across projected outcomes” (p. 39). The caution suggests a heavier weight on the determination of outcomes in the previous step. The weighing of potential outcomes in Step 7 appears as a check and balance of the process thus far. The *twenty-dollar bill* test rejects the assumption of maintaining the status quo. The test refers to an old joke that makes fun of economists. As Bardach explains, “two friends are walking down the street when one stops to pick something up. What about that—a twenty-dollar bill, says one. Couldn’t be [says an economist friend], if it were somebody would have picked it up already” (p. 41). The analogy is simple, if the conclusions you draw are so great, why is it not already happening?



**Step 8: Tell the Story**

The eighth and final step of Bardach's policy analysis is to share the story of your analysis. This provides the researcher with the opportunity to redefine and reconceptualize what you have pulled out from your analysis. One of the final recommendations Bardach provides for the analysis using his Eightfold Path is to not necessarily follow the eight steps when providing the narrative analysis. Bardach recommends a more narrative approach to the analysis that shares a story of policy and recommendations. Chapter IV provides description of the political context and the subsequent recommendations.

**Positionality and Bias**

Supporting literacy development in students has been a thread that has run through my professional career over the course of twenty years. Personal struggles with learning to read became my professional focus as a classroom teacher of elementary students who faced similar hurdles. This focus continued through my career as I searched to learn more about how we learn to read and best practices for teaching reading. I continued my professional development through additional certification and degrees in reading. After leaving the classroom, I began coaching school systems, schools, and classrooms in the areas of reading and writing.

As a current school administrator, I am faced with developing literacy for over five hundred students in my building. Deeply intertwined with literacy performance in schools and districts are the policies that often influence what happens in schools and classrooms around literacy. Since policies are often generated by a variety of agents that

have multi-faceted agendas, the pure purpose of using policy to increase and support student achievement in literacy can get lost in the shuffle prompting results first and fiscal accountability. I have served on several fronts of the policy initiative, as a teacher, a coach of teachers, and as a school leader. I have experienced the frustration of knowing what is in the best interest of the students in my room does not always align with the interpretation and implementation that comes with policies aimed at improving student performance in literacy. I have also been on the delivery end of the initiative conversation as an administrator sending the directives from outside policies and initiatives to the classroom while maintaining teacher autonomy in the classroom.

My current position as an educator with years of experience teaching literacy and as an administrator evaluating literacy instruction and monitoring literacy achievement connect me to this research in my professional capacity. The use of a standard protocol for the policy analysis will assist in maintaining objectivity in the analysis.

### **Summary and Forecast**

An examination of literacy achievement and the political landscape that brought about sweeping reform such as NCLB indicates a vision to increase the literacy achievement of students by ensuring that all students had access to research-based curriculum and schools were held accountable for raising the achievement of all students. Significant funding was provided for this effort with the assumption that an issue with low literacy achievement was a result of limited resources and finding to meet the needs of all students. Chapter II presents a review of literature relevant to federal involvement in policy creation, the focus of this examination. Chapter III presents a review of the

results of NCLB and state specific results under NCLB for North Carolina. The final chapter outlines the results of my use of Bardach's 8 steps to analyze No Child Left Behind and North Carolina policy. The results of the analysis are presented with a discussion of conclusions drawn, recommendations for future policy creation, and additional research that could add to the field of policies designed to increase outcomes for students.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **HISTORICAL CONNECTION OF SCHOOL REFORM AND LITERACY EDUCATION**

The development of policy intended to drive actions, outcomes, and practices in education has deep roots. Federal involvement in education has increased over the last several decades where it once remained aloof, allowing states and local governments to direct educational procedures and practices. While my examination of education policy was not intended to be comprehensive, the increased evolution and involvement of government in education provides necessary context for this study as education policy have implicitly portrayed American values, ideas, and faith. “Beliefs in progress or regress always convey a political message. Opinions about advance or decline in education reflect general confidence in American institutions” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 14).

This chapter includes the historical context and narrative progression that began as federal responsibility in public education and a desire for evidence of money well spent to the concerns of Civil Rights groups about the inequity of education across subgroups in our public schools. Newly elected presidents eager to make history in public education made multiple attempts to pass policy aimed at moving achievement in schools. The increased standardization and federal involvement led to the development of what constitutionally could not be called national standards but when tied to federal funding to schools certainly gave all appearances of governmental control.

## **Federal Intervention in Literacy Policy**

### **Federal Responsibility**

Prior to 1965, federal involvement in education was largely (and purposefully) absent. The launch of Sputnik by the Russians prior to an American space launch provided supporters of more federal responsibility in schools a prominent platform, as they were able to use the event to sound national alarm to debate the federal role in education. In 1965, the passage of Title I and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) changed the landscape significantly as “. . . the persistent and even growth of big government during a supposedly conservative era . . . conservatives came to embrace conceptions of federal responsibility that would have been considered daring had they been proposed by liberals in 1965 . . .” (Davies, 2007, p. 1). The idea of any federal responsibility of schools was highly controversial. President Johnson warned the American people in his political campaign against Republican Barry Goldwater of the impending problems facing growing national problems and increased school enrollment “. . . unless we act now our education system will crack under the pressure” (Davies, 2007, p. 29). While President Johnson signed ESEA, which included a call for national testing, it was not until President Nixon, a firm believer in an accountability system that measured broad goals of education such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) at that time, that tying funding to achievement was considered:

Previous administrations had not required direct evidence of a link between federal aid and student achievement. . . . NAEP in its original form had no punitive power over low-performing schools. For this reason, NAEP was not used

directly to evaluate the ‘effectiveness’ of any particular federal program. (Nelson & Weinbaum, 2006, p. 25)

The bulk of money through ESEA was earmarked for the Title I program. Title I was a program designed to aid those children experiencing poverty. The monies, while tied to student experiencing poverty, would be allocated to the public school system based on the level of poverty within the district to fund compensatory education services for students. The underlying assumption of designating funds to the educational services, such as supplemental reading instruction, was that a lack of resources was the reason low-income students were underperforming. There was no consideration in the funding that a limited teacher capacity or professional development in the area of reading instruction could be a factor in the lower performance of these students. This lack of consideration lent a view of education that low performance was a direct result of a lack of adequate resources in low-income schools. The inherent flaw in such accountability mandates according to Levin (1974) is the “. . . underlying hope that performance reporting systems will lead to favorable changes” (p. 365). Levin’s statement 44 years ago still rings true for education policy today. The attachment of funding to performance-based policies and systems suggests that the problem is one of resources and one that money can alleviate.

### **Focus on Vulnerable Populations**

In 1975, Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which entitled children with disabilities to a free and appropriate public education. This was significant for reading as the law designated new categories of children with reading

problems (McGill-Franzen, 2000). Where compensatory education was provided to help children catch up, struggling readers who also received special education services were assumed to have a disability that hampered their ability to learn to read.

The continual focus of the ESEA through subsequent revisions has increased the federal role in public education. Amidst growing concern about the crisis in public schools by President Reagan's administration, the abolishment of the U.S. Department of Education was on the table (Vinovskis, 1999). Then Education Secretary Bell established a National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE), which produced the landmark influential report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform* in 1983. This report set the educational context for future policies and actions as it "painted a very dismal picture of American schooling" (p. 9). The 1980s revised investments in measures of student outcomes. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which did not previously report results at a state level, was now poised to deliver data at this level. Secretary Bell instituted what was referred to as "the wall chart . . . allowed for the ranking of states by their educational attainments" (p. 13).

### **Push for Policy**

Following *A Nation at Risk*, newly elected President Bush in 1988 decided to try his hand at advocating and passing federal education policy. The Education Excellence Act of 1989 was developed with the purpose of rewarding public and private schools that made substantial progress towards raising student achievement, particularly in reading, writing, and mathematics; creating safe and drug-free school environments; and reducing the dropout rate (Stedman & Riddle, 1989). The substance of this legislation seemed to

forward the desired agenda for federal involvement for the purpose of driving achievement results. Despite several failed attempts by President Bush, the Education Excellence Act of 1989 never became law.

President Bush convened a panel of U.S. Governors to attend the Charlottesville Education Summit to “discuss education reform and the idea of national education standards” (Calzini & Showalter, 2009, p. 4). These preliminary discussions opened the door for what later became National standards. In response to the Charlottesville Summit, both President Bush and President Clinton attempted to pass education reform through America 2000 (U.S. Department of Education, 1991) and renamed Goals 2000 (Calzini & Showalter, 2009, p. 5). Both of these reforms were based on the National Education Goals that stemmed from the Charlottesville Summit:

1. readiness;
2. school completion;
3. achievement and citizenship;
4. mathematics and science;
5. literacy and lifelong learning;
6. safe, disciplined, and drug-free schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1991).

Neither reform effort passed.

### **Continual Efforts**

President Clinton was not deterred by the failure to pass Goals 2000. The president dusted off the legislation and sent it back to Congress in 1994 as part of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary School Act, also known as the



Improving America's Schools Act (IASA), with an even larger budget than Goals 2000 (Debray, 2006, as cited in Calzini & Showalter, 2009). With this large success under his belt, politicians responded with even more money for educational reform with the Academic Achievement for All Act, also known as the Straight A's and the Public Education Reinvestment, Reinvention, and Responsibility Act of 1999, otherwise known as the Three R's. The Three R's proposed something significantly different than its predecessors, the withholding of funds from underachieving schools (Calzini & Showalter, 2009). This withholding is a significant shift in education politics and moves districts to meet standards in a variety of ways in effort to maintain funding.

A significant difference in the previous movement with America 2000 and Goals 2000 was in the focus on achieving versus a focus on a failure to attain. America 2000 and Goals 2000 each had the goal of rewarding schools that made progress towards academic achievement where The Three R's moved to withhold funding from those who chronically underperformed. This shift of political strong holding leads to the investigation of the proposed study. While the variance in policy implementation is not solely based on the monetary "carrot," the risk of losing money based on student performance is an enormous motivation for how districts and schools implement policy.

President George W. Bush signed the landmark No Child Left Behind provision of ESEA in 2001. The "Bush administration spent the next six years battling states over its implementation" (Calzini & Showalter, 2009). The federal involvement in education was also viewed more as a means to support the "... civil rights of the educationally disadvantaged" than it was about federal control (Davies, 2007, p. 280). The focus on

civil rights for the educationally disadvantaged gave rise to the defining of educational practices in literacy and the use of scientifically based practices as a means of leveling the educational playing field for all students. This leveling however played out very differently in the implementation for states and schools nationwide. Critics of NCLB legislation felt that this and other “. . . test-based accountability has several unintended, negative consequences . . .” and “. . . cause educators to shift resources away from important but non-tested subjects . . .” (Dee & Jacob, 2011, pp. 418–419).

The continual attempts to pass reforms for the nation's schools shows the strong belief that changes needed to be made and that the federal government needed to take the lead or at least be heavily involved as money was provided as part of federal funding.

Accountability became the focus and compliance monitoring became the new federal role.

### **Influence of National Standards**

In 2009, then President Obama called for significant changes in American education. Then president Obama continued the focus on accountability and felt that national standards were a way to influence states to comply. In a speech delivered to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Obama made it clear that he would “cultivate a new culture of accountability in America’s schools” (Stout, 2009, para. 8). Obama also “flesh[ed] out how he would use federal money and programs to influence policy at the state and local level” (Stout, 2009, para. 2).

Evidence of this influence is found in the National Governor’s Association intention to develop common national academic standards. The direction intended

would become important to the development of national standards for federal compliance. The development of national standards would become the stronghold of states accountable through withholding of federal funding for those not willing to adopt a set of national standards. While the development or implementation of national standards is not addressed specifically in this study, the influence of federal involvement in this area and the later withholding of state funding for not adopting the national standards is important context for the increased federal involvement in policy that drives educational outcomes nationwide. The National Governor's Association intention to develop national standards was supported by the federal government. Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the 2009 Governors Education Symposium clearly indicate the "approval and the blessing of the government" (Calzini & Showalter, 2009, p. 9):

Creating common standards hasn't always been popular. Right now, though, there's a growing consensus that this is the right thing to do . . . Just last month, the U.S. Department of Education started asking for comments on policy issues through the Web site. Our first question was about raising standards . . . It is especially important that this has started at the state level because some people will raise concerns that common standards across states will lead to federal over-reaching . . . So, while this effort is being led at the state level, as it should be, it is absolutely a national challenge, which we must meet together or we will compromise our future. (Duncan, 2009, pp. 4–5)

While constitutionally through the Tenth Amendment the federal government cannot impose national standards on states without states granting such powers to the government, it is clear that there is considerable handwashing between national organizations and the federal government to create such standards while including the

threat of withholding funds from states that fail to adopt the standards. This political landscape continues to influence how districts and schools implement federal policies.

### **Connection of National Standards to Federal Funding**

The development of national standards, referred to as Common Core State Standards (CCSS), was a development initiative was driven by the National Governor's Association (NGA) and the Chief Council of State School Officers (CCSSO) in 2009 and after public comment and revision were released in June of 2010 (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The release of national standards endorsed by the federal government and tied to federal funding, has states clamoring to adopt the standards and figure out how to implement them in their systems to keep the purse of federal funding open.

“As of June 2014, 43 states, the Department of Defense Education Activity, Washington DC, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands and the U.S. Virgin Islands adopted the CCSS in ELA/literacy and math” and were in the process of “implementing the standards locally” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, n.d.). This implementation did not come easily for many localities. For example, the CCSS standards in English language arts emphasized argumentative writing in which students draw on nonfiction sources to generate persuasive essays. The consequent reduction of the role of expressive writing and fiction in schools is just one of the 12 shifts that the CCSS implementation involves in English language arts Common Core State Standards Initiative, n.d.). These shifts have caused many teachers to struggle to familiarize

themselves with the CCSS and design new vehicles for curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

### **States Comply to Keep the Federal Purse Open**

While the standards were not identified as a national curriculum, they became a key component in the desire to compete for Race to the Top (RttT) funding, causing many states to adopt them to maintain eligibility for significant funding opportunities. Race to the Top was a then President Obama initiative that, “offer[ed] bold incentives to states willing to spur systemic reform to improve teaching and learning in America’s schools” (Obama Whitehouse Archives).

### **Forcing Accountability Practices**

In addition to maintaining eligibility for federal funding opportunities, states were required to adopt accountability practices. The simultaneous focus on implementing new standards and accountability programs were challenging for many school systems and teachers (Murphy & Torff, 2014). While the use of competitive grant process that relied on incentives rather than sanctions was the core intention, RttT’s “creative and complex design limited capacity of federal and state education agencies to push reform down to the school level” (McGuinn, 2014, p. 63).

One interesting feature of RttT, as noted by McGuinn (2014), was to “move the U.S. Department of Education away from being a compliance monitoring organization to one focused on capacity building and innovation” (p. 65). This focus was significantly different from previous attempts that attached monies to outcomes. McGuinn (2014) also suggests a cooperative and coercive relationship created by RttT. The cooperative

relationship is established, as the federal government is reliant upon state agencies to implement federal policy. RttT is also coercive as it pushes states to change “politically unpopular” mandates with unions and education leaders (p. 75).

The political landscape that influenced elements of NCLB provides context for the provisions later found in the legislation and for what states and districts were ultimately held accountable to and for through the implementation of NCLB. The heavy hand of accountability, the use of national standards as a strong-arm and the requirement of 100% proficiency in literacy through the use of research-based strategies were clear directives to states as to what the federal government expected in return for its funding.

### **Context of the Passage of NCLB**

NCLB Act of 2001 became law in 2002. NCLB was in part a response to the National Commission on Excellence in Education that was chartered under the authority of 20 USC. 1233a to “review and synthesize the data . . . on the quality of learning and teaching in the nation’s schools . . . with special concern from the educational experience of teenage youth” (Jorgensen and Hoffmann, 2003). It is reported that NCLB was in some ways already being formulated as early as 1991 (Rudalevige, 2003). The 1999 reauthorization of NCLB resulted in satisfaction on the part of no one (Rudalevige, 2003). Table 1 shows the accountability legislation and the federal standards that resulted in NCLB (2001).

Table 1

## Accountability Legislation and Federal Standards (Rudalevige, 2003)

	Standards			Assessments			Sanctions		
	Standards Established	Deadline for Proficiency	Disaggregation of Performance	State Testing	High-Stakes National	Adequate Yearly Progress	School Improvement Plans	Restructuring of Schools	Public School Choice
<b>Reagan administration/ George H. W. Bush administration (1981-1992)</b>	Yes, voluntary standards	No	No	No	Proposed, NAEP as benchmark (not passed)	No	No	No	Proposed, tuition tax credits and Title I vouchers (not passed)
<b>103rd Congress (1993-1994)</b>	Yes, for Title I students	No	No	Yes, three test between grades 3 and 12	No	Yes, but vague	Yes	No	No
<b>106th Congress (1999-2000)</b>	Proposed for all students (only passed the House)	Proposed, ten years (only passed the House)	Proposed (only passed the House)	Yes, three tests	Proposed, voluntary (implementation banned)	Proposed (only passed the House)	Proposed (only passed the House)	Proposed (only passed the House)	Proposed not passed
<b>George W. Bush presidential campaign (2000)</b>	Yes	No	Partial	Yes, annual tests for grades 3-8	Yes, NAEP as benchmark	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>No Child Left Behind Act (2001)</b>	Yes, mandatory for all students	Yes, 12 years	Yes, by race/ethnicity, LEP, disability, and Title I students	Yes, annual tests for grades 3-8, one in 10-12	Partial, NAEP required but not linked to funding	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partial, plus supplemental services vouchers

### **Provisions of No Child Left Behind**

NCLB enabled the federal government to have increased influence on public schools (NCLB, 2002). The operationalization of NCLB was achieved through various policy frameworks. NCLB was an expansion of the ESEA, the central federal legislation passed in 1968 and designed to address K-12 education. This expansion included many provisions that addressed aspects including school choice, supplemental education services, and learning for English Language Learners. The legislation also outlined the following major provisions: teacher quality, accountability, achievement, assessment, school choice, and supplemental education services (Crawford, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2000; McMurrer, 2007; Shaul, 2006; Zhang & Cowen, 2009).

As presented in earlier sections of this text, the federal climate for education prior to NCLB was a sense of urgency for the nation that students needed to better equip to compete in a global marketplace. The fact that other nations were experiencing significant advancements in space exploration and the discrepancy of performance between African American students, students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged students, and white students was becoming more apparent and egregious. After stagnation and limited achievement results overall and across subgroups and several failed attempts at increasing the federal role in education, NCLB was conceived. This policy analysis focuses on assessment, accountability, academic achievement, and teacher quality. As stated previously, a deliberate decision was made to exclude school choice and supplemental education services as these are retroactive to the implementation of legislation meaning, school choice and supplemental services are actions taken by



schools and districts as a result of low achievement. While this decision does not negate the potential influence of these provisions on overall literacy achievement, the scope of this study focuses on initial policy implementation and creation. The following sections examine the existing information regarding each of the policy frameworks and implications for literacy.

### **Assessment**

NCLB gave powers to the federal government to compel States to carry out yearly assessments of the students with the aim of promoting proficiency in reading and math. Through annual assessment, the legislation allowed the federal government to identify the schools as sufficiently serving their student populations based on their yearly progress in reading and math performance (NCLB, 2002). The assessments targeted all students in grade 3 to 8. The schools were rated based on their performance and their specific achievements in various subgroups (NCLB, 2002). Based on the yearly performance progress, the schools were rewarded or sanctioned.

The sanctions imposed on consistently poor performing schools were severe, and they especially impacted schools from disadvantaged neighborhoods (Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002). The sanctions included but were not limited to reconstitution, replacement of staff, and restructuring of schools. Another hallmark of the legislation were the rewards, which were based on the performance of the schools in both English and math (NCLB, 2002). The law used the rewards and publicizing of school performance as a means of enhancing the schools' commitment and motivation toward achieving yearly progress in reading and math assessments. Unlike the National

Assessment of Educational Progress, the assessments identified under NCLB law were based on fewer subjects and were associated with the shift of resources by the school administrators towards the subjects and topics captured in the high-stakes tests (Dee & Jacob, 2011; Linn et al., 2002; Michelson, Giersch, Stearns, & Moller, 2013).

**Promoting results or playing the system.** The role of NCLB in promoting literacy was dependent upon the efforts of primary stakeholders such as teachers and school administrators. The need for accountability led to unintended responses from stakeholders, which can sometimes be counterproductive (Smith & Kovacs, 2011). Neal and Schanzenbach (2010) argued that to ensure the schools were able to meet the accountability targets, some teachers and administrations targeted and focused their attention on students whose literacy levels in the target areas were close to the existing proficiency standards. The researchers, therefore, suggest that NCLB increased the risk of those students who perform poorly or those who did not show any potential for achieving the set targets as ignored by teachers and instructional efforts. Neal and Schanzenbach (2010) showed that the increase in performance following the implementation of NCLB was predominantly observed among the students who fell in the middle-performance level bracket while those in the lowest performance bracket showed no literacy progress.

Reback (2008) supported the argument that the accountability requirement of NCLB pushed teachers to focus their attention more on those students who were on the margin of passing. Through the assessment of student performance data from Texas, Reback (2008) noted that the performance of students was associated with the importance of their test score to the school ratings. Figlio and Getzler (2006) revealed that teachers

and administrators went to the extent of reclassifying students with a history of low performance as having disabilities in order to benefit from adjusted proficiency standards. Other school administrators resorted to disciplinary actions such long suspension periods for the low-performing students to ensure that they were not given a chance to participate in the exams (Figlio, 2006). These actions were not only morally wrong but violated the very institution of equal opportunity learning and prevented students with behavioral problems from succeeding in school.

In many cases, the outcome of NCLB policy resulted in state academic threshold reductions and ultimately the policy objectives of NCLB being ineffective (Heise, 2017). With the statutory obligation of states to make progress toward 100% student proficiency by 2013 as measured through AYP, this mandate is reported by Heise (2017) to have been described as “unrealistic under any circumstances” (p. 1869). The result of this policy is likened to “a balloon mortgage, preparing to explode” (Heise, 2017, p. 1869) and obviously, a situation where, in the absence of some type of statutory relief, the states would lose their federal funding eligibility. By 2007, due to the difficulties of the states in meeting the benchmarks that they had set, it became “abundantly clear to most observers that NCLB’s reauthorization would involve more than mere tinkering and, instead require a substantial statutory overhaul” (Heise, 2017, p. 1870).

**Outcomes equal funding.** Holding schools accountable was a large focus of NCLB. Congress developed the legislation to ensure the spending of federal dollars were leading to increased proficiency based on student assessment results. Eric Hanushek and Margaret Raymond (2005) write that the accountability policies are “premised on an

assumption that a focus on student outcomes will lead to behavioral changes by students, teachers, and schools to align with the performance goals of the system” and that “explicit incentives. . . will lead to innovation, efficiency, and fixes to any observed performance problems” (pp. 368–369, as cited in Dee & Jacob, 2010, p. 152). Schools that failed to show Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) were heavily sanctioned under No Child Left Behind. Not only were state, district, and school results publicly announced and publicized, schools that failed to reach the status were designated as “in need of improvement.” Schools in need of improvement were required to spend at least 10% of federal funds for professional development of staff—the implication being that the reason the school failed to achieve adequate yearly progress was due, in part to a lack of competency of the teaching staff. Should schools move into three and four consecutive years of failing to achieve adequate yearly progress, not only were they required to divert funding to professional development efforts, schools and districts must provide the students who did not meet the standards supplementary services. NCLB reserved the most severe of sanctions for the fourth year where schools and districts were to take corrective action and replace existing staff, redesign curriculum, and/or replace school leadership. The accountability component of NCLB was required the establishment of academic standards for students in public schools. Schools were held accountable based on the proficiency level of student’s achievement. The accountability systems in NCLB were developed by the states as mandated by the amended Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 2005). However, national assessment standards and national assessments, such as the National Assessment of

Educational Progress (NAEP), were used to test the skills and knowledge offered across the different states (Crawford, 2004). For the nationally recognized assessments to be applied at the state level, they needed to be aligned with the academic standards as defined by the state, be equivalent or superior to the state assessment approach, and be valid and reliable. The accountability policy provided detailed guidelines on alternative assessment for the students who had notable cognitive challenges (Briggs, 2005). The alternative assessment for cognitive disability was based on the need to adhere to laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1990) and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Briggs, 2005).

**State perspective.** North Carolina is a useful state-level example for this study as it had provisions and accountability policies in place prior to NCLB and may serve as a means of before and after comparison on the impact to literacy performance. The North Carolina State Board of Education's (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2012) reading/literacy policy has been connected to the criteria of the NCLB federal policy to hold schools accountable. This began with the mission and basis "that every public-school student will graduate from high school, globally competitive for work and postsecondary education and prepared for life in the 21st Century" (Public Schools of North Carolina, p. 4). The analysis of NCLB and North Carolina will first require discussion of the general theoretical intentions of accountability of teachers and school administrators and how this has historically linked to reading/literacy statistics for North Carolina public schools.

## **Achievement**

NCLB required that every state test each student on a yearly basis in grades 3 through 8 in addition to testing students in high school one time in reading and math (Ladd, 2017). These tests were used as the basis for setting goals for annual achievement to ensure that all students would be headed in the right direction for 100% proficiency to be achieved by the school year 2013-2014 (Ladd, 2017). Additionally, it was required that schools “make adequate yearly progress (AYP)” (Ladd, 2017, p. 1) toward the goal of proficiency, and where they did not make this goal, they would suffer consequences that included the denial or withholding of federal funding and the public identification as a low performing school. Schools in low performing status faced even harsher consequences should they remain in that status for long. Schools remaining in low performing for a second year were required to develop school improvement plans and the local education agency had to support the school in need either with financial resources, professional development, or other resources. Schools that fell into three or more years of low performing status were required to offer supplemental education services to families at no cost and they were to offer parents their choice of schools. The most drastic measure involved the restructuring of the school itself which included replacing the school leader, school staff, or reopening the school as a charter school. In addition to making adequately yearly progress and making sure schools avoided the sanctions of low performance, states were to create their own annual assessments, design a system of accountability for schools and districts, and use their tests set proficiency standards (Ladd, 2017).

The skewed curriculum that stemmed from NCLB as a result of focusing on only those tested subjects of literacy and math had further implications for the teaching of reading and, ultimately achievement. Schools and classrooms were focusing on lower level foundational reading skills that were assessed on the tests as the assessments provided limited opportunity to engage in higher order thinking or comprehending of text. Critics of NCLB and its direction for literacy to be scientifically based assert the teacher influence and diagnostic ability with reading and reading difficulties to be more impactful than simply the research-based approach. One of the predominant critics, Richard Allington, in his 2005 article *Ideology is Still Trumping Science*, asserts,

Our current “scientific” method focuses almost exclusively on identifying what works best generally. That is, our research designs compare how treatment and control groups do “on average.” But no study has ever identified an educational treatment that has worked effectively for all participants. (p. 463)

Allington’s premise brings together the art and science of teaching, particularly as it relates to literacy. As literacy is, at its core, a meaning-making approach the scientific basis that became the structure for literacy in NCLB failed to recognize the art that requires teachers to identify, diagnose, and treat specific reading issues. This is a highly personal and individual approach to instruction that collective research on effective reading instruction did not address. The idea that collective research identifies what works for the average learner is somewhat contradictory to the dual purpose of the legislation, which was to close achievement gaps for populations of students for which the traditional educational approach has not been successful. This brings us to another critical provision in NCLB, teacher quality. The ability to effectively impact student

achievement in literacy, teachers must be skilled not just in instruction but also in how to recognize and correct when instruction is not working for students.

### **Teacher Quality**

The aspect of the policy aimed at defining teacher quality required schools to ensure that all public school children, irrespective of their social and/or economic identities, had access to highly qualified teachers (Eppley, 2009; Mollenkopf, 2009). Teachers who taught “core academic subjects” were required to “be highly qualified, defined as having a Bachelor’s degree and subject-specific knowledge” (Ladd, 2017, p. 1). Schools that did not meet the qualified teacher requirement would be held accountable by being placed into a disciplinary period in which finances and academics were scrutinized until they fulfilled the highly qualified requirements. The teacher quality policy described the requirements that teachers needed to obtain in order to be deemed highly qualified (Eppley, 2009). The policy required teachers to hold a bachelor’s degree and show good command of knowledge in the area of interest. Teachers were also held to obtaining a teaching license and state certification (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006).

**Certification.** The certification of teachers differs across the states; however, certification generally requires teachers to have gone through a rigorous preparation program that is recognized by the state. Currently and depending on the state, certified teachers are expected to have completed a preparation program with between 18 and 40 educational credits and additional student teaching time of between 8 and 18 weeks (Darling-Hammond, 2000). The elements of teacher quality outlined in NCLB were derived from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and its various forms



of reauthorizations, which were all characterized by the need to achieve economic prosperity (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Hayes (2008) suggests that accomplishing this mandate is not without challenges, particularly for small rural schools and poor urban communities.

**Annual reporting.** Under NCLB, states were required to submit annual reports on various aspects of teacher quality. The states were expected to provide annual documentation of teacher certification, licensing, and various preparation programs available for teachers (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006). Each state was also expected to indicate the annual pass rates for the teachers who successfully completed teacher preparation programs. The annual report was required to document the demographics of qualified teachers and areas of specialization (Mollenkopf, 2009).

The importance of the policy in ensuring improved student learning was supported by various educational research findings. A Darling-Hammond (2000) study that was based on a case study assessment of the effect of teacher quality on student achievement noted that measures of teacher quality such as certification are highly correlated with the student performance level. Darling-Hammond's (2000) findings are important in the determination of the role of NCLB in literacy since researchers focused on the performance in reading and mathematics assessment as a means of evaluating the success of the policy. Carey (2009) noted that apart from parents and family income levels, teacher characteristics are predominant predictors of student performance and literacy.

Various researchers have questioned the importance of teacher certification in ensuring improved student performance and literacy level. Darling-Hammond and Youngs (2002) highlighted the lack of adequate evidence that supports the association between the knowledge of teachers regarding the pedagogy and student achievement. Walsh (2001) also casts doubt on the importance of certification in ensuring improved student performance and literacy. McMurrer (2007) adds to the voices that criticize the importance of teacher quality provision as a predictor of student performance.

**Adherence.** To ensure the adherence to the policy across all schools, the federal government provided incentives and grants to attract highly qualified teachers to schools that serve children from underprivileged families (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006; Mollenkopf, 2009). The aim of the grants and incentives was to ensure that the gap that existed between schools narrowed and students offered equal opportunities to attain literacy proficiency (McDonnell, 2005). The federal government promoted access to quality teachers by students with disabilities through providing funds and incentives aimed at the preparation and improvement of the effectiveness of teachers who served students with disabilities (Marx & Harris, 2006).

The conflicting views regarding the importance of highly qualified teacher policy called for further analysis of NCLB to determine its effectiveness in promoting student performance and literacy. Darling-Hammond (2000) argued for the need for further research on how the requirements for teacher quality policy varied across different settings.

## Summary

NCLB was a sweeping reform effort aimed at influencing the way in which schools, districts, and states prepared curriculum to address literacy skills, developed assessments for measuring those skills, and addressed the literacy needs of the most vulnerable students through supplemental instruction and effective teachers. The legislation held states and schools accountable for attaining 100% proficiency for all students and imposed heavy sanctions for not meeting the goal. Many believe the legislation also resulted in the instructional programs for reading and math being narrowed (Ladd, 2017). This is because of a strong reliance on tests that are multiple-choice since that are least costly and take less time for grading than do questions that are open-ended and that provide a better evaluation of skills and conceptual understanding of students (Ladd, 2017). Test-based accountability also creates problems since teachers are incentivized to “teach to the test rather than to the broader domains that the test questions are designed to represent” (Ladd, 2017, p. 1). Another problem with NCLB was that the teachers were encouraged to narrow the student groups for instruction since teachers are given the incentive to provide additional focus on students who are close to the cutoff point of proficiency resulting in “reductions in the achievement of students in the tails of the ability distribution” (Ladd, 2017, p. 1).

According to Dee and Jacob (2010),

Any effects of NCLB on test scores are small at best. The positive effect of NCLB on average math scores that emerges from this study occurs too soon relative to what might have been reasonably predicted, and for that reason may be overstated . . . Further, whether there are positive effects on eighth grade math is not clear, and no effects on reading emerge at either grade level . . . On a brighter note,

there may be some positive effects for black students in fourth-grade (although not in eighth-grade) math and for Hispanic students in math at both grade levels. (p. 204)

As evident in the existing literature, researchers differ over the impact NCLB had on US literacy levels. Critics cite the widening literacy gap as one of the unintended consequences of the legislation (Berliner & Nichols, 2007; Linn et al., 2002). Implementation of NCLB, when coupled with variations in state and district levels of flexibility and management, suggest other potential contrasting views regarding NCLB effectiveness. As cited in Woodside-Jiron (2003, p. 530), federal policy and legislation directed at reading have “become not only more frequent but also more directive, naming what must be done as opposed to what may be done” (Paterson, 1998, 2000). The variances in these impacts suggest a gap in the literature. As some researchers assert by the widening gap of literacy achievement, there are lessons to be learned by critically examining the policy reported to have been created expressly for the purpose of decreasing achievement gaps and supporting continual development in literacy. North Carolina as an example of state impacted by NCLB, with its pre-existing accountability structure in place and years of developing policy to address achievement gaps and literacy, supports this need for critical policy analysis, continual research, and alignment of policies that better address literacy achievement issues.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **SUCSESSES AND CHALLENGES**

NCLB was representative of a shift in the role of the federal government in kindergarten through 12th-grade education. While NCLB still reserved the educational rights of states under the US Constitution, the legislation presented flexibility and choice through funding, significantly impacting the decisions states made with regard to education in order to maintain government funding (Ladd, 2017). Before 2001, the US government had been primarily reliant on the Constitution's equal protection clause for promoting the opportunity for education to students who were disadvantaged (Ladd, 2017). This was accomplished partially with grants under Title 1 for those schools that served students that were low-income (Ladd, 2017). Federal involvement in education up to the passage of ESEA in 1965 focused largely on vocational efforts and preparation for the workplace, which did not threaten local interests or have large implications for what happened in schools and local education agencies. The passage of ESEA in 1965 shifted the federal focus to the equity of education for students with disabilities and students whose first language was not English. This shift in focus moved the boundaries of federal involvement into local and state education agencies to better evaluate and monitor effectiveness of educating these vulnerable populations. This chapter examines the successes and challenges under NCLB, provides connections between legislation and results, and looks at NCLB through the literacy lens. The chapter then moves to examine

the state perspective of North Carolina as it navigated NCLB. A brief discussion follows as to where we went after NCLB with lessons learned.

### **Identified Successes Under NCLB**

#### **Volume of Data**

Some of the successes of NCLB included the sheer amount of data that it made available to the public and policymakers regarding student achievement in literacy and math. Access to a substantial amount of data on all students, not just a representative sample, was been essential for policymakers and educational researchers (Loeb & Miller, 2006). As such, it is difficult to overstate the importance of this data for scholars across all states compared to matched data from past years on schools and teachers. The available data from NCLB research can be highly matched to other states and large data sets including labor market research, higher education, and other vital statistics (Ladd & Sorensen, 2015).

#### **Focus on Learning for All**

A second positive impact of NCLB is that it held schools accountable not only on average test scores of subgroups of some learners but also for the aggregate scores on individual students (Loeb & Miller, 2006). However, one limitation of this approach was that some schools were not able to report results for accountability purposes for subgroup performance as they lacked sufficient numbers of subgroup students for the reporting of results to be reliable or unidentifiable for individual students. In addition, individual schools often had fewer policy levers that worked to improve subgroup performance compared to policymakers at the district levels that were available when setting

guidelines under which teachers and students were allocated to specific schools and the resources to be available to individual schools. Therefore, the process of accountability was better approached at district level than at the school level.

### **Teacher Quality Matters**

Finally, the third arguably positive aspect about NCLB was the policy required that every teacher need to be “highly qualified” with at least a Bachelor’s degree and specific specialty in their subjects. According to Jennings and Rentner (2006), even if states had initially handled this requirement by initiating their own strategies, by 2006 every state had designed official assessment criteria for teacher quality in line with NCLB. Also, by 2006, 88% of all school districts had reported that every teacher of core subjects was highly qualified and aligned with NCLB standards (Loeb & Miller, 2006). NCLB provision led to significant reduction in the employment of uncertified teachers and higher overreliance on teachers with Master’s degrees. Nonetheless, there was criticism on the importance of the Master’s degrees and specifically those attained after the teacher joins the profession (Dee & Jacob, 2010; Ladd & Sorensen, 2015; Loeb & Miller, 2006).

### **Challenges Under NCLB**

Despite the above positive outcomes, NCLB largely employed a top-down accountability pressure on teachers and schools which was considered to be punitive rather than being constructive, and as a result, critics considered NCLB a flawed policy as far as school improvement was concerned. The specific flaws or shortcomings and challenges of NCLB policy that deserve closer attention include the following factors.

### **Narrowing the Scope**

First, the test-based accountability policy of NCLB was criticized for its narrow approach to schooling and literacy. The primary argument was that aspirations for schooling and education needed to be broader than teaching students how to perform better in few select subjects (Brighthouse, Ladd, Loeb, & Swift, 2016). A comprehensive approach to learning would promote the role that schools and teachers played in initiating child development in terms of skills and knowledge that would empower learners to both succeed in the labor market, live fulfilling and rich lives, become good citizens, and competitive global researchers.

Critics also argued that NCLB had a negative impact on schools due to increasing federal footprint in the K-12 education system and also largely limited schools focus to accountability and standardized tests. In addition, the large emphasis of NCLB on reading tests largely narrowed down curriculum focus and, in the process, forced teachers and schools to spend less time on other subjects that are not under the standardized tests such as arts, foreign language, and social studies (Jennings & Rentner, 2006; Klein et al., 2000). Limited focus on other subjects was facilitated by underfunding where although the original NCLB advocated an increase in the education budget to offset the costs of attaining NCLB ambitious programs for literacy achievement, the federal spending hardly reached the recommended levels. For example, in 2014 the annual spending for NCLB was projected as \$25 billion but only \$13.7 billion was released to Title I funding. Similarly, the funding for 2016 financial year was only about \$14.5 billion.



### **Missing the Target**

By 2010, it had become increasingly clear that most schools were going to miss the deadline for attaining NCLB's achievement targets of 100% proficiency by 2013 (Krieg, 2008; Heinrich et al., 2010). For instance, as of 2010, 38% of the schools had not submitted their AYP reports up from 29% in 2016, with projections showing that by 2013/2014 the percentage would rise to 54%. In 2011, Arne Duncan, the then Secretary of Education cautioned that 82% of schools could be labeled "failing" in meeting the AYP guidelines and advocated the need by Congress to rewrite the law (Rodriguez-Garcia, 2015). However, the number did not turn out to be that high although several studies revealed that the failure rates to meet AYP guidelines were 51%. In the process, the Congress was informed on the need to rewrite NCLB but were unable to successfully amend the bill.

### **Inconsistent Results**

The NAEP results that were available through the implementation of NCLB yield equally inconsistent and unimpressive score reports for the Nation's fourth and eighth graders. The NAEP provides periodic assessments of the Nation's Report Card based on test scores and student proficiency outcomes (Rodriguez-Garcia, 2015; Walt, 2012). The tests are given to a nationally representative sample that is randomly allocated to 4th and 8th graders throughout the country since the 1990s. Unlike the high stakes and accountability tests, the NAEP scores are not vulnerable to teaching to the tests (Baker et al., 2010). A recent report by Ladd (2017) reveals key trends that have been observed

from the NAEP test scores since 1990 among fourth- and eighth-grade students as shown in Figure 1.

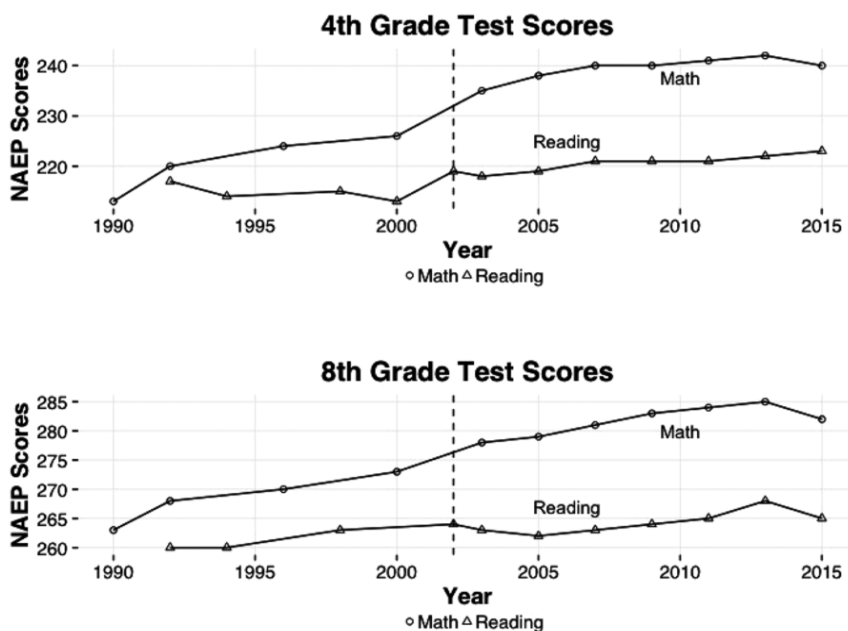


Figure 1. Trends in NAEP Scores between Fourth Graders and Eighth Graders between 1990 and 2015 (Ladd, 2017).

Figure 1 sums up the trends in literacy levels and math over a course of the 25-year period, where the dashed vertical line illustrates the year that NCLB was adopted. As evident, even if the math test scores for both 4th and 8th graders show a rise in performance after 2002 when NCLB was adopted (until 2015), for the most part of the 13-year duration the trend appears to be a continuation of the same performance that had started in the 1990s. In contrast, the reading scores reduced in the first few years after the adoption of NCLB, and therefore the observed trends lack to provide sufficient support or offer little illustration for the postulation or argument that NCLB contributed to raised test scores (Ladd, 2017). Even so, the trends alone are not indicators for what might have

happened in the absence of NCLB or when the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was still in place. Also, considering that there is no control group and that NCLB was introduced at the same point in time, it is difficult to compare the outcome for these subjects since NCLB was applied to all schools nationwide. To overcome the potential bias and confounders, different scholars have used diverse empirical methods to examine the causal impact of NCLB and student proficiency levels or literacy attainment.

### **Summary**

NCLB provided a significant volume of data that continues to be referenced and used for reporting purposes across the nation. This data has highlighted education for all students and maintained a consistent focus on the most vulnerable of learning populations. The legislation also provided minimal criteria for those who teach students to be qualified in the areas they were teaching. These are considered some of the greatest gains from NCLB.

Regardless of these successes, the legislation also brought considerable challenges. As researchers identify (Brighthouse, Ladd, Loeb, & Swift, 2016), the narrowing impact of the legislation had impacts still resonating. Arts, sciences, and civic education curriculum were often pushed aside to make room for additional learning in reading and math to facilitate better score results. The results noted from NCLB, however, were inconsistent. In part, due to a lack of control group for research to draw a definitive causal effect of the legislation to the results and trend results are not stable enough to base success as a result of legislation. Researchers have attempted to

investigate the trends in efforts to connect legislation to results. That will be examined in the next section.

### **Connecting Legislation to Results**

After the initial implementation of NCLB, states and researchers moved to examine the proficiency results under NCLB. For the next section, the study will highlight some of this work. The examination will center on the provisions identified in earlier chapters as a focus for this study; assessment, accountability, achievement, and teacher quality.

As previously discussed, common studies have been executed by Dee and Jacob in 2010 and in 2011. To address the causal effects, the authors took into consideration the assumption that some states such as North Carolina, Texas, and Wyoming had in place their own accountability standards or systems in different years before the adoption of NCLB (Dee & Jacob, 2010, 2011). In contrast, the authors treated states without accountability standards as the group treated by the federal law, with the rest serving as a control group. In the analysis process, the researchers estimated interrupted time series model which enabled them to assess changes in the trends of the federal law treated states after the adoption of NCLB between 2002 and 2010 (Dee & Jacob, 2010, 2011). To mirror the idea of the Dee and Jacob study that used a state specific example as a control group, this study examines the impacts overall and a closer look at North Carolina for a state specific comparison. A detailed discussion of the impacts nationally and in North Carolina specifically are described below and divided by the provisions selected for this study.

## **Assessment Challenges**

**Subgroup challenges.** Challenges associated with NCLB (2001) have to do with the requirements of performance for student subgroups, particularly since there is a requirement that states report the results of tests by specific subgroups which includes those students who are disabled, economically disadvantaged, LEP, and the various racial-ethnic student groups. Since every subgroup is required to meet the expectations of AYP and where just one fails the result is that the whole school fails (Brown, 2012). Because these students are under the same AYP expectations as other students, this becomes problematic and Brown (2012) states that “CEC believes that the rules governing these subgroups should be less strict” (p. 34). Another challenge is the requirement set out by NCLB for subgroups that 95% of the entire group be tested and where there is less than 95% participation in the testing, regardless of the performance on tests, the school is deemed to have failed and deals with the results of not having met the AYP (Brown, 2012). Another problem is that some students “fall into more than one subgroup (e.g., an African American student with a learning disability), which may lead to deliberate over-counting or under-counting of the number of students” (Brown, 2012, p. 35).

**Leaving out the arts.** The test-based assessment of students advocated by NCLB legislation is criticized for its unintended effects on student cognitive development and its role in promoting bias against subjects that are not assessed (Berliner & Nichols, 2007). The law puts pressure on teachers to focus only on assessed areas, a condition that causes some schools to manipulate the test scores (Jacob & Levitt, 2003). The subjects that are

not assessed under NCLB include social studies, art, music (Spohn, 2008; West, 2012). The law is indicated to have caused the neglect of non-target subjects. Another pitfall is that there is limited evidence on the effect of NCLB legislation on student's performance (Dee & Jacob, 2011). Available studies that examine the national performance trends have contrasting findings (Fuller, Wright, Gesicki, & Kang, 2007). The assessment of student performance by Fuller and colleagues (2007) noted that, despite the apparent increase in student performance following the implementation of NCLB, progress rates of performance have lagged in many cases. These issues need to be more fully researched quantitatively on a state by state basis, which would identify specific subject areas that have been neglected or minimized. In a 2007 nationwide educational research study, the researchers focused on the performance levels of fourth-grade students between 1992 and 2006 (Fuller et al., 2007). The authors noted that performance in some states is deceiving. According to their evidence-based findings, the proficiency bar is set below the limit defined by National Assessment of Educational Progress in these states (Fuller et al., 2007). They noted that progress following the implementation of NCLB has been characterized by an increased widening of the achievement gaps.

### **Accountability Challenges**

**More students left behind.** The accountability approach used by NCLB initiative was criticized as being rigid and punitive, and the accountability program was associated with the risk of leaving behind some students, especially English Language learners. The failure of the accountability program to address the specific challenges that students face in the assessed subjects resulted in the inability of the initiative to adequately address

concerns (Crawford, 2004). The tools used in the reading assessment process were suggested to lack the ability to differentiate between the academic and language errors (Hakuta, 2001; Solano-Flores, 2006). Hakuta and Beatty (2000) argued that the failure of the assessment tools to take into consideration the realities that exist among English Language learners limited the reliability of the assessment and ultimately, the results. Although the assessment approach taken by NCLB allowed non-native English students to take the assessment in their native language, there was no evidence for the extent to which the approach helped to enhance accountability, and only limited time was allotted to development of native languages in the states (Solano-Flores & Trumbull, 2003; Solano-Flores, Trumbull, & Nelson-Barber, 2002).

**Reasonable expectations.** If that accountability would be enhanced under the NCLB, there was a need to focus on the development of reasonable expectations (Crawford, 2004). Some researchers have indicated that accountability, especially for English Language Learners, was not attainable since the proficiency expectations in this subgroup cannot be reached (Crawford, 2004). The challenge with accountability in assessing English Language Learners was associated with the exit level. Once the English Language learners attained a score of 36th percentile they were no longer documented in the subgroup, therefore the need to reach full proficiency as indicated in NCLB was not attainable. The fact that there was no standard time taken by students learning a new language, such as English as second language subgroup, to reach full proficiency challenged the expectations of NCLB initiative (Abedi & Gándara, 2006; Fitzgerald, 1995). The rigid accountability guidelines that required schools to register progress in

yearly assessments were supported by schools that received an influx of student with little or no comprehension of English language (Brown, 2004; Collier & Thomas, 1989).

### **Achievement Challenges**

**Revisiting and rewriting standards.** A large emphasis of No Child Left Behind was in improving reading skills for U.S. students. The law first required states to develop standards for reading and language arts. States were then charged with creating assessments to measure the standards created with the results reported to the public. In attempts to assure that the law met the reading needs of students and used federally funding in measurable ways, the federal government required that only scientifically validated programs for reading should be used. The accountability approach used by NCLB initiative was criticized as being rigid and punitive, and the accountability program was associated with the risk of leaving behind some students, especially English Language Learners. The failure of the accountability program to address the specific challenges that students face in the assessed subjects resulted in the inability of the initiative to adequately address concerns (Crawford, 2004). NCLB set out to address achievement standards and accountability. However, there have been problems with NCLB and shortcomings with the system of accountability set out in NCLB. Reading proficiency has not been significantly impacted among students, nor has overall proficiency, as hoped for when NCLB was enacted.

**Assurances.** There have been problems, challenges, and failings of the effectiveness of the foundational requirements set out in NCLB. Before implementation of NCLB, the states were required to “develop, articulate, and implement their own



academic standards and assessments” (Heise, 2017, p. 1866). The significance of NCLB, in terms of policy and law, is that it “implicated every public K-12 school regardless of whether the school received Title I funding” (Heise, 2017, p. 1866). States, of course, were to develop their own standards and assessments under NCLB. However, the problem as revealed by Heise (2017), is that “states, confronting the perceived or real threat of federal sanctions for failing to achieve adequate yearly progress, transformed academic standards and assessments setting authority into a ‘race to the bottom’” (pp. 1868–1869). This race to the bottom was characterized by state education agencies that transformed academic standards to assure a more favorable outcome and perception of student achievement in order to maintain the pipeline of funding provided through the legislation. The tools used in the reading assessment process were suggested to lack the ability to differentiate between the academic and language errors (Hakuta, 2001; Solano-Flores, 2006). Hakuta and Beatty (2000) argued that the failure of the assessment tools to take into consideration the realities that exist among English Language learners limited the reliability of the assessment and ultimately, the results. Although the assessment approach taken by NCLB allowed non-native English students to take the assessment in their native language, there was no evidence for the extent to which the approach helped to enhance accountability, and only limited time was allotted to development of native languages in the states (Solano-Flores & Trumbull, 2003; Solano-Flores et al., 2002). Despite the rigidity of the accountability model, schools and districts had flexibility to develop their own reading curriculum, standards, and assessments they would use to measure achievement.

Prior to NCLB, reading remained stagnant for fourth graders nationwide (NAEP, 1990). In the years following NCLB (1999-2004), more reading progress was made than in previous 28 years.

### **Teacher Quality Challenges**

The importance of the policy in ensuring improved student learning is supported by various educational research findings. A Darling-Hammond (2000) study that was based on a case study assessment of the effect of teacher quality on student achievement noted that measures of teacher quality such as certification are highly correlated with the student performance level. Darling-Hammond's (2000) findings are important in the determination of the role of NCLB in literacy since the researchers focused on the performance in reading and mathematics assessment. Carey (2009) noted that, apart from parents and the family income levels, teacher characteristics are predominant predictors of student performance and literacy.

**Teacher certification.** The importance of teacher certification in ensuring improved student performance and literacy level has been questioned by various researchers. Darling-Hammond and Youngs (2002) highlighted the lack of adequate evidence that supports the association between the knowledge of teachers regarding the pedagogy and student achievement. Walsh (2001) also casts doubt over the importance of certification in ensuring improved student performance and literacy. McMurrer (2007) study also adds to the voices that criticize the importance of teacher quality provision as a predictor of student performance. The researcher noted that educational administrators at

the district level and state level regard the policy as being ineffective and not linked to improved student achievement.

**Attracting highly qualified teachers.** To ensure the adherence to the policy across all schools, the federal government provides incentives and grants to attract highly qualified teacher to schools that serve children from underprivileged families (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006; Mollenkopf, 2009). The aim of the grants and incentives is to ensure that the gap that exists between schools are closed and students are offered equal opportunities to attain literacy proficiency (McDonnell, 2005). The federal government also promotes access to quality teachers by students with disabilities by providing funds and incentives towards the preparation and improvement of the effectiveness of the teachers who serve the students with disabilities (Marx & Harris, 2006).

**Accounting for variance.** The conflicting views regarding the importance of highly qualified teacher policy calls for further analysis of this policy to determine its effectiveness in promoting student performance and literacy. Darling-Hammond (2000) argued for the need to further research on how the requirements for teacher quality policy vary across different settings.

According to Heise (2017), NCLB resulted in “singularly unending traditional education federalism boundaries. NCLB profoundly reshaped education federalism boundaries when it became law in 2001” (p. 1861). However, Heise (2017) reported that in 2015, with Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), “Congress, once again, dramatically readjusted education federalism lines” (p. 1861). However, the growth in the demands for school voucher programs, charter schools, and tax credit programs along with the growth

in homeschooling appears to indicate that families, “have an almost unquenchable thirst for greater agency when it comes to decisions about their children’s education” (Heise, 2017, p. 1862). There is reported to be a “tug-of-war” (p. 1862) between the states and local government officials as well as between the Department of Education and Congress. This is important to understand since NCLB effectively diminished the local control over schools (Heise, 2017). This means that NCLB instituted what is a top-down educational policy.

### **Summary**

This section highlighted researchers attempts to connect the results following the implementation of NCLB to the legislation. As noted, the connection of results was influenced by actions states took in order to stay in compliance with the legislation and attempts to show more favorable results. The shifting of proficiency requirements, changing of academic standards, and narrowing of curriculum options created muddy waters when results seemed to indicate favorably for student groups. Where the results due to the increase of effort of schools and districts to better meet the needs of all learners, or were the results more indicative of a shifting of the bar and movement of instructional priorities to those tested subjects? It appears the constant connection is the relationship research provides between teacher quality and student results, although NCLB defines teacher quality as simply a matter of credentials when the supporting research discusses the relationship of teachers to student results in terms of teacher effectiveness.

### **NCLB and Literacy**

Dee and Jacobs (2010) reported that no evidence exists to support any claims that NCLB improved the achievement of students in reading. In addition, in their report, *Dollars without Sense: The Mismatch between NCLB and Title I Funding*, Duncombe, Lukemeyer, and Yinger (2008) observed that NCLB had been less effective in attaining its core objectives of enhancing literacy and proficiency.

### **Exacerbating the Plight of the Poor**

Guisbond, Neill, and Schaeffer (2012) reported NCLB has damaged the quality of education as well as educational equity due to the “narrowing and limiting effects falling most severely on the poor” (p. 4). Additionally, Guisbond and colleagues (2012) reported that NCLB also failed in bringing about a significant increase in academic performance and failed in narrowing gaps in achievement. The reforms, including the waivers of the Obama Administration and the Secondary Act (ESEA) of the Senate Education Committee that was focused on addressing the fundamental flaws of NCLB, instead intensified these with the result being a decade lost for schools in the United States (Guisbond et al., 2012).

Considering the problems of NCLB at the time, the Obama administration in 2011 offered states including North Carolina a reprieve from most of the law’s directives through a series of waivers. The waivers remained in place across 42 states and they allow states to deviate from NCLB mandates in exchange for adoption of some specific education redesign priorities. For example, the states were no longer mandated to attain the 100% proficiency levels by the years 2013-2014 or offer tutoring or public choice for

schools that did not meet the AYP targets (Usher, 2015). As part of the waivers, North Carolina had to adopt a set of standards focused on preparing students for the workforce and higher education, such as the adoption of Common Core State Standards or recruit higher learning institutions to assess and certify that their standards met the rigorous waiver standards (Meyer & Whitten, 2010). In addition, North Carolina also adopted the reading/literacy policy that is closely related to NCLB of holding schools accountable (Rodriguez-Garcia, 2015; Walt, 2012). The teacher-evaluation system was also in line with the waiver program that took student progress into consideration through state standardized tests.

### **Unintended Responses**

The role of NCLB in promoting literacy was dependent upon the efforts of primary stakeholders such as teachers and school administrators. The need for accountability led to unintended responses from stakeholders, which can sometimes be counterproductive (Smith & Kovacs, 2011). Neal and Schanzenbach (2010) argued that to ensure the schools were able to meet the accountability targets, some teachers and administrations targeted and focused their attention on students whose literacy levels in the target areas were close to the existing proficiency standards. The researchers, therefore, suggest that NCLB increased the risk of those students who perform poorly or those who did not show any potential for achieving the set targets as ignored by teachers and instructional efforts. Neal and Schanzenbach (2010) showed that the increase in performance following the implementation of NCLB was predominantly observed among the students who fell in the middle-performance level bracket while those in the lowest

performance bracket showed no literacy progress. Reback (2008) supported the argument that the accountability requirement of NCLB pushed teachers to focus their attention more on those students who were on the margin of passing.

### **Nobel Idea, Wrong Approach**

Dee and Jacob (2010) have described how NCLB had represented the federal government's bold new offensive that had been aimed at directing educational policy nationally. According to Dee and Jacob (2010), NCLB has clearly not been the right approach. It has also been suggested that the answer is one about policymakers needing to pay attention to what has taken place outside of schools as well as within. The law was enacted with the assumption that it would enhance the performance of students in reading and writing (Linn et al., 2002). Hanushek and Raymond (2005) also suggest that the law aids in students' behavior change as the students align their conduct to the assessment goals. NCLB promoted accountability through incentives and sanctions imposed on schools based on their progress in annual assessments (Neal & Schanzenbach, 2010). Theoretically, this nationwide approach to the issues of literacy levels that were not being addressed within the states would have a positive effect on the educational system as a whole.

### **Achievement, No Achievement Perspectives**

However, the impact of the legislation on the literacy level has been questioned by some critics, who cite the widening literacy gap and neglect of non-tested subjects as the consequences of unintended outcomes associated with NCLB (Berliner & Nichols, 2007; Dee & Jacob, 2011; Linn et al., 2002). On the other side of the debate, proponents

of the legislation argue that despite the obvious problems that are faced in the implementation of any legislation, NCLB has led to enhanced reading and mathematics literacy (Neal & Schanzenbach, 2010). Yet the ways in which the objectives of NCLB were carried out in practice shows that improved literacy levels were not met for the students who needed improvement the most. While teachers had a “short-term incentive to focus on ‘bubble’ students, those close to the proficiency cut score” (Jennings & Sohn, 2014, p. 125), it is evident to see how this strategy would be ineffective in improving literacy rates nationwide.

In addition, there has existed the fundamental motivating perception affecting the widespread adoption of public school accountability as has been exemplified by NCLB so that the public elementary and secondary school system in the United States has been and continues to be both incoherent and fragmented. This has proven particularly so among proponents of public-school reform policies who have continued to argue that too many of American public schools—especially those that are serving at-risk student populations—have not been sufficiently directed to focus on the essential core performance objectives. This organizational gap has been argued as having been reflected as a lack of having created and implemented accountability measures for both the teachers and school administrators because they had been underpinned by weak incentives.



## **Summary**

While the goal of NCLB was to improve literacy performance for all students, including those who traditionally performed in the lowest achievement bracket, researchers agree that NCLB had the unintended consequence of perpetuating the achievement gap as schools and teachers focused more on the students who were in the margins of passing (Neal & Schanzenbach, 2010; Reback, 2008; Hanusheck & Raymond, 2004). Evidence of this lack of progress is found in the Obama administration response of providing waivers to states to relieve the sanctions associated with a lack of proficiency. Next, is an examination of the relationship between NCLB and one state perspective, North Carolina.

### **NCLB and North Carolina**

#### **Broken Promises**

Dee and Jacob (2010) have concluded that North Carolina abandoned its own constitutional commitment for providing North Carolina's public-school students with a soundly based fundamental education. This has been decided by North Carolina legal advocates for North Carolina's low-income school districts. They have cited how years of North Carolina educational budget cuts as well as the jettisoning of needed intervention and remedial educational programs have led to tens of thousands of North Carolina's low scoring reading/literacy students. Over the decades, the federal education reforms have been spurred by two-fold outcomes based on student equity and educational excellence. While there has been a notable improvement in towards these two goals, critics hold that attaining educational excellence and equity under NCLB has largely remained elusive

(Mickelson, Giersch, Stearns, & Moller, 2013). Recent state-wide comparisons by NAEP indicate that in North Carolina, the overall student literacy and proficient levels lag behind that of learners in other states where socioeconomic, racial, and educational gaps persist despite decades of reforms intended to eliminate such problems. For example, in the most recent NAEP report card results, Mark Johnson (the North Carolina state superintendent of schools) expressed concerns that there was lack of progress on students' test scores resulting in frustrating policy outcomes (Gebelein, 2018).

### **Stability for Some**

According to Gebelein (2018), the nationwide assessment of literacy level attainment in fourth and eighth grades found that although scores for North Carolina learners were largely stable between 2015 and 2017, there was some substantial decline in scores in some regions. Importantly, the scores that significantly lagged behind included those from minority students and poor students further elaborating that NCLB was less effective in enhancing student proficiency. Moreover, contrary to the general trend from national performance, the NAEP results showed that the math scores for 4th graders statistically significant declined between 2015 and 2017, despite 42% of the 4th graders in North Carolina having met the NAEP proficient standards, which is 7% lower than the national average of 49%.

In North Carolina, NCLB designed to address both goals of literacy proficiency and equity appeared to have achieved neither objective (Clotfelter, Glennie, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2008; Mickelson et al., 2013). The primary problem and linchpin for the failure of NCLB reforms have been attributed to the high stakes compulsory tests and

accountability levels used by the federal government to hold schools accountable. According to Bifulco and Ladd (2016), if NCLB was as successful in North Carolina as the proponents of the law claimed, then the long-standing proficiency and literacy gaps between low-income youth and middle-income youth, or between Native Americans, African Americans, Latino, White, and Asian students should have disappeared or shrunk almost eighteen years since NCLB became effective in 2002. Bifulco and Ladd (2016) further elaborate that most districts and states such as North Carolina ignored sections of NCLB, including the requirement for highly qualified teachers and the even distribution between wealthier and poor schools.

### **Main Criticisms**

The main criticisms of NCLB in North Carolina were in terms of diverse factors such as its assumptions about the linearity of the learning process, individual differences among learners, diversity among states and schools, and the external and internal learning environment. Instead, NCLB tended to assume that education was a linear, homogeneous, cause-and-effect paradigm that existed in a closed system that should generate uniform learning proficiency and literacy as a common standard (Rusaw, 2007). Critics further add that the major segments of NCLB were problematic specifically as the law was applied through 17 years without reauthorization or congressional updates. For instance, a report from the Public Schools of North Carolina (2016) argued that there remained unclear progress on the two main remedies (free tutoring and transfer to another school) on low-performing schools and efforts put in place to improve literacy levels. In addition, districts and states also expressed hurdles screening tutors to meet the required teacher

quality with proposals by the North Carolina State Board of Education proposing to give its own tutoring services. In addition, NCLB was less effective in promoting dramatic school turnaround initiatives to improve perennially failing schools. According to Dee and Jacob (2010), NCLB approach was less effective in attaining high literacy levels and proficient outcomes.

Based on the above modeling, the authors (Dee & Jacob, 2010, 2011) found out that NCLB led to a statistically significant and moderate increase in test scores in math among fourth graders. In addition, NCLB also led to a positive, although not statistically significant, rise in math test scores for eighth graders (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2016a). However, in both cases, there was no effect on literacy levels of students in eighth grade, while the effect among fourth graders was only significant at bottom score distribution, indicating that NCLB was only effective at improving basic student skills. Among the special subgroups, there was a positive effect on test scores among African American students in fourth grade, and positive effect among Hispanics and learners from low-income households in both fourth grade and eighth grade (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2017b).

### **North Carolina Was Not Alone**

In North Carolina, different researchers have also reported similar research evidence based on Dee and Jacob (2011) methodology with a specific focus on individual state implementation of NCLB. For instance, Lee and Reaves (2015) documented no significant impacts attributable to NCLB either in terms of math or literacy levels or student proficient gaps. Reback et al. (2008) observed different results in that NCLB

contributed more pressure to schools and when administrators are aware of the dangers of measuring student achievement they use low stakes tests as opposed to the high stakes test from NAEP, with results showing small positive correlation in literacy levels, but no statistically significant correlation with science or math scores during the initial 10-years of NCLB. Bifulco and Ladd (2016) noted that in several districts in North Carolina, fewer than half of the learners have attained the projected 100% proficient standards as of the 2013-2014 NCLB dateline. In contrast, there is no state nationwide where half of the students were reported to have achieved NAEP literacy standards or reading proficiency. Also, the pass rates of the NAEP test scores vary significantly across individual state districts as they do from state-to-state.

For example, the pass rate for fourth and fifth graders based on elementary-school assessment was between 28% and 87%. In 10 districts, less than 50% of the students had passed their exams at the elementary level. In 2013, the fourth-grade proficiency rate in North Carolina based on NAEP reading assessment ranged between 11% and 47%, while the average literacy levels were 31% (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2017). Five districts had literacy proficiency standards less than 20%, nine districts had proficiency rates ranging between 19% and 28%, and 17 districts had proficient rates that ranged from 29% and 41%. Only four districts— Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools, Watauga County Schools, Union County Public Schools, and Wake County Schools—reported a higher proportion of students with the higher proficiency of 40% or more (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2018).

In addition, the documented pass-mark in middle-school test assessments varied between 20% and 87% with three districts having a pass mark of less than 30%, while in 17 districts less than 50% of the learners passed the reading assessment tests. In summation, about 10% and 44% of the 8th graders recorded a proficient level in the 2015 NAEP reading assessment (Polikoff, 2015). In contrast to other states, similar shortcomings have been reported with NCLB in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and the District of Columbia where literacy levels have been reported to be below 35%, 29%, and 20% respectively (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2016a). In 21 states, including North Carolina, California, Texas, and Chicago, only 24.5% of the students achieved the required proficient levels, while in 17 states such as Washington, Minnesota, and South Carolina only between 30% and 39% of the students had achieved the required proficient levels by the year 2014 (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2017b). Nationally, the average proficiency among 8th graders stood at 32% as of 2014 compared to NCLB projected mark and legislative mandate of 100% proficiency. In North Carolina, the proficiency level stood at 47.8% as of the year 2016 which is slightly above the reported national average of between 32% and 39% (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2017).

### **NC and NAEP**

Moreover, the proficiency rate among learners that took part in the NAEP writing tests tended to be a bit lower compared to the reading tests. There was also a wide disparity in terms of the subgroup achievement among students making NCLB goal of attaining the 100% proficiency more difficult in certain schools and districts in North Carolina. Both state assessment and NAEP assessment reveal large and surprisingly

similar achievement trends and challenges between subgroups disaggregated by poverty status, ethnicity, and race (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2016b). In the illustration, the 4th grade level reading both at the state and national levels indicate that on average, there is a difference of 27% points between African American students and White students, and between 21% to 28% between Hispanic and White students (The North Carolina Academic Standards Review Commission, 2017).

In addition, there is a 23% to 26% disparity in proficiency rates between economically disadvantaged students and economically advantaged counterparts. Even more worrying is that among eighth graders, there even more large differences in their reading and writing proficiencies between white students, African Americans, and Hispanics, as there is between students from high-income households and students from low-income families. Finally, in North Carolina, at both fourth and eighth grades, students with limited literacy standards and students with disabilities and special needs trailed well behind their peers both at the state level and national levels (Mickelson et al., 2013).

### **NC Incentivizes Teachers**

It is reported that some changes have occurred since the program began. For example, the General Assembly provided \$10 million in bonuses for teachers of the third grade. One-half of these bonuses are given on the basis of the Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS) and growth scores (RMC Research Corporation, 2017). The other one-half of the bonuses are given to teachers on the basis of being identified among the top one-quarter of teachers in third grade within each Local Education Agency

(RMC Research Corporation, 2017). The result is that there have been gains that are positive among young readers in the state of North Carolina. Figure 2 shows the reading performance for grade four on the NAEP between 2007 and 2015.

In recent years, according to Public Schools of North Carolina (2017), a leveling-off in reading/literacy proficiencies has taken place among all demographic groups in North Carolina's educational system. Yet, more than 15% of all the students in North Carolina's public-school system has continued to have gaps in every subgroup among grades 3 through 8. "While less than 10% of the students who belong to the White subgroup are not proficient, nearly 45% of the students who belong to the Students Disabilities and Limited English Proficiency subgroups are not proficient" (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2017, p. 7).

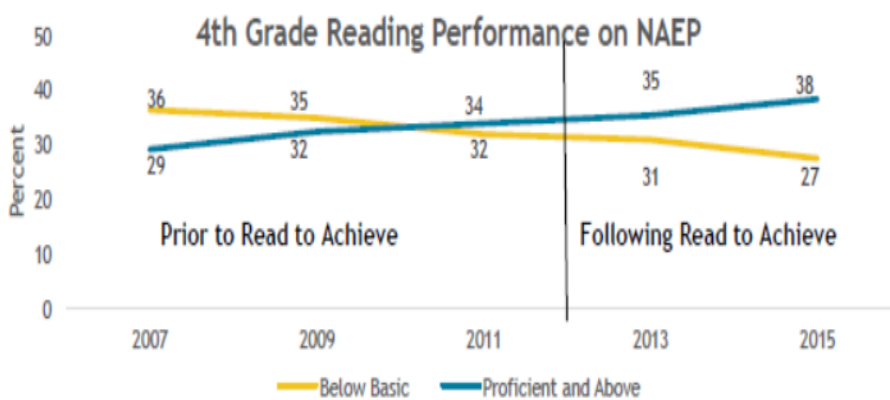


Figure 2. Grade 4 Reading Performance between 2007 and 2015 (RMC Research Corporation, 2017).

### Summary

North Carolina provided a perspective to NCLB with a pre-existing accountability model. The existence of a model did not yield any greater results for NC during NCLB.



NAEP results indicated that NC did no better, and in some cases worse than that of learners in other states. This was particularly the case in areas where socioeconomic, racial, and educational gaps persisted. Bifulco and Ladd (2016) claimed that if NCLB was as successful in NC as proponents claimed it would be, then the achievement gaps should have disappeared or shrunk in the years since NCLB. While NC implemented an incentive program to motivate higher test scores in certain grade levels, NC scores continued to remain level. The next section provides more in-depth discussion and perspective for North Carolina and literacy achievement.

### **Literacy and NC**

The North Carolina State Board of Education's (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2012) reading/literacy policy has been connected to the criteria of NCLB federal policy to hold schools accountable. This has meant having the mission "that every public-school student will graduate from high school, globally competitive for work and postsecondary education and prepared for life in the 21st century" (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2012, p. 4).

### **Demographic Impact**

To discuss literacy in North Carolina a look at the demographic challenges that contributed to the heightened focus on literacy is needed. Rong, Hillburn, and Sun (2017) reported that North Carolina had very little immigration prior to 1980, but between the years 1990 and 2010, the state "had the fastest increase rate of immigrant population in the United States" (p. 3). This is reported to have been a "fourth-wave immigration, which swept the country and brought several major demographic changes to the make-up

of its population, including nativity and race/ethnicity” (Rong et al., 2017, p. 3). This high rate of immigration had a great impact on the school population of North Carolina. North Carolina is first among all southern states that have a growing population of individuals who were born in foreign countries with growth in foreign population “at a rate of 625% between 1990 and 2010” (Rong et al., 2017, p. 5). The Latino population of North Carolina is reported to have been approximately 1.2% of the population of the state in 1990 but by 2015 represented 9.1% of the population of the state, noted as an increase of 1200% (Rong et al., 2017). This has resulted in a massive challenge for the state of North Carolina in the area of literacy among students and the parent population of schools.

Findings showed that students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunches were concentrated in public schools with approximately 50% of Black students and Hispanic students and one-half of American Indian and Alaskan Native student and one-fourth of Pacific Islander students attending schools that are high poverty (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). However, just 8% of White students, 15% of Asian, and 17% of students who were two races attending schools classified as high poverty schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

### **21st Century Skills, 18th Century Assessments**

Teachers are to facilitate instruction through the encouragement of students in using skills of the 21st century so that students are able “to discover how to learn, innovate, collaborate, and communicate their ideas” (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2013, p. 2). Included in the core content areas for the 21st century are financial literacy,

global awareness, health awareness, and civic literacy (North Carolina Public Schools, 2013). Subjects that are taught along with projects that are related are to be “integrated among disciplines and involve relationships with the home and community” (North Carolina Public Schools, 2013, p. 2). Teachers are to be reflective of their practice and assessments are to be structured, authentic and such that demonstrate the understanding of students (North Carolina Public Schools, 2013). Finally, teachers are required to “demonstrate the value of lifelong learning and encourage their students to learn and grow” (North Carolina Public Schools, 2013, p. 2).

The present study has a particular focus on the state of North Carolina as it is related to NCLB and in the specific area of reading scores. A critical and in-depth analysis of NCLB and the related policies, particularly as it relates to North Carolina, is important in addressing concerns and in providing up to date information regarding the role of federal government in promoting literacy levels and the impact on one state in particular. Understanding policies that intend to impact reading results is imperative for understanding current reading instruction on a state and national level.

### **Rich Accountability**

North Carolina’s rich accountability history makes the state an interesting state to study as it relates to literacy. Holding schools accountable for student performance was already part of the educational landscape in North Carolina beginning with then governor James B. Hunt’s move to minimum competency exams as part of high school graduation in 1976. This gave way to standards-based accountability for North Carolina in the 1980s. Both of these practices moved into 1995 and the ABCs of public education that

established sanctions for schools and teachers. This level of attention on accountability through standardized testing in basic subjects like English language arts and mathematics set the scene for North Carolina's preparedness for what was to come at the national level.

With such attention already paid to the student performance through their accountability measures and recognizing a need to improve student achievement in reading, North Carolina's General Assembly enacted the Read to Achieve Program in 2012. This law required screening of early literacy in grades K-3, with those having difficulties with reading identified and teachers providing tailored instruction to meet individual student needs (RMC Research Corporation, 2017). This law also makes a requirement that the parents of those K-3 students who are identified as having a deficiency in reading are notified. Reading interventions that are intensive must be provided until it is demonstrated that the student no longer has a reading deficiency (RMC Research Corporation, 2017). There is also a requirement that these students are regularly monitored during each school year (RMC Research Corporation, 2017). This law set the requirement for reading camps during summer months be provided to those students who have a reading deficiency at the end of the third-grade year (RMC Research Corporation, 2017). During 2015, the same reading camps were expanded for students in the first and the second grades, among those students who had deficiencies in reading (RMC Research Corporation, 2017). This law also serves to end the social promotion for readers in the third grade who cannot demonstrate that their reading skills are sufficient on the standardized assessment (RMC Research Corporation, 2017). This law

additionally sets out “good cause exemptions” for some of the students with special needs (RMC Research Corporation, 2017, p. 1).

Li (2012) had described how the exception of North Carolina and NCLB and measurable shifts in reading/literacy goals for the state were connected to North Carolina already having developed its own accountability program prior to the introduction of NCLB. Because of this Li (2012) has noted how the intended reforms of the federal legislation may have been less painful for North Carolina’s state educators. Although the ABCs of Growth was an early model for NCLB, its benchmarks and requirements differed substantially. The ABCs emphasized performance as measured by gains in student performance. The ABCs were first implemented for K-8 students in the 1996-1997 school year and, initially, schools were given one of the following four designations:

1. Exemplary, for schools whose average test score gains exceeded expected gains by over 10%;
2. Meets Expectations, for schools whose gains meet expectations but which do not exceed them by 10%;
3. No Recognition, for schools that do not meet growth standards, but whose students are more than 50% proficient;
4. Low Performing, for schools that do not meet growth standards, and whose students are less than 50% proficient.

Teachers at schools in the top two categories received small bonuses (\$1,500 and \$750, respectively; Li, 2012).

Spires (2015) reported that North Carolina has “recently added increased standards for teacher licensure in the area of reading instruction” (p. 1). However, Spires (2015) states that there are four specific reasons that exist for North Carolina further elevating teacher training so that there “a new generation of literacy specialists” in North Carolina schools (p. 1). The first stated reason is that there are many students in the North Carolina schools who are unable to read at necessary levels to succeed in school or in life (Spires, 2015). Additionally, reported by Spires (2015) is that 65% of those students in fourth grade during the year 2013 “scored below proficiency on reading, with only 8 percent of students performing at an advanced level” (p. 1). The work of Michelson, Giersch, Stearns, and Moller (2013) stated that NCLB and the associated standardized tests scores for North Carolina:

actually, contribute to the perpetuation of gaps in achievement because of: (a) a testing’s likely effects distorting curriculum and instruction and (b) the use of test scores to assign students to racially stratified tracks in core classes where students are exposed to very different curricula and have starkly different opportunities to learn. (p. 1)

### **Read to Achieve**

Spires (2015) reported that while North Carolina has enacted legislation recently—the Read to Achieve in the Excellent Public Schools Act, which sets out a requirement that students be able to “read at grade level by the end of third grade” and where students do not reach grade level reading that special assistance is granted to them (p. 1). Spires (2015) reported that as of 2013 approximately 55% of students in third-grade in North Carolina were not able to “read at grade level” (p. 1). Spires (2015)

reported a study that the Annie E. Casey Foundation conducted in 2012 focused on the issue of reading for the third grade and stated findings that “about 1 in 6 children who are reading proficiently by the end of third grade will not graduate from high school on time and are likely to drop out” (p. 1). However, North Carolina does have standards that are rigorous and that set out requirements for expertise among teachers relating to foundational reading (Spires, 2015).

Researchers also concluded that North Carolina had abandoned its own constitutional commitment to provide North Carolina’s public-school students with a soundly based fundamental education. It was decided by North Carolina legal advocates for North Carolina’s low-income school districts. They cited how years of North Carolina educational budget cuts as well as the jettisoning of needed intervention and remedial educational programs led to tens of thousands of North Carolina’s low scoring reading/literacy students (Ladd, as cited in Dee & Jacob, 2010).

A study conducted in 2015 and reported in 2017 revealed that nearly 85% of teachers stated an agreement that the use of their skills and knowledge in the use of assessments that drove instruction increased (RMC Research Corporation, 2017). Approximately 80% of the teachers stated agreement that professional development had worked to bring about an improvement in their knowledge on “research-based reading instruction” (RMC Research Corporation, 2017, p. 25).

### **North Carolina Progress Under NCLB**

A recent report by Mickelson and colleagues (2013) states that in North Carolina, NCLB largely failed to close the achievement gap among students as it focused on limited literacy concepts and subjects.

According to Mickelson and colleagues (2013), the only limited success of NCLB in North Carolina appeared to be student performance in math but little or no change was been realized in literacy and proficiency levels. Another research study by Ahn and Vigdor (2014) came to a similar conclusion that since the inception of NCLB, North Carolina schools had barely met or largely missed on their AYP progress with dismal proficiency among the low-performing students that the 2001 legislation was formulated to protect (Ahn & Vigdor, 2014). Li (2012) had described how the exception of North Carolina and the NCLB and measurable shifts in reading/literacy goals for the state was connected to North Carolina already having developed its own accountability program prior to the introduction of NCLB.

Although the ABCs of Growth was an early model for NCLB, its benchmarks and requirements differed substantially. The ABCs emphasized performance as measured by gains in student performance. The ABCs were first implemented for K-8 students in the 1996-97 school year and, initially, schools were given one of the following four designations: 1) Exemplary, for schools whose average test score gains exceeded expected gains by over 10%; 2) Meets Expectations, for schools whose gains meet expectations but which do not exceed them by 10%; 3) No Recognition, for schools that do not meet growth standards, but whose students are more than 50% proficient; 4) Low



Performing, for schools that do not meet growth standards, and whose students are less than 50% proficient. Teachers at schools in the top two categories received small bonuses (\$1,500 and \$750, respectively). (Li, 2012, p. 7-8). Significantly, as has been described by Li (2012) there had been no explicit sanctions that had been associated with poor reading/literacy performance. In addition, in practice, that had been determined by Li (2012), there was ABC designations that had been non-binding in most of the school years prior to NCLB. This had shown fewer than 1 percent of North Carolina's public schools designated as low-performing. The 2001-2002 school year prior to the implementation of the NCLB, had shown .34% (only 7 schools) had failed to meet the ABC standards. Once the NCLB had been in force the difference in the 2002-2003 school year in North Carolina had shown 53% of the schools had failed in making the AYP standards that first year. By the 2004-05 school year North Carolina had nearly 10% of its schools officially subjected to NCLB sanctions.

Moreover, school performance on the ABCs was only weakly correlated with AYP performance; 44% of ABC Exemplary schools failed to make AYP and 73% of schools meeting growth expectations under the ABCs failed to make AYP. This had been particularly so because ABC designations are based on gains in scores. Student demographics are a much stronger predictor of AYP performance; the percentage of White and free lunch students, for instance, explains over 28% of variation in AYP status, as opposed to just over 6% of variation in ABC status (Li, 2012).

### **North Carolina, NCLB, and the ABCs**

In addition, as has been further described by Li (2012) on his study, this had been due to North Carolina schools with many of its disadvantaged students having been significantly more than likely to have passed the ABCs, thus, had meant that when the NCLB had been implemented it had directly affected the principals of these schools in connection to the ABCs accountabilities.

Li (2012) had found in his research analysis that with North Carolina's transition from its existing accountability system for its public-school system goals for reading/literacy as fundamental to achieving its goals for equal education of students in preparation for careers and higher education, to the NCLB standards had not fared well. This had emerged in high-minority populated schools showing lower scores in testing for literacy across all academic subjects.

Because the ABCs based targets on growth in scores while NCLB focused primarily on level targets, the schools that experienced the greatest shock were those that were improving test scores among poorly performing students; in fact, almost 20% of schools which failed more than 25% of their subgroup-specific AYP targets in the first year of NCLB received the highest ABCs rating of exemplary the prior year (Li, 2012).

According to the North Carolina Law Review 81 N.C.L. Rev 1703 published in May of 2003, speaking in reference to NCLB (2001),

The New Accountability emerged from this joinder of diagnostic standards and accountable professional pedagogy. In the best cases, this recombination of reform has resulted in a system of education that turns the traditional school topsy-turvy. The teacher's job is no longer to execute instructions set at the state or district level, but rather to collaborate with colleagues in monitoring the

learning strategies of individual students and the teaching strategies of peers, and to help correct difficulties as they arise. (p. 4)

### **New Teacher Standards**

In 1997, the North Carolina State Board of Education was reported to have “charged the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards Commission to align the new Core Standings for the Teaching profession with the newly adopted mission” (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2013, p. 1). This involved 16 Commission members who were practicing educators considering what it is that teachers should know and what they should “be able to do in 21st-century schools” (North Carolina Public Schools, 2013, p. 2). Included among these things, was that administration and staff should share in leadership so that there would be consensus and ownership (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2013). Teachers were given the task of making their instructional content meaningful and relevant in the lives of students. The material must not only be covered, but solutions must be uncovered and the core content that already exists should undergo revision and be inclusive of skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and literacy in information and communication technology (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2013).

### **Evidence of Some Success**

Hatalsky and Johnson (2018) reported that evidence from a study conducted in North Carolina between the years 2000 and 2008 demonstrated that the “high stakes accountability had positive effects on student tests scores, especially for struggling schools” (p. 1). Roach (2014) reported surprising results to come from North Carolina

schools in that “the sanction that yielded the most positive results” (p. 1) of NCLB (2001) included

the most negative sanction: school restructuring which includes management and leadership changes. The result is consistent with Ahn and Vigdor’s larger findings that schools faced with the most negative sanctions benefited by restructuring leadership. (p. 1)

Roach additionally reported that it was found “that such restructuring measures positively affected both low-performing and high-performing students across the North Carolina school system” (p. 1). The graduation rate in the state of North Carolina for 2003 was reported at 92.4% (Education Trust, 2003). North Carolina’s students are outperforming other U.S. states in 3rd-grade reading proficiency as shown in Table 2 which is amazing considering the influx of minority races and ethnicities into the state.

Table 2

North Carolina 2012 Third Grade Students Reading at/Above Proficiency Level (State of North Carolina, 2012)

<b>All Students</b>	68.80%
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	71.40%
Male	66.30%
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
American Indian	59.10%
Asian	79.20%
Black	52.80%
2+ Races	71.90%
Pacific Islander	71.10%
White	80.50%

### **NC and Lackluster Scores**

Sutton (2016) reported an examination of the adjustments of policy in the state of North Carolina needed so that the state can keep their eligibility for receiving ESSA education funding. Five key areas were examined including academic standard, assessments, school accountability, school improvement, and teacher quality (Sutton, 2016). Findings from the examination are reported to show that “North Carolina’s academic standards align with the requirements laid out by ESSA. No action is necessary from the state” (Sutton, 2016, p. 2). This is because North Carolina is reported to have in 2010: “adopted the CCSS in mathematics and English language arts” (Sutton, 2016, p. 2).

### **Read to Achieve**

In addition, as has been described by Spires (2015), the recent legislation in North Carolina called Read to Achieve in the Excellent Public Schools Act, required all North Carolina state’s students to read at grade level by the time they have completed third grade. Students who are not reading at the third-grade level upon entering the fourth grade now has legal implications that will require they receive special educational assistance, that will include attending summer reading camp as well as other interventions for ensuring their reading/literacy readiness upon entering the fourth grade. Nearly 55% of North Carolina’s third-grade student population statewide in 2013, could not read at the third-grade level. The intention of the legislation therefore, was aimed at those North Carolina third-grade students who had not demonstrated third-grade reading/literacy proficiency after various interventions were performed (Spires, 2015).

Sutton (2016) reported that in 2016 that the Appropriations Act resulted in pilot programs in a series being created and that had a design for the provision of compensatory bonuses and performance incentives for teachers who contribute to student outcomes that are positive. One of the critical components put into place by the Appropriations Act included a Third-Grade Reading Teacher Performance Pilot Program: A statewide program to provide bonuses to third-grade teachers whose students demonstrate high growth on the reading EOG.

### **Summary**

North Carolina results and results from NCLB suggest similar trajectories. Neither the legislation overall or a state specifically show evidence of consistent movement that supports the closing of subgroup performance or literacy for all students. Regardless of North Carolina's efforts to establish systems for accountability and adopt rigorous standards, it was not enough to show longstanding impact to the attainment of literacy skills for our most vulnerable populations. The action of NC to include a monetary incentive for teachers whose students demonstrate high growth in reading did little to affect the outcome of closing achievement gaps or significantly raising literacy achievement overall. The next section will examine where we headed when NCLB came up for reauthorization.

### **Moving on from NCLB**

In December of 2015, when ESEA/NCLB was up for reauthorization lawmakers renamed it the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA. Regardless of the name changes, the focus of the legislation remains centered around improving educational opportunities

and outcomes for the most vulnerable students; those with disabilities and those living in low-income families and communities.

ESSA was designed to fix some of what have been identified as major flaws of the earlier legislation such as the requirement for 100% proficiency for all students and the sanctions levied on schools and school systems for those who didn't meet achievement demands based on standardized assessments. One of the major adjustments and additions in the new revision is the allowance provided to states and schools for student growth. Under NCLB, only student proficiency matter and schools were held accountable for the attainment of proficiency levels. It did not account for students who may be in a fourth grade but reading on a first-grade level upon entering the fourth grade and moves to reading on a third-grade level by the end of a school year. The student would not be considered proficient and would have the applicable consequences outlined in NCLB. ESSA emphasized academic growth and provided states latitude and flexibility to use other nationally recognized assessments to measure student growth and achievement.

## **ESSA**

The problems with NCLB were addressed by the Elementary and Secondary School Act (ESSA). ESSA was put into action in 2015 (Sutton, 2016). Some of NCLB remains including that the states being under a requirement to test students on an annual basis in math and reading for 3rd through 8th grade and then one time during high school (Sutton, 2016). Students must be tested in science one time during grades 3 through 5, six through 9, and 10 through 12 (Sutton, 2016). Additionally, there is an ongoing federal

requirement for 95% of students attending each school and each district to be participative in the summative assessments of the state (Sutton, 2016). However, the changes from NCLB to ESSA include that states are allowed to “place a cap on the total amount of time students spend taking state assessments” (Sutton, 2016, p. 2). States also have the choice of offering an assessment that is recognized nationally such as the ACT or SAT rather than a state exam for those students in high school (Sutton, 2016). In addition, states are granted the flexibility to use an alternate assessment if it is aligned with academic standards for students who have disabilities for “up to one percent of the student population” (Sutton, 2016, p. 3). Under ESSA, the states have the freedom to be more inventive in relation to the types of assessments used and are free to make a choice for participation in pilot programs focused on developing and implementing assessments that are innovated at local levels (Sutton, 2016). Additionally, student achievement may be measured by states using interim and multiple assessments that are statewide during the academic year instead of using only one summative assessment such as the test at the end of the grade (Sutton, 2016). The ESSA sets out requirement that schools must be held accountable for student performance on the summative assessments of the state and that student performance must continue to be disaggregated by demographic subgroups (Sutton, 2016). AYP benchmarks are no longer required for states under *ESSA*, however, states are under a requirement for designing their own systems of accountability for identification of schools that are performing low (Sutton, 2016). These systems are required to be such that “produce a summative determination that creates meaningful,



annual differentiation between schools” (Sutton, 2016, p. 4). Figure 3 shows ESSA school accountability measures.

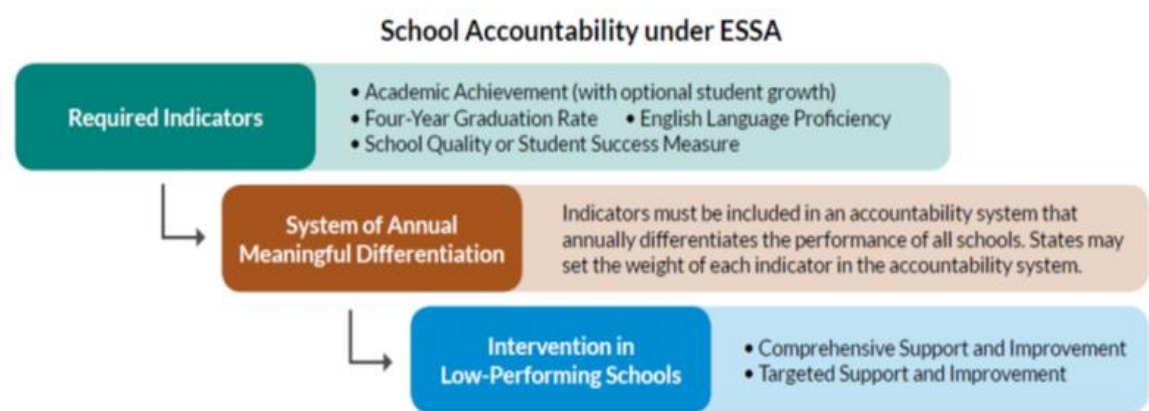


Figure 3. ESSA School Accountability Measures (Sutton, 2016).

The changes from NCLB to ESSA do not change the requirement that schools have to use a system for accountability in identifying which schools are low-performing (Sutton, 2016). ESSA mandates a “comprehensive support and improvement (CSI) and targeted support and improvement (TSI)” (Sutton, 2014, p. 4).

### **CSI Schools**

The CSI schools are in the five percent of lowest-performing schools as well as high schools that have 67% and below graduation rates (Sutton, 2016). TSI schools are schools that student subgroups are underperforming consistently (Sutton, 2016). Federal funds are allocated for TSI and CSI interventions with a requirement that districts implement evidence-based interventions (Sutton, 2016). It is reported that the U.S. Secretary of Education is excluded from setting the interventions specifically or the strategies for improvement (Sutton, 2016).

Although teacher quality was addressed in NCLB through the implementation of the requirement of ‘higher qualified teacher,’ NCLB failed to address evaluation of teachers. However, the ESSA results in the elimination of the provision of NCLB that is teacher-related (Sutton, 2016). There is no longer a requirement for teachers to meet the requirement for ‘highly qualified and the states are no longer under a requirement to make provision of documentation on teacher evaluation to the US Department of Education, which NCLB waivers required (Sutton, 2016).

The financial crisis occurring simultaneously with the reauthorization of NCLB in 2008 resulted in the reauthorization of NCLB being delayed. The backlash grew against NCLB, and there was an appearing unwillingness or an inability politically for NCLB to be reauthorized. This, when combined with the state’s failure in achieving AYP, resulted in a political collision (Heise, 2017).

The passing of the ESSA resulted in states being able to develop their own academic standards with the only stated requirement being that they are to be challenging (Heise, 2017). However, there is no set definition for ‘challenging’ (Heise, 2017). While there are federal sanctions imposed by ESSA, the states have a greater amount of autonomy, and this is reported to be, “both in terms of control over substantive standards setting and the consequences for states that fail to achieve their own self-defined achievement goals” (Heise, 2017, p. 1873). ESSA also places limitations on the U.S. Secretary of Education’s ability to impose specific conditions or to state rejection of those remediation plans that the states initiate (Heise, 2017).

The attention of the federal government is now upon the states' lower 5% of schools in the state in addition to those schools that have problems with their graduation rate. While the states formulate their goals for accountability under ESSA, states still have to provide them to the Department of Education. Ultimately, except in the case of preschool where ESSA increased the policy authority of the federal government, ESSA has returned education policy back to the individual states (Heise, 2017).

### **Summary**

The introduction and implementation of NCLB presented successes and challenges to schools and state education agencies. The overall increased attention on the performance of subgroups of students who, prior to legislation, may not have received the instructional or financial attention was a success under the scrutiny of the new legislation. The data now available as a result of NCLB provides information for researchers and future policy makers to analyze and interpret in hopes of designing more effective policies to drive increased literacy performance. The level of top down management that stemmed from NCLB left many states having to choose to fund those subjects that drove the policy rather than supporting more diverse educational experiences for students. No clear causal relationship or correlating outcome showing that the legislation was effective for raising student proficiency in literacy introduces gaps in available research and opportunity to examine policy more closely to potentially uncover better policy design to yield intended results more consistently. Chapter IV will provide this analysis and discussion.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **NARRATIVE OF CHANGE**

No Child Left Behind was sweeping federal legislation that stemmed from years of increasing political involvement in the nation's schooling, as demonstrated on the international front with Sputnik's arrival on the moon coupled with increasing gaps in student literacy achievement across multiple subgroups led a call to action and advocacy. The results have not proven worthy of that action and advocacy.

In this study, Bardach's 8 step policy analysis is used as the framework for results and discussion. In Step 8, Making Suitable Policy Decisions, Bardach suggests a narrative approach that includes: (a) the overall political context of the policy, (b) factors involved, and (c) recommendations. This discussion aligns with Bardach's suggestions and presents the main research findings in this and connects them to the study's research questions.

Information for this study was drawn from online scholarly databases such as Google Scholar and Semantic Scholar in addition to institutional databases managed by the federal government, such as the US Department of Education website, and those that are managed by the State of North Carolina, such as North Carolina State Board of Education. Undertaking this research approach was deemed essential in facilitating the use of existing educational data and policies to develop a critique of the NCLB policy, scrutinize the probable implications, track achievement gaps, and postulate appropriate

recommendations to overcome potential pitfalls. The examinations of NCLB and Literacy First Policy in North Carolina were assessed in the light of Bardach's 8-Step policy analysis method taking into consideration the formulated research aim and research questions. Specifically, the results and discussion section present and critically discuss the main findings drawn from the extant body of literature and government sources on the impact and achievement gaps of NCLB policy, using North Carolina as an example of literacy policy and its relation to the federal legislation. The next section outlines the Bardach's 8-Step policy analysis framework and how it was applied in this results and discussion chapter to explore the four research questions.

### **Bardach's 8-Step Analysis**

Baker and colleagues (2010) point out that education policy analysis is both a social and political activity, which can be resource intensive and very time-consuming. Byrd-Blake and colleagues (2010) agree that in modern dynamic, elastic, and technologically globalized economies, education policymakers continue to encounter daunting realities of having to make critical decisions in a relatively short period of time. Cronin, Dahlin, Adkins, and Kingsbury (2007) further cautioned that most frameworks used in policy assessment (such as classroom examinations, and overall school performance) apply specific models and concepts to explain education policies in abstract terms. Moreover, such models largely focus on macro-evaluation of political systems (Portney, 2016), and theoretical terms which give less comprehensive policy assessment (Rodriguez-Garcia, 2015; Walt, 2012).

The study sought to apply a comprehensive framework for education policy analysis in efforts to address literacy achievement outcomes and pitfalls of NCLB. The framework was adopted from Bardach's (2012) 8-Step Analysis and offers a step-by-step approach for NCLB education policy analysis that is highly valuable to scholars and practitioners with less time, experience, or resources to undertake education policy analysis research in North Carolina. The eight steps proposed by Bardach (2012) included:

1. defining the research context;
2. stating the problem being researched;
3. searching for relevant evidence on the research context and identified problem;
4. considering different potential policy options from the existing policies;
5. projecting and predicting the potential outcomes of the alternative policies compared to existing ones;
6. applying an evaluative criterion;
7. weighing potential outcomes; and
8. making the final decision based on previous steps (Bardach, 2012).

Bardach's 8-Step Analysis was used to address the research questions in this study:

1. What were the educational, policy, and political issues that NCLB set out to address?
2. What were the successes of NCLB, associated law, and policies in addressing literacy achievement?

3. What were the challenges associated with NCLB, associated law, and policies in addressing literacy aims? and
4. What are the recommendations for policy creation aimed at supporting literacy proficiency?

### **Political Context**

Under NCLB, all state schools were required by the federal government to test their students annually, create an accountability system, and set yearly achievement goals in a manner that 100% of all the students would be on track to attain academic and literacy proficiency by 2013-2014. The goals towards the 100% proficiency were intended to be measured through adequate yearly progress (AYP) initiative, and schools unable to achieve this goal were subject to consequences. The AYP requirements not only applied to the average of all students in every school but also to special subgroups defined by disability, racial, and economic characteristics. In line with federal systems, each state was to set its own individual proficiency standards and design its own tests. Core subject teachers were also required to be highly qualified with a minimum of an undergraduate degree and subject specialized knowledge. These requirements stemmed from a history of underachievement in the nation's schools, even with increased funding from the federal government to address the underachievement of low-income minority students.

#### **Step 1: Defining the Context of NCLB and NC Literacy**

Research Question 1 is assessed in line with the Bardach's (2012) first step, which intends to define the context under study. NCLB was intended to improve student

performance and hold educators and schools accountable for learning outcomes (Ladd & Sorensen, 2015). Similarly, in North Carolina, proponents of the NCLB argued that lack of sufficient focus by schools on major performance objectives was correlated with limited motivation and accountability among educators and school managers (Dee & Jacob, 2010). According to Ladd (2010), accountability policies like NCLB were intended to potentially influence and initiate the alignment of the student's behavior with the set performance requirements. In North Carolina, the explicit motivation spelled out under NCLB were intended to spur innovations that would empower learners in resolving their performance challenges and, therefore, enhance individual literacy achievement (Ladd & Sorensen, 2015).

This first step in Bardach's analysis provided valuable context for the study as it framed some of the issues uncovered in the literature within the context of an increasing focus on holding schools accountable in times of global innovation and discovery. Another important discovery was how closely the federal government was willing to get to tie money, results, and decision-making to state schools. This narrow margin that was created with federal involvement in schools influenced how schools ultimately implemented the policy requirements of NCLB thus also influencing literacy achievement.

However, one of the pending questions among critics is whether NCLB has effectively achieved its intended purpose in promoting literacy and proficient levels, not only in North Carolina but across the states? If so, what achievements can be identified since the implementation of NCLB? What performance gaps remain, and how can the



existing policy framework be formulated to have in place effective strategies aimed at enhancing high literacy levels among students in North Carolina? The next subsection turns to these questions in efforts to explore how NCLB has affected student outcomes since its inception in 2001 with a specific focus on North Carolina.

### **Step 2: Stating the Problem**

The challenges presented by NCLB as a result of the increased federal involvement with K-12 education included a narrow approach to schooling and literacy. The narrow scope of NCLB through the isolation of reading and mathematics, examining results confined to proficiency regardless of growth, and the funding of resources for teaching in lieu of professional development for teachers provided opportunity for varied criticisms. Perspectives from the business realm provided insight to how a policy such as NCLB went astray. In his 2006 article, “The Side Effects of NCLB,” Gordan Cawelti provided an overall context of the potential impact of myopic vision policy as he explains,

W. Edwards Deming, a major force behind the quality movement in the United States, repeatedly warned that a heavy reliance on single goals or other narrowly defined evidence of success tends to encourage people to tweak the system rather than make the fundamental changes needed in schools and classrooms to ensure student mastery of standards. Making the right numbers appear becomes more important than improving the system. Thus, we see “negotiations” between state education agencies and Washington bureaucrats on the need to exempt English language learners or students in special education programs as well as maneuvering by some states to lower their cutoff scores to show higher numbers of “proficient” students. (p. 65)

Inconsistency of results from state and national assessments provide inconclusive evidence that NCLB achieved the objective of improving literacy outcomes, particularly

for the most vulnerable of learners, students with disabilities and students whose first language is not English. The current findings are in line with Bardach's first step in defining the education problems experienced in North Carolina. According to Bardach (2012), whether the identified problem requires further research will depend on three conditions which have been identified in the present literature:

1. There is a potential discrepancy between the existing policy and the planned or ideal condition. In this study, there is a discrepancy between NCLB in North Carolina and the initial expectations among policymakers that the Act would boost the overall student achievement and reduce gaps between the advantaged student subgroups and their more disadvantaged counterparts.
2. The reason for the differences between existing policy guidelines and the anticipated outcomes should be unclear, and
3. There should be more than a single solution to the identified problem.

Over the decades, the federal education reforms have been spurred by two-fold outcomes based on student equity and educational excellence. While there has been a notable improvement toward these two goals, critics hold that attaining educational excellence and equity under NCLB has largely remained elusive (Mickelson et al., 2013). Recent state-wide comparisons by NAEP indicate that in North Carolina the overall student literacy and proficient levels lag behind that of learners in other states where socioeconomic, racial, and educational gaps persist despite decades of reforms intended to eliminate such problems. For example, in the most recent NAEP report card results, Mark Johnson (the North Carolina state superintendent of schools) expressed concerns

that there was lack of progress on students' test scores resulting in frustrating policy outcomes (Gebelein, 2018).

It was expected that the tight reign federal policy had through the expectation of results, the monitoring of programs, and the strong hold of financial sanctions for non-compliance, that literacy results would improve to the extent that ALL students would be reading on grade level in a designated time frame. This unrealistic expectation led many states to revise proficiency criteria to get closer to the policy bar without risking losing a valuable funding source. This sleight of hand by states is important to highlight as problematic for policy creators as meeting the instructional needs of all students became secondary to sustainable reading achievement.

Having identified the successes and achievement gaps of the NCLB Act and the potential policy problems, the next section presents evidence from past studies and institutional reports further highlighting the magnitude of the identified problem.

### **Step 3: Searching for Evidence**

Bardach's (2012) third step seeks to further present empirical and qualitative evidence aimed at elaborating the success and challenges associated with NCLB, associated law, and policies in addressing literacy objectives in North Carolina. National testing data provided valuable means of comparison to state specific data for NCLB and literacy performance. While the data presented was also discussed in an earlier chapter, it was important to examine it through Bardach's third step as the NAEP assessment are not vulnerable to teaching to the tests (Baker et al., 2010) and provide a measure not specific to any given state and how a state may have interpreted and implemented NCLB.

NAEP tests are given to a nationally representative sample that is randomly allocated to fourth and eighth graders throughout the country since the 1990s. Unlike the high stakes and accountability tests, the NAEP scores are not vulnerable to teaching to the tests. A recent report by Ladd (2017) reveals key trends that have been observed from the NAEP test scores since 1990 among fourth-grade and eighth-grade students as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4 sums up the trends in literacy levels and math over a course of the 25-year period, where the dashed vertical line illustrates the year that NCLB Act was adopted. As evident, even if the math test scores for both fourth and eighth graders show a rise in performance after 2002 when NCLB was adopted (until 2015), for the most part of the 13-year duration the trend appears to be a continuation of the same performance that had started in the 1990s. In contrast, the reading scores reduced in the first few years after the adoption of NCLB, and therefore the observed trends fail to provide sufficient support or offer little illustration for the postulation or argument that NCLB contributed to raised test scores (Ladd, 2017). Even so, the trends alone are not indicators for what might have happened in the absence of the NCLB or when the Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act was still in place. Also, considering that there is no control group and that the NCLB was introduced at the same point in time, it is difficult to compare the outcome for these subjects since the Act was applied to all schools nationwide. To overcome the potential bias and confounders, different scholars have used diverse empirical methods to examine the causal impact of NCLB and student proficiency levels or literacy attainment.

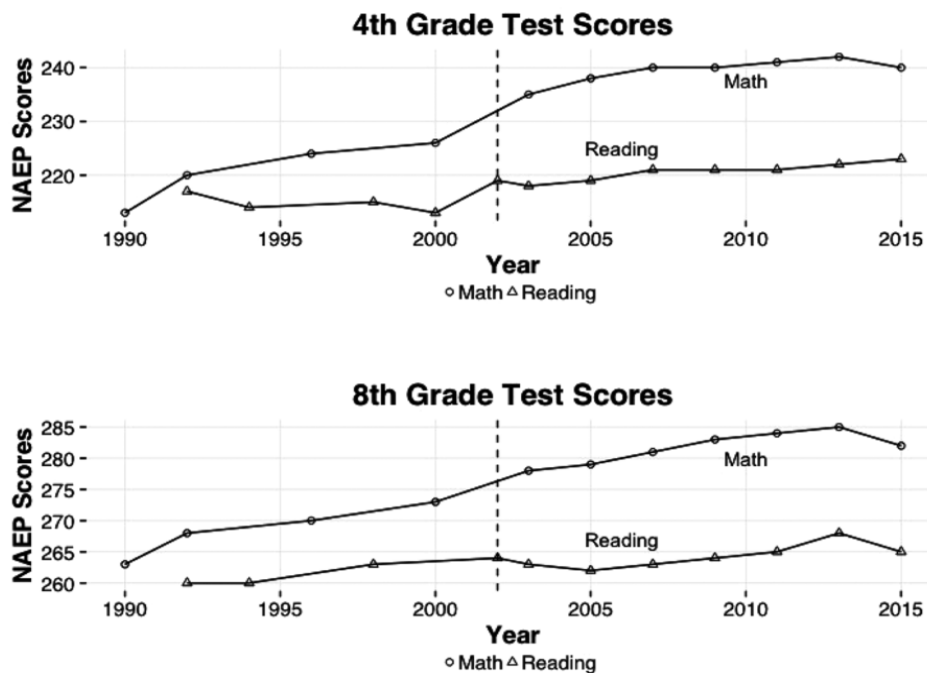


Figure 4. Trends in NAEP Scores between Fourth Graders and Eighth Graders between 1990 and 2015 (Ladd, 2017).

Dee and Jacob in 2010 and in 2011 found that NCLB led to a statistically significant and moderate increase in test scores in math among fourth graders although there was no effect on literacy levels of students in eighth grade, and the effect among fourth graders was only significant at bottom score distribution, indicating that NCLB was only effective at improving basic student skills. Among the special subgroups, there was a positive effect on test scores among African American students in fourth grade and positive effect among Hispanics and learners from low-income households in both fourth grade and eighth grade (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2017b). For North Carolina, Lee and Reaves (2015) documented no significant impacts attributable to NCLB either in terms of math or literacy levels or student proficient gaps. This result seems contradictory

if there are positive effects occurring nationally for subgroup performance and no significant impacts are experienced at the state level, such as what was found in NC.

Based on the data provided through national assessments such as NAEP that are not tied to individual state standards and examining the information from North Carolina, show that measures of student progress showed conflicting results. Having explored the successes and challenges of NCLB and the existing evidence against the shortcomings of the NCLB Act in addressing literacy achievement in North Carolina, the next section seeks to address the fourth research question.

Based on the evidence gathered, the success of No Child Left Behind on literacy achievement is inconsistent at best and detrimental to those students who were educated under the policy at worst. The adherence to strict scientifically based research that has been deemed effective for most learners does not allow for the adjustments teachers make in order to reach all learners. This ability to diagnose, adjust, and treat instructionally for learners often benefits the marginalized groups the policy was originally intended to support.

#### **Step 4: Alternative Policy Recommendations**

Bardach's (2012) third step emphasizes the need for alternative policy interventions to address the achievement gaps of the existing frameworks. The findings from the previous sections are in consensus that although NCLB has been effective in some areas such as facilitating accountability, it has been less effective in achieving its core objective of promoting equity and literacy proficiency among students. As noted by the North Carolina General Assembly (2015), NCLB has largely contributed to a

widened literacy gap between subgroups and further disadvantaged low-income students it was designed to protect. In the light of these considerations, this section seeks to explore policy alternatives for alleviating the identified problem in line with Bardach's fourth step and evaluate how the achievement shortcomings under NCLB in North Carolina can be addressed. The section, therefore, seeks to address the fourth research question:

Considering the limitations of NCLB, past research evidences the need to initiate programs aimed at enhancing excellence and greater equity in schools across North Carolina. For example, the adoption of the Read to Achieve program deviates from NCLB's limited approach on few core subjects to incorporate more critical skills and knowledge that students require to be successful after high school and at the next grade level (North Carolina General Assembly, 2016). According to the Public Schools of North Carolina (2013), the Read to Achieve program also focuses more on end-of-course assessment and end-of-grade tests that have real-world problem applications and rigorous open-ended questions that require learners to express their ideas explicitly with supporting facts.

One of the suitable policy approaches is to ensure that students' literacy levels are above the grade level and students not reading at the required grade standards need to be assigned additional support. Some of the support that has been deemed critical by the Public Schools of North Carolina (2016c) include intensive reading intervention, uninterrupted reading time, multiple assessments to prove proficiency, and reading camps

to ensure all students are well prepared to execute grade level reading, writing, and other literacy skills.

The North Carolina General Assembly (2016a) notes a series of policy changes between 2012 and 2013 aimed at transforming the education performance of students. The key reforms adopted in North Carolina as an alternative approach to NCLB included the adoption of Common Core State Standards (North Carolina General Assembly, 2016b), modifying the North Carolina state testing model, altering the NCLB, and implementing the federal grant referred to as Race to the Top Initiative (RttT). According to the North Carolina State Board of Education (2016), these alternative reforms were designed to prepare learners for the needs of the knowledge economy that emphasizes the need for hard skills (technology and science) and soft skills (problem-solving and critical thinking).

Such a reform approach is broad enough to address the limited focus of NCLB that limits learners to reading and math skills. Also, the reform context of NCLB in North Carolina placed emphasis on improved accountability and broadened curriculum for students to ensure that new policies were able to meet the academic needs of every student. The implementation of these policies also reduces focus on teachers and schools and instead reflects more on the direct impact on the classroom and student performance (Grubb, 2016). As such, schools are mandated on the need to focus more on using the culturally relevant curriculum, empowering teachers with resources and training necessary to bridge the gap between higher order thinking and teaching skills. In addition, the new policies need to promote and maintain transparent focus on student



achievement so as to realize effective performance for all learners at the end-of-year test assessments.

Unlike NCLB that does not focus on any specific pedagogy areas, the new alternative polices formulate areas of importance such as culturally relevant topics which Ladson-Billings (2014) referred to as suitable pedagogy that empowers students politically, emotionally, socially, and intellectually by adopting cultural referents to impact attitudes, skills, and knowledge. Formulating policies anchored on this instruction empowers teachers to connect the curriculum to their personal experience and also to the experience of their teachers, and at the same time fulfilling local and state curricular goals. For example, the adoption of CCSS by North Carolina education system enables teachers to develop competitive learning and literacy standards since teachers have an opportunity to apply rigorous curriculum expectations. Unlike NCLB, the CCSS affords educators and schools the latitude to explore adequate learning standards that are in line with culturally appropriate instruction material. Hence, the success of subgroups and students from low-income households in attaining literacy and NCLB proficient standards.

Moreover, under the new reading/literacy program, the end-of-year tests now include open-ended questions, and this means that the high stakes assessments and the current curriculum not only align with the NCLB standards but also stresses on the need for higher-order critical thinking and decision-making skills. Therefore, to ensure all students attain success, schools need to focus on embracing suitable skills gap that exists under NCLB by encouraging policies that promote high order thinking anticipations in

line with CCSS (Polikoff, 2015). In elaboration, a teacher may find it difficult to provide inquiry-based lessons when the learners lack basic skills. Therefore, new policies should embrace a down-top approach to learning as opposed to the NCLB policies that focus on top-down accountability approach. As teachers progress to implement new alternative policies, the focus should be on promoting a combination of basic skills and higher-order critical thinking learning to bridge the gap in attaining NCLB set literacy standards.

Also, disaggregated data need to remain in place so as to ensure that teachers and schools adhere to fidelity-based teaching. In line with the NCLB requirements, reporting disaggregated data is crucial in promoting the honest pursuit of high literacy levels for students. In the process, the policy will ensure that teachers will continue to seek creative models and initiatives to adequately promote individual student proficiency and literacy. Based on these policy formulations in North Carolina, the transitional recommendations will enhance genuine reforms that will contribute towards adequate learning and proficient standards for all students in line with the NCLB standards. For example, within the CCSS, North Carolina has also developed Essential Standards policy geared towards incorporating other critical content areas such as English as a second language, healthful living, art, world languages, social studies, and science all which are not part of the core NCLB requirements.

The new Essential Standards, North Carolina intends to develop learners and equip them with standards to make them succeed in the 21st-century world in terms of college readiness and critical thinking. Yet, the primary point of contention is how students (and mainly the learners that lack basic skills and literacy) can respond to the new

academic hurdles? Policy makers and educators in North Carolina understand that educators are able to bridge the gap between critical thinking and deficient basic literacy skills by recruiting highly trained teachers. Importantly, the new policy approach in North Carolina seeks to overcome previous challenges with education curriculum by limiting overreliance on high stakes assessments and narrowed curriculum focus on math and literacy skills. Finally, the existing teacher evaluation system in North Carolina no longer requires the teachers to report their assessment data to the U.S. Department of Education.

The attention received for those students in achievement gap areas such as students with disabilities and students from low-income homes remains a positive result of NCLB legislation and resulting state policies such as those found in NC. Although North Carolina had non-traditional test methods in place, such as extended response tests, and the development of extended standards that highlight critical and higher order thinking skills, the data to support this as a better approach to the design of policy is not yet available.

While North Carolina's approach to improving literacy was admirable and sought to support the limitations outlined in the previous step, results were again inconsistent. Gaps continue to persist across subgroups. Teacher education and support was another admirable attempt by North Carolina to recognize the impact and influence of the teacher in raising student achievement.

### **Step 5: Projecting the Outcomes**

Bardach's (2012) fifth step seeks to analyze projected outcomes for education policies in NC and nationally. Following the initial review of recent North Carolina's

education policies, researchers confirm that the state was progressively shifting towards appropriate initiatives that provided essential resources or tools to enable schools to make strategic staffing choices, improve testing, and enhance education standard in the state in line with the NCLB Act. The new North Carolina policies were clearly informed by the educational demands of the 21st century and their outcomes based on preparing students to take part in a knowledge-based economy (Neal & Schanzenbach, 2010). However, as this educational paradigm shift was experienced in North Carolina, educators and policymakers needed to undertake a critical reflection on policy changes considering the historical context and framework of the past policies such as the NCLB Act that the new education policies are reforming. Since an achievement gap in terms of student literacy in North Carolina still exists, as teachers and schools embark on implementing the new reforms, adequate measures need to be embraced to promote their successful reforms and implementation. Therefore, the current section highlights some of the projected outcomes that the proposed policies will likely achieve in the future.

First, the new policies are likely to improve accountability by broadening the learning scope from the narrow approach under the NCLB initiative. McMurrer (2007) observed that under NCLB, schools substantially reduced instructional time for subjects like physical education, music and art, science, and social studies, while substantially increasing instructional time for math and English. Similar trends have also been reported by researchers such as Griffith and Scharmann (2008) and as well as by Dee and Jacob (2010). Under the new policies in North Carolina, the effort is not only to reduce the NCLB-based overemphasis on the two core subjects but also to broaden the learning

scope to other subjects and allocating sufficient time to all curriculum areas to broaden student performance and proficiency.

Second, the NCLB Act overemphasized on narrowed focus on reading and math tests and their instruction modes (Krieg, 2008). In addition, the tests were limited to huge over-reliance on multiple-choice assessments that are quicker and cheaper to grade than the use of open-ended questions that are better situated in assessing student critical arguments, writing skills, and conceptual understanding (Polikoff, 2015). The use of test-based accountability programs works to empower educators with incentives to educate and test, as opposed to broader concepts of test assessments formulated to represent narrow student comprehension. The evidence of educating to test emerges from diversities in test scores on high stakes assessments used by the federal systems to assess the states' accountability systems, and assessment scores by NAEP that limits focus on students' proficiency (Ladd & Lauen, 2010). The new policies with, therefore, help overcome existing NCLB initiatives where teachers only focus on selected groups of students to attend to by incorporating all the students in an inclusive learning system in line with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

Third, new policies that align with the ESSA initiative will provide North Carolina with higher flexibility in terms of designing their state-level education policy, revisit, and improve on key components of their education that were not met by the NCLB Act. For example, under the reading/literacy policy, North Carolina maintains control over the education contents and academic standards and is not required to make further adjustments. Importantly, new progressive policies enable the state to keep its

existing assessment scores and standards, while implementing new innovative tests aimed at identifying and improving low-performing schools and student subgroups (Polikoff et al., 2015).

Fourth, the new policies focus on closing the achievement gap on each socioeconomic and racial subgroups and their performances in line with the desired literacy standards. In the process, poor students, Latinos, or African Americans stand a chance to be evaluated on individual merits and achieving designated threshold regardless of how these subgroups perform in contrast to White or non-poor student populations. The objective is emphasized in reading and literacy policy to ensure every student attains the needed performance standards.

Analysis and projection of policies aimed at influencing achievement levels for students show promise for correcting some of the challenges associated with federal legislation like NCLB. Policies aimed at broadening the scope of education beyond that of reading and math provide opportunity for students to experience success and proficiency in areas such as science, civics, and the arts. Assessments that allow for extended responses or problem-based experiences lend themselves to better evaluation of conceptual understanding versus isolated knowledge and skills.

### **Steps 6 and 7: Applying Evaluative Criteria and Weighing the Outcomes**

Bardach (2012) pointed out that in Steps 6 and 7, in order to evaluate interventions and their outcomes, there is a need to apply criteria or standards against which the projected outcomes are measured. Notably, the criteria are aimed at judging the

outcome of alternative policy interventions, as opposed to the individual alternative themselves.

Rodriguez-Garcia (2015) postulated a five-criteria approach that can be used to evaluate interventions. Those criteria include (a) Relevance, (b) Progress, (c) Efficiency, (d) Effectiveness, and (e) Impact.

**Relevance.** First, the relevance of the alternative intervention needs to be taken into consideration (Rodriguez-Garcia, 2015). That is, does the intervention contribute to the education needs of the target population and is it in line with the priorities and policies? The new policy approaches in North Carolina such as reading/literacy policy, Race to the Top Initiative, and CCSS are relevant in terms of replacing and addressing the shortcomings and achievement gaps by the NCLB Act. Although not a complete shift and change from the NCLB guidance, the new policies under the ESSA empower North Carolina in terms of discretion over education policies and reduces federal involvement in state-level education programs. In the process, the policies create crucial opportunities for local policymakers and state education officers to refocus on new creative approaches to best improve student literacy and school performance. The new policies broaden learning objectives by defining what students need to know and be able to accomplish in each academic subject at each grade as opposed to emphasizing performance to few core subjects while omitting others.

**Progress.** Second, the progress of the new policy alternative is essential in assessing how the actual student performance compares with scheduled results or projected outcomes. The alternative policies enhance progress by fostering five key

aspects—including teacher quality, school improvement, school accountability, assessments, and student academic standards—all of which ensure student progress towards academic literacy and proficiency. Today, the progress on North Carolina is in line with the required ESSA standards and no further action is needed by the state’s education board. However, under the policies, schools are still required to test learners yearly in math and literacy both in third and eighth grade and once in high school. Students are also monitored progressively in science through assessments at least once in grades 3-5, 6-9, and 10-12. Additional requirements outline that 95% of all the students in each district and school must take part in each of the state’s summative tests.

**Efficiency.** Third, the efficiency of the results needs to be assessed in terms of resources required for the intervention. One main shortcoming of the NCLB policy was underfunding of its ambitious project which was almost half of the needed financial budget (\$13.8 billion) compared to the required budget of up to \$25 billion. Inadequate funding meant that all projects under NCLB could not be implemented (Polikoff, 2015). Under the new policies, the regulations encourage the state to capitalize on its resources to achieve its literacy goals of student-centered learning. The flexible programs enable the state to channel necessary resources to professional development systems in line with the needs of each teacher, a different approach from the traditional ‘sit and get’ professional development initiatives often delivered to group settings.

**Effectiveness.** Fourth, the level of effectiveness of the new policies includes examining whether the specific degrees facilitate schools and educators to achieve their literacy rate objectives. The goal is focused on training students for 21<sup>st</sup>-century learning



and teaching as the state transition to student-centered learning from factory model education. The effectiveness of the initiatives is programmed to be improved using state-wide training initiatives and workshops that can be undertaken by cooperative educational agencies on the best learning and teaching practices in line with the professional development systems. Additional focus is further aimed at aligning educator preparation programs and personalized teacher development initiatives for innovativeness and teaching flexibility.

**Impact.** Fifth, the impact of the alternative initiatives tends to explore the effect of the activities on related socio-economic and overall educational development. North Carolina continues to use school and teacher accountability systems to identify low performing subgroups and low-performing schools in line with NCLB. In line with the new waiver system under ESSA, the new policies in North Carolina continue to facilitate the need to identify schools for comprehensive improvement and support and also in terms of targeted improvement and support. Low performing schools and districts are evaluated using a combination of student growth assessments and School Performance Grades (SPG), as evaluated using Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS) (Polikoff, 2015). Schools that perform poorly with low literacy levels are defined as schools that record scores of D or F grades, with student progress being designated as students “not met expected literacy” or “met the expected literacy.” In contrast, low performing districts are identified as areas where most schools have been identified to have poorly performed, and that all performance records fail to meet the ESSA requirements such as lack to identify schools with underperforming subgroups. Under the

new policies, districts are compelled to identify strategies to improve the performance of low-grade schools and attain set proficiency levels.

The five-part system recommended by Rodriguez-Garcia (2015) served as the lens through which the alternatives are considered. The first step, relevance, addressed the level of flexibility states had to develop broader curriculum standards that addressed all content. The inclusion of policy provisions such as teacher quality, assessment, and achievement align with the overarching goal of improving literacy achievement, however there is considerable variability in how that is accomplished across individual states. A predominate shortcoming of the federal legislation is in the funding provided for states to make such drastic changes to maintain compliance with the law. The level of effectiveness that is addressed in part four of the system led to considerations outside of the scope of the legislation, such as the teacher preparation programs that created highly qualified educators to work in the nations' schools. The final step of considering the impact of the initiative can be seen in the continual use of systems designed to identify subgroup achievement and identify schools in need of support. This attention is a positive direction for subgroups and schools who may otherwise be unsupported or fall through the cracks.

### **Step 8: Making Suitable Policy Decisions**

Bardach's (2012) final policy analysis step (Step 8) intends to carefully weigh the alternative policies before making the final decision regarding the specific policy option to pursue. The decision, in this case, is context specific to North Carolina education policies and it focuses on achieving the required student proficiency and literacy levels

while ensuring school accountability on student performance. Based on the existing policy reforms, researchers and education policymakers advocate the need for policies that will focus on a culturally relevant curriculum where teachers have adequate resources and training to bridge the gap between higher order thinking and skills teaching. Also, the focus needs to be anchored in maintaining a transparent focus on student literacy to promote the sustainable performance of all students on End-of-Year assessment tests.

One of the crucial areas of this policy is promoting and facilitating issues of teacher quality in North Carolina by addressing the conflicting perceptions about the need and the importance of policies aimed at highly qualified teachers. Also, the requirement for teacher quality policy will consider the diversity of different geographical settings, resources, and other internal and external factors that might influence student performance in different school settings. The importance of highly qualified teachers can be addressed by ensuring culturally relevant curriculum where teachers are able to connect their lived learning experience to their literacy levels, while still fulfilling local and state proficiency assessment expectations. For example, the CCSS can enhance teachers in establishing comprehensive performance standards and rigorous curriculum objectives while infusing instructional content with experiences and materials relevant to improved literacy levels among the students they teach.

The new regulations also seek to address the misguided and highly unrealistic expectations of the NCLB Act of achieving 100% proficiency goal in different ways. For instance, one of the objectives of the NCLB was to raise academic literacy throughout the

nation. Considering the fact that the US lodges education performance at the state level, the federal education policymakers had to leave it up to individual states to design tailored proficiency standards in the academic programs (Polikoff, 2015). However, the accountability provisions of the NCLB meant that if any state decided to raise its standards, lack of support and additional resources required to achieve new standards could have led to greater number of schools and students missing the state's set literacy goals. Unsurprisingly, encountered by this dilemma, some states reduced their education proficiency standards (Cronin et al., 2007) where up to seven states had lowered their standards especially in states where such literacy levels were higher. In the new policy framework, the focus includes reducing variance in proficiency standards and also initiating student-focused initiatives with measurable and achievable goals to mitigate against the accountability burden.

The new literacy/reading policy needs to consider eliminating unrealistic NCLB requirements of AYP that named and shamed failed schools and exposed non-core subjects to sanctions. In the new approach, the focus is on time path to ensure that the set deadlines are more feasible to achieve in the early years of the student's learning process. Usher (2015) noted that the AYP program under NCLB largely contributed to raising failure rates over the 10-year period since its implementation. According to Cronin and colleagues (2007), when half of the individual schools failed to show success development, there was a clear indication that the NCLB policy had been met with substantial achievement gaps. In part, the waivers offered during the Obama Administration contributed to a tenable situation in which policy modification helped

ensure that no school failed in its proficiency requirements. To date, the major outcome of the new education policies is the shift of accountability from assessment scores to a wider and inclusive focus on the growth of student scores or progress in declining the literacy achievement gaps.

The primary effort of the new policies is a shift from, or countering the narrow focus and top-down nature of the NCLB Act. According to Polikoff (2015), the policies are in line with the waivers from most stringent NCLB provisions with efforts to mitigate against school failures although the primary concern is that the government had to work outside the Congress, a move that might set a negative precedent in subsequent education policy-making process (Usher, 2015). Importantly, however, the policies in place also address the counterproductive impact that the NCLB act may have imparted on the morale of the teaching profession and teacher commitment.

However, the NCLB policy negatively impacted on teachers and reduced their commitment and especially in schools with disadvantaged subgroups. As a result, there were incidences of clear cheating by teachers in some cities such as Washington, Chicago, and Atlanta showing the magnitude of pressure that NCLB had on teachers under the high stakes accountability process. New regulations in North Carolina set to address these challenges since low morale might contribute to increased cases of teacher attrition and subsequent costs of hiring new instructors (Sutcher et al., 2016). The regulations are also set to work in a manner that reduces the high NCLB pressure with limited support on individual teachers and schools to raise student proficiency and literacy levels.

Support for teachers is crucial to ensuring that students from subgroups and low-income families have equal access to learn and attain higher literacy standards. The new approach intends to address gaps in standards-based approach by reforming the comprehensive approach to student literacy levels and the capacity by teachers to deliver the projected curriculum goals, and also ensure resources necessary to achieve high proficiency among students are available. Critics argue that more attention and resources should be addressed to attain capacity building, which is a helpful process for low performing students and schools (Sutcher et al., 2016). Therefore, the education policies adopted in North Carolina are anchored on a “bolder and broader” approach to teaching and proficiency, one that works to address common hurdles that most disadvantaged students display in schools. Such policy approaches also incorporate better care services, high quality pre-school and after school, and supplementary programs to compensate for less-performing schools and students that fail to attain the required curriculum goals at the end of a specific school grade (Ladd, 2012).

### **Summary**

The introduction and implementation of NCLB presented successes and challenges to schools and state education agencies. The overall increased attention on the performance of subgroups of students who, prior to legislation, may not have received the instructional or financial attention was a success under the scrutiny of the new legislation. The data now available as a result of NCLB provides information for researchers and future policy makers to analyze and interpret in hopes of designing more effective policies to drive increased literacy performance. The level of top down management that

stemmed from NCLB left many states having to choose to fund those subjects that drove the policy rather than supporting more diverse educational experiences for students. Efforts such as those found in the reauthorized ESSA scale back the involvement of the federal government in the dictation of how states develop supports to improve performance. No clear causal relationship or correlating outcome showing that the legislation was effective for raising student proficiency in literacy introduces gaps in available research and opportunity to examine policy more closely to potentially uncover better policy design to yield intended results more consistently. Chapter 4 will provide this analysis and discussion.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

As a North Carolina educator through the NCLB legislation years, with teaching and leading experience, and expertise in the area of literacy, my inquiry of NCLB aimed to inform policy creation for achievement in literacy. The passage of NCLB and its sweeping reform efforts shifted the educational landscape for years following. The main premise of raising student achievement and holding individual schools, districts, and states accountable was a lofty goal and, in theory, a goal with which many could agree. The political landscape leading up to the creation and passage of NCLB was one of recognizing the progress and proficiency of American students had flatlined and/or regressed. The Nation's leaders felt the need to address the failure of the education system to keep up with global successes and innovation. The resulting legislation through NCLB and individual state implementation, such as North Carolina fell short in that assurance of achievement with 100% proficiency for all students. The inconsistency of data that show variability of sustainable results nationally and stateside indicate the need for further examination of what aspects of policy aimed at improving achievement for all are most successful and what needs to be excluded from future policy creation.

#### **Political Issues Addressed by NCLB**

Since the passage of ESEA in 1965, significant funding and federal resources have been directed to the education of students, particularly those most vulnerable such



as students with disabilities, minority students, and students in poverty. NCLB recognized the continual failure of previous legislation and set out to correct the course. Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* nearly 20 years of debate has raged about how to best improve the Nation's schools, particularly the equity of education for the most vulnerable learners and how to maintain the excellence of education for all. Multiple presidencies attempted to address the need but often encountered the objection of increasing federal involvement in directing the education of students at the federal level. The foundation of NCLB was on financial resources, sanctions, choice, and accountability. The aim of this study was to investigate the issues NCLB attempted to address, success and challenges associated and provide recommendations for future policy creation. These objectives were specific to the support of literacy achievement.

### **Implications of NCLB and Literacy Achievement**

A main objective for NCLB was the achievement of students in literacy as literacy was identified as the keystone for success in multiple disciplines. To address this, the legislature determined all instruction in literacy should be grounded in research based instructional practices. This section of NCLB left the states to determine their own procedures and methods for determining research-based practices that would support literacy development. Since the passage of NCLB, criticism regarding the National Reading Panel report (2000) used as the basis for NCLB came under its own scrutiny and backlash. In her article, "Murder Your Darlings: A scientific response to the voice of reason in reading research," Garan (2005) asserts, "instead of an evidence-based guide that can inform practice in reading instruction, we are faced with a biased report

characterized by misreported, overgeneralized findings that do not inform but rather mandate education policy ironically in the name of science” (p. 438).

The issues also arose with the details as they were interpreted and implemented across states. As found through this study, researchers addressed the distortion of curriculum and standards of achievement as states, in order to maintain access to federal funding, reexamined the levels of standards necessary to achieve the required proficiency and narrowed the instruction of curriculum to the teaching of tested subjects, thus forgoing a richer more well-rounded educational experience for students that included the arts, civics, and music education.

### **Recommendations for Policy Creation Aimed at Supporting Literacy**

The popularly known principal of Campbell’s Law (Campbell, 1979) states that whenever critical decisions are based on the outcomes of a quantitative measure, the measure itself becomes corrupted (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). NCLB used the strong arm of accountability to force schools, teachers, and students to achieve using the mark of one assessment of proficiency. The long-held belief of educators that one assessment should never be the only evidence of learning and mastery has been studied and influences daily educational practices throughout the profession. Policy generation aimed at improving achievement results in literacy needs to consider not only the research basis for instructional practice in the content area but also best practices for the evaluation of learning in the particular content area, in this case, literacy. As such, any research base used in the creation or implementation of literacy achievement should be comprehensive

and include evidence from advances in neurobiology (specific to learning to read), reading research, and instructional best practices.

The inconsistent results of NCLB to impact sustainable literacy achievement, even so much as perpetuate the achievement gap in literacy for students with disabilities and low-income students leave us at a tipping point for future progress. This tipping point requires the in-depth examination of what beliefs drive policy creation, how those in key positions for implementation are supported, and a comprehensive evaluation of recommendations policies make around how achievement is to be obtained. As a result of this study, I recommend three considerations for future policy creation as it relates to literacy,

- a thorough examination of the beliefs that drive the policy creation,
- a commitment to develop teachers' capacity in diagnosing and supporting readers, and
- an obligation to developed informed practices based on student populations that demonstrate a limited or lack of response to core instruction, such as those identified through achievement gaps.

### **Examination of Beliefs**

One important constant in this study was the continual reference to legislation leading up to the passage of NCLB. This was significant as it provided a potential rationale and mindset for what later became sweeping educational reform. These contexts and mindsets were the thinking about what educational outcomes should exist for literacy in the US. They also projected the belief that achievement in literacy could

be distilled to scientific examination and standardized evaluation in a single format and at a standard point in time. As a trained and experienced educator, this narrowing belief that all students respond to instruction at the same rate and in the same way goes against the very basis and fabric of education. Educators have long held the belief also reported in the literature (see Simmons & Kameenui, 1998), that students who struggle with literacy need specific and targeted instruction designed to meet individual learning needs. If this were the driving belief behind policy creation, one method or means of achievement would not dominate the requirements included with policies aimed at increasing student performance. Future policy creators would be wise to include researchers and practitioners in the establishment of core beliefs around the intention of the policy as a precursor to developing the structures and provisions under which policy implementation will occur.

### **Commitment to Capacity**

Should policy creators spend time examining and defining the beliefs that will drive the creation of policies aimed at improving educational outcomes for students, there must be consideration of and commitment to the development of teacher capacity. The assumption of NCLB was if students had highly qualified teachers in the classroom, they would yield better results than those classrooms not lead by a highly qualified teacher. While the basis of this criteria has merit, the requirement falls short of assuring the ability of a highly qualified teacher to diagnose and treat the needs of a struggling student in literacy. An example of this would be the elementary school educator. According to the provisions of NCLB, the highly qualified elementary school teacher must complete an

accredited school program in the teaching of young students. Since most elementary educators do not teach a single subject, rather they teach all subjects (mathematics, literacy, social studies, health, science), many elementary education preparatory programs include best practice coursework in multiple content areas and perhaps a single course in differentiating instruction or meeting the needs of diverse learners. Rarely do traditional elementary programs include course work specific to literacy diagnosis, unless a student chooses additional certification. This general approach to elementary educator preparation is akin to a medical professional having a single course in diagnosing illnesses. It would not be considered adequate preparation for comprehensive health assessment, diagnosis of individual symptoms, and corrective treatment any more than it is adequate preparation for an elementary educator to provide comprehensive learning assessment, diagnosis of individual learning needs, and corrective learning treatment.

The results of NCLB that indicated little or no progress for students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged students, and student subgroups based on ethnicity, indicate that attention should be given to how teachers address the needs of students who struggle, particularly in literacy. The limited progress also suggests that building the capacity of all teachers to diagnose and treat learning in literacy could prove critical for meeting the learning needs of all students and closing achievement gaps.

### **Development of Informed Practices**

NCLB required the use of scientifically based reading research in the teaching of literacy to all students. The main premise of the recommendation stemmed from a Congressionally convened panel resulting in the National Reading Panel. Many seasoned

educators questioned the approach of the panel in identifying appropriate measures for scientifically based instruction. J. W. Cunningham (2001) asserts the report

maintains that “The evidence-based methodological standards adopted by the Panel are essentially those normally used in research studies of the efficacy of interventions in psychological and medical re-search” and states its belief “that the efficacy of materials and methodologies used in the teaching of reading and in the prevention or treatment of reading disabilities should be tested no less rigorously” (p. 27; p. 1-5). This argument is based on a metaphor of reading instruction being like the curing of psychological and physical diseases. The Panel’s unquestioned assumption of this metaphor has the regrettable effect of reducing schooling in general, and reading education in particular, to a series of low- or non-interacting interventions. (p. 330)

While in the discussion of capacity earlier in this chapter, the connection to the medical profession provided relevant example to why teacher preparation programs and highly qualified, particularly at the elementary level, needed to head the example of medical preparation as diagnosticians, the scientific research process based on the medical profession does not need to lead the cause in the development of informed practice. The reasoning is simple, the variability and complexity of reading as the learning of sounds and words and as the meaning-making process of comprehension (see discussion of defining literacy in Chapter I) create a bond for successful reading that when isolated, may lead to incomplete interpretations for literacy practice. Literacy educators need information that is informed both quantitatively and qualitatively based on what we know about learning through brain research or research specific to learning disabilities. We need case studies that show real work with actual students who struggle in attaining strong literacy skills. The field would benefit from seeing literacy achievement success in action through video or coaching practices. A compilation of

informed practices that included a collection of research and practical and sound application of instructional literacy practices could inform the field of literacy instruction in a way that statistics and application to general education population doesn't do. Scientific research studies have a place in informing what and how we teach students in literacy, but it cannot be the only yardstick to determine how to reach all students.

### **Conclusion**

NCLB implied an underlying belief and assumption that holding teachers accountable or that strong-holding students and teachers to produce results was enough to motivate students to want to do better and for teachers to teach better, thus leading to better results. This also suggests that the issue of literacy achievement is one of student and teacher motivation or one that money could ultimately alleviate. The substantial body of research that already exists around the brain and the way in which reading development occurs could be a more useful basis for the development of policy designed to impact student achievement. Another significant assumption created by the legislation is that literacy skills develop in a linear and systematic framework and, providing research-based instruction in a systematic manner, leads to an equal rate of learning for all students. If this were true, the proficiency mark at the end of each school year would be attainable and perhaps even guaranteed for every child.

Taking on the challenge of examining such a lengthy and intricate policy such as NCLB even with a targeted focus on the influence of policy for literacy specifically, can lead in many different directions. The variable of teacher capacity, the influence of sanctions, and the requirement of a means of selecting appropriate instructional materials

leaves many areas that the scope of this study still could not address. The method of analysis allowed this researcher to step outside of the structure of more rigid analysis for policy and consider influences of historical context (where we've been and how we got here) and align the three aspects of this study; assessment, achievement, and teacher quality to underlying beliefs about motivation and learning. It is clear through my analysis that coercing schools to perform, the structure in which teachers must meet the needs of individual students, and shaming all when the results are as intended was not the right approach for improving literacy in schools. States like North Carolina show that actions based on a different set of beliefs such as developing a broader educational foundation and rewarding the performance desired rather than simply punishing the undesirable, while it has not demonstrated sustainable growth, is at least moving in a better direction. Ultimately, if our policies reflect what we believe about teaching, learning, achievement, and motivation, our students could have a better chance at greater literacy achievement.



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