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From Regulation to Results: Shifting American Education from Inputs to Outcomes

Mike Johnston*

INTRODUCTION

Ten years after the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB),1 its mention now stirs as much bipartisan grumbling as it initially boasted bipartisan celebration. At its signing ceremony, the late liberal lion Ted Kennedy and newly minted conservative President George W. Bush stood shoulder-to-shoulder, embracing a new framework for American education. It seemed that perhaps we had removed politics from education and had finally commenced the work of improving educational outcomes for all children.

One decade later, bemoaning NCLB has become a guaranteed applause line for any politician of any party before any audience. So what has changed? And what would it take to design a reauthorized NCLB that could gather political support and catalyze lasting change? Finding the way forward requires an honest assessment of NCLB’s failures and a new framework for how to move forward with the reauthorization of a new NCLB. Accordingly, this Essay addresses some of the major mistakes in NCLB and proposes a new framework for its reauthorization—a framework that will move our national attention from NCLB’s flawed focus on inputs toward a new focus on outputs.

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I. An NCLB Scorecard: "Partially Proficient"

One can compare NCLB to the Ford Model T; no one would want to drive it today, but its bold invention created a new paradigm for modern transportation. In form and function, NCLB is not unlike the Model T: NCLB is clumsy and imperfect, and when it was passed, we lacked enough technological sophistication in our assessments and data management to show what was possible in education and how those aims could be realized. But Ford had the audacity to make the Model T a vehicle of egalitarianism, defying the paradigm that cars were only for the elite. In its promise that children of all backgrounds can achieve at the highest levels, NCLB shares this boldness.

NCLB initiated three tectonic shifts in federal education policy that deserve special attention for their failures as much as their successes: (1) introducing the notion of nationwide accountability in education, (2) pushing teacher quality to the forefront of our national dialogue, and (3) taking steps to use quantitative assessments in our evaluation of the education system.

More than any other piece of federal education legislation, NCLB introduced the concept that the nation’s education system should be accountable for its results. Before NCLB, there was little or no ability to compare the performance of students within the same school system, much less students within the same state. NCLB insisted that states and districts must measure and report student performance to create transparency for students, parents, and teachers alike.

To accomplish this, NCLB required each state to create academic standards, to use standardized tests aligned to those standards, and to publish that data for public consumption. The flood of NCLB reporting data was a success in itself. For the first time, we had disaggregated state data that painted a picture of student-, school-, and district-level performance. As never before, this information spotlighted the persistent achievement gaps between affluent and low-income students. And, for the first time, this stark portrait began to create demands for consequences in schools, districts, and states in which the education system continued to fail.

Despite the value of this unsettling portrait, it is only half-complete. NCLB was right to rely on standardized tests as a method of measuring achievement, but, in many places, the tests employed were not yet rigorous, comparable, or useful. Even today, assessments do not deliver achievement data in real time (most districts wait four to six months to get test data back). The data that is delivered is not especially useful for teachers because the tests are based on low-rigor academic standards and assessments, and they do not measure a balance of twenty-first century skills like critical analysis, creativity, and collaboration. In short, to accomplish the goals of NCLB, tests should be faster, more sophisticated, and more functional.

NCLB made an unforeseen mistake by allowing the states to create their own academic content standards.\(^5\) Despite the fact that NCLB required the standards to be "challenging,"\(^6\) the law did not define that term, thus leaving it to the states to define the level of rigor for themselves. The results were predictable: Faced with the prospect of punitive federal interventions for poor academic performance, states simply turned to the lowest common denominator by dumbing down standards and assessments. In this way, students were miraculously labeled "proficient" despite scoring significantly lower than their peers in other states and countries.

NCLB’s delegation of standard writing to the states has thus sparked a national race to the bottom while simultaneously making it harder to compare performance across the country. With no incentive to create rigorous standards and assessments, but every incentive to boost the number of students scoring "proficient," many states have rushed to create low-rigor standards and assessments.\(^7\) This creates comparison difficulties. With every state adopting different academic standards and assessments, students labeled “proficient” in one state would be considered “unsatisfactory” in another.\(^8\) Thus, aside from infrequently administered international assessments, there is no way to uniformly gauge student performance across the country.\(^9\)

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6. Id.
8. Id.
9. Policymakers and educators across the country are currently working to address these problems by developing new assessments that are aligned to the Common Core State Standards. This is a comprehensive set of standards drafted by a collection of states under the aegis of the National Governors’ Association. Far from “federalizing” what our students should learn, the Standards are state-created academic standards that align to the twenty-first century skills that students need in a globalized economy. See COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS INITIATIVE, http://www.corestandards.org (last visited Dec. 6, 2011).
Finally, in what has become a cruel irony, state efforts to comply with NCLB's reporting requirements have revealed that NCLB dramatically underestimated the enormity of the achievement gap. As we acquire more and better data from NCLB reporting, we now know that achievement gaps between white and minority students are so large (and so persistent) that the goal of 100% proficiency by 2014 is impossibly out of reach.10

But none of this suggests that the founding principles of NCLB should be abandoned. By learning from the successes of the last decade, drawing on the law's strengths, and courageously addressing its flaws, the NCLB reauthorization can still make historic progress toward an education system that ensures success for all children.

II. MOVING EDUCATION FROM INPUTS TO OUTCOMES

The reauthorization of NCLB affords us a unique opportunity to redirect the national education agenda. To do that effectively, we must shift the focus of the current conversation from inputs (e.g., how much money we spend, how many degrees our teachers have, how well-prepared students are initially, etc.) to outcomes: how effective our teachers and principals are, how much students improve through a year's instruction, and what results we receive for the funding we invest. What follows is a vision for realigning our federal policy to value outcomes over inputs, with a specific focus on students, educators, schools, and funding.

A. Outcomes for Students: Growth over Status

With a narrow focus on one achievement data point in time, the proficiency scores under NCLB do not help students, parents, or the public to evaluate student or school performance. NCLB should instead follow the path of the leading states, which have built accountability systems based on growth.11 While we must continue to focus on the long-term goal of seeing every child reach academic proficiency, the indicator that often matters most for parents and educators is how much a child is improving from year to year, not a static number or label that has little relation to previous (or future) performance.

10. Achievement Gap, Educ. Wk. (July 7, 2011), www.edweek.org/ew/issues/achievement-gap (stating that black and Hispanic students continue to trail their white counterparts by as many as two grade levels in math and reading).

NCLB started with status-based growth measures (test scores on an absolute scale), but it opened the way for breakthroughs like the Colorado Growth Model and the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System, both of which measure student academic growth over time. These measures actually help parents determine whether a particular classroom, school, or model is supporting their students' academic achievement, and they also help parents and students focus on attainable targets that inspire them to make real progress. At the system level, growth measures can possibly help neutralize the stigma of neighborhoods and schools with low rates of proficiency by focusing on how much progress students make along the way, not solely on where they start or finish. Growth measures thus enable us to identify and reward the schools that are making dramatic gains with students, not just the schools that enrolled students with high test scores.

These growth measures can fundamentally change our definition of success for individual students, educators, and entire schools. Under the flawed NCLB system, we assumed many schools were doing a poor job based solely on their proficiency scores: Thus, a school with 35% proficiency rates in fourth-grade reading was thought to be a bad school, while a school with 85% proficiency was thought to be a good school. But by focusing on growth, models like Colorado's have revealed that some of the most effective schools were schools with low overall proficiency but extremely high levels of growth. Put simply, the 35% proficiency school is a triumph once one realizes that the fourth graders there were starting the year at 0% proficiency. And, by contrast, some of the most “successful” schools (those showing 85% proficiency) were actually coasting; after all, scoring 85% proficient does not seem nearly as impressive when 95% of the students started the year proficient.

12. Adequately Yearly Progress, see infra note 29, only considers whether students are proficient or not. It does not consider the amount of student growth over time.

13. Colorado Growth Model, supra note 11; Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System, supra note 11.

14. For example, one of Colorado's most successful charter school networks—West Denver Preparatory—has consistently high growth (at one campus, a 94 median growth percentile in math and a 71 median growth percentile in reading) but lower overall proficiency rates (76% proficiency in math and 62% proficiency in reading). State, District, and School Performance, SCHOOLVIEW, http://www.schoolview.org/performance.asp (last visited Oct. 16, 2011). A median growth percentile is calculated by ordering all student growth scores, selecting the median score, and then comparing the percentile growth against the median. SchoolView Growth Model FAQs (General), SCHOOLVIEW, http://www.schoolview.org/GMFAQ.asp#Q21 (last visited Oct. 16, 2011).

15. This is most tragically illustrated by the impact on high-performing students in the United States. The United States ranks thirty-first out of fifty-six industrialized nations in terms of the percentage of students scoring “Advanced” in math. ERIC A. HANUSHEK, PAUL E. PETERSON & LUDGER WOESSMANN, U.S. MATH PERFORMANCE IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE 4 (2010), available at http://www.hks...
B. Outcomes for Educators: Moving from Qualifications to Effectiveness

NCLB must move beyond its current framework, which focuses exclusively on teacher qualifications, and replace it with a framework that focuses on teacher effectiveness. This means discarding our old metrics for measuring teacher quality—certifications, degrees, and training programs—and replacing them with reliable metrics tied to effectiveness.

The current NCLB teacher-quality metric, which focuses on certification with no attention to educator effectiveness, is the wrong model. This metric hoped to identify and redress a crucial problem at the time: A large number of teachers who were teaching outside of their accredited subject area, and these teachers were disproportionately placed in classrooms with low-income and minority students. Although we know that content-area expertise in secondary math and science does correlate positively to teacher effectiveness, there is a clear distinction between content-area expertise and the certification required to get a teaching license. Most licensure programs do not provide extensive content-area training but instead focus on pedagogy and instructional strategies. Indeed, there is no direct linkage between certification and actual teacher effectiveness. Yet, we do know that the effectiveness of the classroom teacher is the single most important in-school factor for determining student success, and so our licensing and accreditation process should focus on a teacher’s overall effectiveness—not where they received their certification or how many


hours of coursework they completed. These inputs to a teacher’s training are not nearly as important as the outcomes demonstrated by the student learning that happens in their classroom.

Thus, instead of focusing on teacher qualifications, we should move to effectiveness-based metrics for hiring and evaluating teachers. These metrics will need to be robust and complex, including evaluation of teachers’ instructional practices from supervisors, peers, and students. Most importantly, these metrics should include measures of student growth as a core component.

This is a dramatic shift toward an outcome-based regime for educators, as it ceases to focus on front-end qualifications and instead focuses on results in classrooms. The immediate resistance to this transition would likely come from those who believe that requiring higher qualifications is the only way to protect or increase the prestige of the teaching profession. These people believe that we should add more coursework, seat time, and specialization for teachers before they enter the classroom, instead of making teaching more competitive by attracting a much larger and more diverse body of applicants who deliver reliable and dramatic results in the classroom. Such opponents argue that reducing the certification requirements will reduce the professionalism of teaching by signaling that anyone can teach. These critics argue that the profession is already losing its prestige, and that higher teacher salaries are the only way to attract the best and brightest. To be sure, one of our top priorities should be to pay teachers more, but to make the case for increasing compensation, we must first increase the prestige of the teaching profession.

Experience in other sectors demonstrates that opening up a labor market by lowering barriers to entry makes a profession more selective. As universities know, to drive up selectivity you can either (a) accept fewer applicants or (b) attract more applicants. In a profession facing a major teacher shortage,
accepting fewer applicants is impossible, meaning that the best chance to increase selectivity and status in the teaching profession is to increase the number of applicants. We need to lower the barriers to entry while also making it easier to dismiss and replace unsatisfactory teachers, thus ensuring competition and the concomitant prestige of entering an elite profession.

Thus conceived, this model begins to mirror most private sector businesses—including consulting, financial management, and advertising—where all are welcome to apply, highly talented managers know what they are looking for, and very clear metrics support employee improvement and success after arrival (or dismissal if they fail to meet those metrics).24

We can provide our struggling teachers with very clear avenues for improvement, coupled with the urgency that there are a dozen applicants in line behind them who would like their position if they do not fulfill certain requirements. This high level of accountability would create the political will to restore the status of the teaching profession by raising salaries for teachers. And we would make that financial investment not because our teacher salaries lag behind other countries, but because we see that there is no better return on our investment than attracting and retaining highly effective educators.

Finally, by working to define and measure teacher and principal effectiveness, we can work to evaluate which programs, training, and professional development methods contribute the most to teacher effectiveness. In this way, we can signal that we are looking to ensure the teaching profession the status and respect it deserves by making it more selective in its recruitment, more rigorous in its evaluation, and more reliable in its metrics. Only then will we begin to treat our best educators like the national treasures they are.

C. Outcomes for Schools: Courage on School Turnaround

Although it was not the first initiative to propose grading schools, NCLB brought this idea to the national stage. Indeed, we can now use NCLB reporting data to identify schools that are high-performing, average, or “dropout factories” (Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s term for high schools in which at least 40% of the freshman class drops out).25 This focus on transparency

24. For instance, Bain & Co., one of the world’s most prestigious consulting and financial management firms, places less emphasis on hard credentials like undergraduate school or degree, and more emphasis on the “ability to think,” focusing on intense apprenticeship. Your Background, JOIN BAIN & CO., http://www.joinbain.com/build-your-career/your-background/default.asp (last visited Nov. 22, 2011).

25. Press Release, U.S. Dep’t of Educ., Secretary Arne Duncan’s Remarks at the Release of America’s Promise Alliance Report, “Building a Grad Nation” (Nov. 30,
brought the first wave of school closures based on performance, closures that also sparked heated political battles.26

By addressing these dropout factories, NCLB indicated that it was not only concerned that every child have access to an education, but also that every child have access to a high-quality education.27 This means that merely having the right to enter school is not enough; the law was going to expect every child to graduate ready for college or a career. Rather than just guaranteeing inputs, NCLB stood for the proposition that we would expect certain outcomes for students and hold their schools accountable if those outcomes were not met.

NCLB tried to address this problem, but the solutions were wanting because they were at once overly prescriptive in areas that do not matter and laissez faire in areas that do.28 NCLB first mandated that all schools make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), or "continuous and substantial academic improvement for all students."9 Any school that fails to meet AYP for two con-

26. See, e.g., Katherine Boo, Expectations: Can the Students Who Became a Symbol of Failed Reform Be Rescued?, NEW YORKER, Jan. 15, 2007, at 44 (documenting then-Denver Superintendent Michael Bennet’s efforts to close and reopen a failing school in inner-city Denver).

27. The predominant narrative of American public education for the past 200 years has been about expanding access: first by extending education to non-landowners, then non-aristocrats, then recent immigrants, then working-class children, then women, then African-Americans, Miliken v. Bradley, 418 U.S. 717 (1974); Keyes v. Sch. Dist. No. 1, Denver, Colo., 413 U.S. 189 (1973); Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Bd. of Educ., 402 U.S. 1 (1971), then a new wave of undocumented immigrants, Plyler v. Doe, 457 U.S. 202 (1982), and finally special education students, Bd. of Educ. v. Rowley, 458 U.S. 176 (1982). After Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), and its progeny, it therefore seemed as if America had finally achieved universal access: Every child between the ages of five and eighteen living in the United States had access to an education that met his or her needs, regardless of race, color, national origin, intelligence, or disability. It would have been possible to declare the American education reform effort complete at that juncture; after all, that is largely what America has done with other major civil rights questions. For example, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Pub. L. No. 88-352, 78 Stat. 241, guaranteed the right to vote, but it did not attempt to remedy the massive and persistent voting disparities in poor communities of color. The Civil Rights Act also prohibits race-based employment discrimination, id., but it does not attempt to narrow the large discrepancy in hiring rates for minorities. Similarly, minorities are entitled to apply to college, but the Supreme Court has abolished racial balancing in the form of quotas at public colleges and universities. Gratz v. Bollinger, 539 U.S. 244 (2003). Likewise, the Fair Housing Act, 42 U.S.C. § 3711 to 3797ee-1 (2006), prohibits race-based housing discrimination, but it does not prescribe solutions for the disparity in leasing rates to people of color.


29. Id. § 6311(b)(2)(C).
secutive years would be subject to “school improvement,”\(^{30}\) where the school must design a plan to remediate its academic deficiencies.\(^{31}\) After two more years of failing to make AYP, the school is identified for “corrective action,” which might include replacing portions of the school staff, restructuring the organization of the school, or appointing an outside expert to coach the school toward making AYP through curriculum restructuring or other methods.\(^{33}\)

If the school still fails to meet AYP after one year of corrective action (and a total of five years after the school was originally identified as needing improvement), the school is subject to the most aggressive intervention—restructuring.\(^{33}\) Under restructuring (commonly referred to as “turnaround”), NCLB mandates that a school undertake one of five interventions: (1) reopen as a public charter school, (2) replace most or all of the staff, (3) contract with an outside entity to run the school, (4) turn operation of the school over to the state, or (5) engage in “any other major restructuring of the school’s governance arrangement that makes fundamental reforms.”\(^{34}\) Unfortunately, a case study of five states found that between 86 and 96% of the schools facing “turnaround” chose the last and least dramatic option—“other” restructuring—which generally entails making marginal changes to curriculum or hiring “turnaround specialists.”\(^{35}\) This means that the worst-performing schools in the country are not taking the kind of dramatic steps that could bring transformative change.

There is no doubt that the work of school turnarounds is incredibly hard on students, neighborhoods, families, elected officials, and district leadership. While these dropout factories have done immeasurable damage to their communities, they have also been institutions in the community, and students and parents alike may find it difficult to concede that their school is failing. For many of these schools, the parents may also be alumni, and an indictment of the school may resonate as an indictment of the parents’ own education and achievements.

For these reasons, deciding to close a school often costs superintendents, mayors, and school board members more political capital than any other decision in education reform.\(^{36}\) Such political costs result in part because this type of advocacy for underserved populations represents a systemic change from the traditional civil rights work in the 1960s. In the previous wave of education

\(^{30}\) Id. § 6316(b)(1)(A).

\(^{31}\) Id. § 6316(b)(3)(A).

\(^{32}\) Id. § 6316(b)(7)(C)(iv).

\(^{33}\) Id. § 6316(b)(8)(A).

\(^{34}\) Id. § 6316(b)(8)(B).

\(^{35}\) CTR. ON EDUC. POLICY, A CALL TO RESTRUCTURE RESTRUCTURING 10-11 (2008).

\(^{36}\) See, e.g., Yesenia Robles, Recall Effort Begun Against DPS Board President, DENVER POST, Jan. 20, 2011, at B4 (documenting a recall effort against a Denver school board member after he approved a turnaround effort that centered on an entire school-feeder pattern, making it one of the nation’s largest turnaround efforts).
reform, public officials were guaranteeing people individual access to public institutions; we were offering access to the franchise, to jury service, and to higher education. Now, instead, we are looking to close or transform social institutions that have been the bedrock of many communities. While the former felt like an opened door, the latter may understandably feel like an eviction notice.

Nonetheless, turning around the lowest-performing schools is the linchpin of a results-driven system like the one proposed here. The notable successes of the past decade have shown that it is possible to turn around low-performing schools through dramatic intervention. The schools that have closed and reopened or converted to high-performing charters have shown dramatically different outcomes with the same population of kids. In the former category, Manual High School in Denver closed, reopened, and has since seen larger-than-expected academic growth. In Boston, Orchard Gardens K-8 required that all staff members reapply for their positions, hired new faculty, and, as a result, is currently improving in English scores and on target to meet AYP in math. In the latter category, schools like West Denver Prep have shown dramatic results in converting a low-performing school to a high-performing charter school.

Because they attempt to remedy one of education’s most intractable problems, turnarounds are not always easy and are not always successful. However, the projects that have seen the most success, and that stand as examples to similarly situated schools, are those that have used the most aggressive turnaround strategies. This is why one of the most important outcomes of any NCLB reauthorization must include an emphasis on comprehensive school turnaround for our most troubled schools rather than superficial tinkering.

To accomplish this goal, the federal government will likely narrow its accountability framework to cover fewer schools (that is, focus performance-reporting requirements on the lowest-performing 10-25% of schools in a state instead of requiring all schools to report on an annual basis). However, even as we narrow the focus of school accountability, we must also intensify the interventions required for poorly performing schools. This would require eliminating a school’s ability to opt for “other major restructuring.” Too often, this “other” option has allowed schools to pursue superficial changes that are easy to enact but result in no lasting change. Such changes are the educational equivalent of rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. If we are to

37. See infra Table 1 (documenting the dramatic rise in test scores in an inner-city Denver middle school after aggressive academic interventions).
38. See Boo, supra note 26; State, District, and School Performance, supra note 14.
40. See State, District, and School Performance, supra note 14 (select “0880 - Denver County 1” for the school district, and “9390 - West Denver Prep—Lake Campus” for the school).
save the passengers, we have to be courageous enough to insist on effective changes to the ship’s structure and leadership. Insisting on rigorous and comprehensive intervention in the lowest-performing schools gives the best hope to those kids whom we have supported the least.

D. Outcomes-Based Funding

In addition to renewing our focus on student outcomes by prioritizing growth over absolute test scores, concentrating on teacher and principal outcomes through refined evaluations, and emphasizing school-level outcomes by maintaining rigorous requirements for school turnaround, it is also time to build on the success of competitive grant programs like Race to the Top by continuing to tie federal funding decisions to outcomes. One of the most vociferous complaints about NCLB concerned the micromanagement that came through mandates and overregulation. Many funding streams are tied directly to individual regulations or requirements that dramatically restrict how money can be spent and what it can be spent on. Some states refuse to implement NCLB’s provisions at all, and others built massive district infrastructures to comply with the testing and reporting requirements of NCLB.

The Obama administration implemented a creative and effective way to fundamentally change the nature of the state-federal relationship through the expansion of Race to the Top and other competitive grant programs such as Investing in Innovation. The power of these programs is that they (1) are entirely voluntary; (2) allow states to develop their own education reform plans and tailor them to match their own, specific needs; and (3) support courageous, reform-minded states that are pursuing strategies that will help the entire education system. The encouragement of bold action by states fulfills one of the U.S. Department of Education’s core functions: being the research and development laboratory for education nationwide.

Many state and district leaders say that they have seen more education reform in the last two years than in the previous twenty; this is a testament to


the aggressive ways in which states and districts have evolved under the Race to the Top and Investing in Innovation frameworks. These incentives provided financial momentum, allowed states to navigate their own local politics by letting them design their own plans, and freed states from other regulations to do more innovative work.\textsuperscript{45} NCLB should include a method to ensure that far more of the Department of Education's state funding is based on competitive grants. This method would allow state-developed best practices to organically emerge as the template for other states rather than forcing one federal structure on all fifty states.

The same principles should apply to funding beyond just Race to the Top and Investing in Innovation. NCLB should push for more flexibility in how federal dollars are distributed and spent, particularly in the expenditure of special education and Title I funding.\textsuperscript{46} Instead of distributing block grants to states for special-needs and low-income students, the Department could encourage states to adopt student-weighted funding. This mechanism would create a funding multiplier for any characteristic that makes a child more expensive to educate: non-native English speaker, special education status, or low-income. Students with such needs would receive additional funding, and these students would then carry those additional revenues with them to any school that they attend. This allows the school to automatically receive the additional funds required to educate these students. Perhaps more importantly, this funding structure could provide a positive incentive for schools to seek out and matriculate the students who are the most difficult to educate because the required money would be consistently available.

This increased flexibility in the ways in which schools can spend Title I and special-education dollars would give schools greater latitude in how to best serve these students. Special-needs students could be placed alongside non-special-needs students more frequently, and a support staff member could monitor the classroom and assist multiple students rather than just one. This would result in more direct services for students and more school-level innovation that spurs new instructional best practices.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The country has been driving the educational equivalent of a Model T for more than a decade. We know newer and more sophisticated models are ready for the road, and expectations are building that a new model must offer fair,

\textsuperscript{45} In fact, the Obama administration's latest policies propose to relax certain NCLB provisions if states agree to adopt certain core education reforms like teacher evaluations. \textit{See Kevin Helliker, 'No Child' Fix Excites, Vexes, \textit{Wall St. J.}, Sept. 24, 2011, at A5.}

\textsuperscript{46} "Title I" refers to Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Pub. L. No. 89-10, 79 Stat. 27. Title I funding is targeted at school districts that serve high percentages of low-income children.
growth-based accountability, a deep focus on teacher effectiveness, requirements for rigorous school turnarounds, and a long-term commitment to competitive grant funding.

As the country continues to lurch forward with an outmoded educational model, political pressure is mounting to force some sort of NCLB reauthorization. However, a reauthorization will only be worthwhile if it sets a clear course toward an outcomes-driven system. Amidst increased backlash against accountability, assessment, and school turnaround, any legislative retreat from those critical issues would be more pernicious than failing to reauthorize at all.

A new NCLB must signal a dramatic paradigm shift. For decades, we have argued over which one reform would fix the entire system. The new generation of education reform must do the opposite: Rather than searching for a single solution, we must commit to building a system that gathers clear and meaningful data on success and failure and uses that information to drive decisions about who to hire, what to fund, and when to take dramatic action. This means moving from an input- to an outcome-based model where, instead of measuring one static moment of student performance, we are measuring growth over time; instead of focusing on training before a teacher enters the classroom, we are focusing on results once in the classroom; instead of concentrating on what goes into a school turnaround plan, we look at what comes out of it; and instead of simply measuring how many dollars go into a school, we focus on what outcomes those dollars leverage.

Despite the ample evidence of America's struggling educational system, there is reason for impassioned optimism about the road ahead. The first generation of NCLB pushed us to measure performance and to publish the corresponding data without any real sense of what we would find, how we would fix what we found, or if it was even fixable at all. Ten years later we have seen how dishearteningly wide the achievement gap is and how far away the goal of universal proficiency remains.

But more importantly, this data has helped us find the places where classrooms and schools are delivering incredible results despite overwhelming challenges. In short, the data shows us that there is a viable path to proficiency for all students, if we focus on the breakthrough practices that are generating positive results. Unexpectedly, the resistance to this data is much fiercer when we know that success is possible. In a world where we know that swift and courageous action can change outcomes, there is a far greater fear of evidence to this effect, because that evidence demands action.

A new NCLB hangs in the balance, caught between those who would hide the data for fear of what it demands, and those who believe that it is only through the sustained revelation and evaluation of that data that we will be compelled to take the courageous steps that will change the lives of the next American generation.
Table 1: Beach Court Elementary Case Study

Beach Court Elementary: 5th Grade
(Ninety-seven percent of students received free or reduced lunch in 2010.)

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