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NATIONAL NEWS

Shock Treatment: Scores Jumped, Then Stalled, After NCLB

Education Week

By: Sean Cavanagh

December 15, 2011

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/state_edwatch/2011/12/shock_treatment_scores_improved_after_nclb_report_says.html

The No Child Left Behind Act is taking quite a public beating from critics on all sides these days, but a [new paper argues](#) that the law contributed to a substantial increase in students' math skills in the years after it took hold.

The problem: After the initial shock of the law's "accountability" mechanisms wore off, there was a leveling-off of student gains—which suggests that bold new education policies are needed to unleash a fresh wave of academic progress, author Mark Schneider contends.

The paper, published by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, speaks to some of the big questions swirling around the attempted, long-stalled reauthorization of the law, as well as to other major, multi-state policy efforts to drive educational improvements at a national scale.

It may also have a few implications for presidential politics.

Schneider is a political scientist and a [former commissioner](#) of the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) who served during George W. Bush's administration, which has not stopped him from [taking issue with NCLB](#) in the past. In his new paper, he notes that from just before the time when NCLB was signed into law—2002—through around 2005, there was a "sharp uptick" in math performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, particularly among 4th graders. There were also big gains among black and Hispanic students. Eighth-grade math scores showed similar, though less striking improvements.

While researchers can't judge cause-and-effect from NAEP scores, Schneider believes the student progress is partly attributable to the shock of NCLB's testing-and-sanction policies coming to states and schools. He draws an analogy to the research of evolutionary biologist [Stephen Jay Gould](#) and paleontologist [Niles Eldredge](#), who said that change to complex systems is often brought about by sudden, radical transformation, rather than incremental change. One classic example from science is the meteor that scientists believe [struck the earth](#) ages ago, wiping out the dinosaurs and changing the climate in a way that was favorable to mammals.

NCLB, Schleicher said, was a meteor of its own. But as was the case in nature, after the law hit, an "equilibrium" set in, and the NCLB law's effect wore off, Schneider contends. After a few years of steady gains, driven in part by the law's policies, national NAEP math scores began to stagnate around 2005, he says.

The same test score boom and bust, he acknowledges, was not evident in grade 4 and 8 reading scores, which have remained relatively stagnant over time. Some researchers have suggested that the foundation for reading skill is more dependent on factors outside school than are math skills, Schneider explains—which might have lessened the impact of policies like NCLB.

Why does any of this matter for Campaign 2012?

Schneider was initially asked by Fordham to look at [Texas Gov. Rick Perry's record](#) on education, which has [come under criticism](#) from the Obama administration and others. Schneider found that post-2000, after Perry became governor, math gains slowed and then stagnated, which would seem to give fodder to the Republican presidential candidate's detractors.

But Schneider sees larger forces at work. The Lone Star state was an early leader in adopting a tough accountability system under then-Gov. Bush, Perry's predecessor. (That state law later [served as a blueprint](#) for NCLB.) As a result, Texas was ahead of the curve in making test-score gains in the 1990s—but that meant it also reached the NCLB-style accountability plateau when Perry became governor, Schneider says.

And so what does the NCLB plateau mean for U.S. schools, in the long term?

Now that the initial effect of the law has worn off, the United States needs a "new shock" to galvanize another round of school progress, Schneider argues. "Scanning the heavens for the next meteor," he says, the most likely candidates are the [Common Core standards](#), and efforts to create new measures of teacher performance.

"If the United States is lucky, one or both of these shocks will produce yet another major uptick in math scores," he writes. "If we are really lucky, these shocks will produce upticks in reading and other subject areas as well."

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White House Issues Inventory of STEM Education Spending

Education Week

By: Erik Robelen

December 15, 2011

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2011/12/amid_all_the_talk_about.html

If you think about the federal role in improving STEM education, odds are the first agencies that come to mind are the U.S. Department of Education and the National Science Foundation. But while they are the two biggest players, plenty of other agencies also have some skin in the game, from NASA to the Department of Agriculture and even the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

A new [report](#) from the White House National Science and Technology Council provides the full picture. In fact, it's [billed](#) as "the most detailed inventory of the federal STEM education portfolio ever compiled." (And I have no reason to doubt this, though as some readers may know, there have been previous efforts to tackle the subject.)

The bottom line? The feds spend about \$3.4 billion on STEM education each year (based on 2010 data), spread across 13 federal agencies.

Some experts have previously argued that there's a lot of overlap and redundancy between federal STEM education programs, but this report from the [National Science and Technology Council](#) suggests the issue may be overstated.

"There is only modest overlap in investments and no duplication among the STEM education investments," the report says. "That does not mean that there are not opportunities for better alignment and deployment of STEM resources."

Here are a few highlights of the "who" and "how" of the spending:

- Of the \$3.4 billion total, nearly \$1 billion is spent on activities that target the specific workforce needs of particular agencies, such as the National Institutes of Health and the Department of Transportation.
- The remainder of the money is spent on broader STEM education matters, dominated by funding from the NSF and the Education Department.
- About \$1.1 billion has as its primary goal targeting populations underrepresented in the STEM fields (such as African-Americans, Hispanics, and females).
- 24 investments totaling \$312 million have the primary goal of improving teacher effectiveness.
- 80 percent of all the federal spending comes from three agencies: the NSF (\$1.2 billion), the Department of Education (\$1 billion), and the Department of Health and Human Services (\$577 million).
- About 60 percent of all the federal spending targets K-12 education, with the rest directed at the postsecondary level.

To learn more about one agency's work you may not know about, the Department of the Interior, check out this recent [EdWeek story](#). It features a program operating at several national parks. Also, here's a recent blog post about a new set of [NSF grants](#) aimed at "transforming" STEM education.

This new White House report was required under the [America COMPETES Act](#). And the report is only the first step. The White House is also charged with developing a five-year strategic plan for advancing STEM education, which is expected out early next

year.

UPDATE: (Dec. 16, 7:50a.m.)

In my haste to write this blog post yesterday, I neglected to probe one important question: What does the federal government have to show for its annual \$3.4 billion investment in STEM education?

Unfortunately, while the White House report does address evaluations of the various programs examined, it never actually says what those studies reveal.

Of the 252 distinct "investments" that met the criteria to be included, 119 have been the subject of agency evaluations since 2005, with about half conducted in 2010 or 2011, the report says. And a wide range of evaluation tools have been used.

The report includes several charts on the types of evaluations conducted, whether a randomized control trial or a simple "pre-post gain" analysis. But it doesn't say what they measure other than to "assess whether a project, activity, or grantee is reaching stated goals in order to guide ongoing improvements."

Again, the White House report never gets to the bottom line of offering even a quick overview of what all the evaluations show. That's too bad. Maybe that will come later?

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STATE NEWS

Iowa literacy goal transcends party lines, speaker says

Des Moines Register

By: Mary Stegmeir

December 15, 2011

<http://www.desmoinesregister.com/article/20111216/NEWS/312160040/-1/GETPUBLISHED03wp-content/lowa-literacy-goal-transcends-party-lines-speaker-says>

A push for reading draws praise during a Des Moines conference.

The goal of having every Iowa child learn to read presents the greatest opportunity for consensus within Gov. Terry Branstad's expansive education reform proposal, state and national education policy leaders said Thursday.

The measure — which would require students to demonstrate literacy in order to be promoted to fourth grade — was the topic of an all-day conference in Des Moines attended by roughly 100 state educators, legislators and community leaders.

"What your governor has done by identifying this third-grade literacy is found an issue that appeals both to the right and to the left," said keynote speaker Ralph Smith, director of the Anne E. Casey Foundation's national Campaign for Grade Level Reading.

Thirty-one percent of Iowa's fourth-graders scored below basic on the reading portion of the 2011 National Assessment of Education Progress, a test given biannually to a sample of the state's students in fourth and eighth grade.

The performance of third-graders on last year's Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, a battery of exams given to all children in third, fourth and other grades, showed nearly 23 percent of students scoring below proficient in reading.

Depending on which results are considered, between 7,800 and 10,000 Iowa children were illiterate in third grade last year.

A report released earlier this year by Smith's organization found that students who don't read proficiently by third grade are four times more likely to drop out of school.

The majority of children who struggle with literacy come from low-income families, Smith added.

"We have become a nation which allows the fate of children to depend on the economic security and status of their parents," he said. "And as a large number of people feel their sense of economic security and status being eroded, they wonder about the children."

Smith went on to say that although schools play a central role in the push for literacy, community initiatives should also be part of Iowa's efforts.

Conference attendee Clair "Rudy" Rudison — a Des Moines minister and 2010 Democratic candidate for Iowa House District 66 — said his Des Moines church launched a reading program earlier this year. More than 25 children, and a handful of adults, take advantage of the service.

“We were seeing so many of our kids dropping out of school, because if you can’t read, you can’t keep up,” Rudison said. “We hope this (focus on literacy) can become a statewide effort.”

The retention portion of Branstad’s proposal, which is based on a model that has had success in Florida, has been criticized by some Iowa parents and teachers. But Linda Fandel, special assistant on education in the governor’s office, defended the policy’s hard-line approach during a panel discussion following Smith’s speech.

“The value of the retention stick in the policy is that it pressures the whole system to really look out for more children, so we are getting more children through,” she said. “Retention should never be the goal.”

Like Smith, Fandel said she believes the proposal has the potential to gain bipartisan support.

Thursday’s conference — which was sponsored by Des Moines’ Child and Family Policy Center, the Iowa Afterschool Alliance, the United Way of Central Iowa and the Business/Education Alliance of Greater Des Moines — shows that the community is concerned about childhood literacy, she said.

Speakers at the event hailed from across the political spectrum. Doug Gross, 2002 Iowa GOP gubernatorial candidate, and former mayor Tom Urban — who described his views as “on the left side” — both said they supported the push to have all students read by the end of third grade.

More details about the plan, including its price tag, will be released next month.

“This is not a political issue to be solved, it’s our children’s future, it’s our state’s economic future, and all of that is really critical,” Fandel said.

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Pennsylvania House to vote on scaled-down voucher plan

Associated Press

By: Marc Levy and Peter Jackson

December 14, 2011

http://www.cumberlandlink.com/news/local/govt-and-politics/article_2c97d666-269b-11e1-a1c9-001871e3ce6c.html

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) - The state House of Representatives is expected to vote on a scaled-down plan to use public money to help low-income families avoid struggling public schools and send their children to private schools.

A Republican-sponsored amendment anticipated Wednesday calls for school vouchers to be tested in a five-year pilot project that would involve about 60 schools in 10 school districts. If approved, it would compete with a farther-reaching bill approved by the Senate in October that would make vouchers available in the state's 143 worst-performing schools.

The House amendment also would establish a state commission to authorize charter schools and increase a tax credit for businesses that fund certain educational causes.

Democrats generally oppose vouchers, calling them a taxpayer-paid gift to private schools that does nothing to improve public schools.

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Tennessee Governor Haslam wants year to study program for school vouchers

Associated Press

By: Erik Schelzig

December 16, 2011

<http://www.tennessean.com/article/20111216/NEWS21/312160072/Haslam-wants-year-study-program-school-vouchers>

NASHVILLE — Gov. Bill Haslam announced Thursday that school vouchers need more study before being considered in the next legislative session.

The Republican governor said he is creating a task force to make recommendations on a voucher program in Tennessee. The panel isn’t scheduled to report its findings to the governor until next fall.

“Those discussions need to happen before legislation is pursued any further in this session,” Haslam said in a release. “First and foremost, any new program must complement our ongoing efforts to reform education.”

Priorities

The governor's education priorities last session included an overhaul of teacher tenure rules and lifting a cap on charter schools.

Haslam said last month that he expected school vouchers to be "one of the most contentious issues" of the upcoming legislative session. He said at the time that he would make up his mind by the end of the year.

The governor said Thursday that he supports what he called an "opportunity [scholarship](#) initiative" for students from low-income homes. But he first wants a careful study of how such a program would best work in Tennessee.

Tennessee Education Association lobbyist Jerry Winters applauded the decision to delay the issue .

"The [financial](#) impact of voucher schools on local school districts would be enormous," Winters said. "And the concerns about publicly funded religious schools are a serious issue."

Democratic Rep. Lois DeBerry of Memphis agreed. "The voucher bill is something we don't know enough about," she said. "I think the governor is right to put [together](#) a task force."

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Illinois working on new rules to measure schools

Chicago Tribune

By: Tara Malone

December 16, 2011

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/education/ct-met-illinois-nclb-waiver-20111216.0.4863585.story>

State seeks waiver from parts of federal No Child Left Behind law

If Illinois officials have their way, the state's public schools soon could be measured by new rules that track how much every student improves year to year.

On Thursday, state leaders affirmed their plans to seek a waiver early next year from the most onerous restrictions of the federal No Child Left Behind law, which requires all students to score at grade level in reading and math by 2014.

For weeks, state schools Superintendent Christopher Koch and top education officials have met with educators, parents and policymakers to create new measures that consider not only whether students hit the single benchmark of grade-level proficiency, but also look at the academic gains made by students every year.

Such a growth model could be a cornerstone of the new accountability system and one that educators across Illinois "may be living with for a while," Koch told Illinois State Board of Education members during their monthly meeting in Springfield.

"That's why it's important to get this right because it really will be driving what is happening in schools," Koch said.

In a controversial move, the Obama administration recently sought to waive the law's march toward universal proficiency — a goal widely seen as well-intentioned but unrealistic — and instead give states the flexibility to fashion their own plans to bring academically struggling students up to grade level and improve the most troubled schools.

The White House opened the door for states to create their own accountability plans in September. Eleven states applied in the first round.

Illinois officials expect to unveil details of the proposed growth model next month and formally apply for the flexibility in February.

Koch and state Deputy Superintendent of Education Susan Morrison offered the most extensive insight yet into the blueprint during an update to the state board members.

The new accountability plan will emphasize standards to measure whether students graduate from high school prepared to step into the workforce or onto a college campus. This falls in line with the so-called common core standards that Illinois and more than 40 other states recently adopted.

Morrison said they may also look beyond test scores in math and language arts to consider as "extra-credit points" factors like how many of a school's students take college-level Advanced Placement courses and score high enough on the rigorous AP tests to earn college credit.

"Student growth absolutely is an important part of accountability, but it's not the only indicator to show whether schools are doing a good job for kids," Morrison said.

Under the waiver process, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, Chicago's former schools chief, requires states to focus on improving the worst-performing schools — those that score in the bottom 5 percent — and focus on schools with the widest

achievement gaps. States also are required to offer recognition or even financial rewards for schools that largely serve low-income students and show the most improvement.

States also must adopt the learning standards to judge whether students are ready for college and put in place teacher and principal evaluation systems that measure educators, in part, on the academic progress of their students — both steps that Illinois has taken.

A suite of recent state education-reform laws creates a new method for evaluating educators' performance that includes student academic progress as a key factor. It is due to unfold in local districts next year through 2016.

Illinois education officials will continue to meet this month and in January with teachers, administrators and advocates to fine-tune details of the new accountability plan.

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Miami-Dade school board delays charter school vote

Miami Herald

By: Scott Hiaasen and Kathleen McGrory

December 14, 2011

<http://www.miamiherald.com/2011/12/14/2546735/miami-dade-school-board-delays.html>

The Miami-Dade School Board on Wednesday delayed a vote on whether to approve 14 new charter schools in the county, amid frustration over the school district's limited authority over charter schools and worries over conflicts of interest.

In a 5-4 vote, the board decided to address the 14 charter school applications next month, so board members can have more time to review the merits of each application. School district staffers have also asked the board to reject two other charter school applications.

Board member Marta Pérez said the delay was warranted in light of a recent series of Miami Herald stories raising questions about potential conflicts of interest at some South Florida charter schools.

"We need to take a look at those conflicts of interest and see how they impact us," Pérez said.

But board member Raquel Regalado, who sought the delay, said the district ultimately has little authority to reject any charter schools if the applications meet the guidelines of state law.

"We're very limited in what we can say about these applications," Regalado said. "I don't think the public understands this is completely ministerial."

The 16 applications were among more than 90 charter requests Miami-Dade administrators received this summer. Helen Blanch, the district's assistant superintendent for school choice, said the district has already broken a state-mandated deadline of Oct. 31 to approve the charters.

While the further delay could prompt the applicants to appeal the board's decision to the state Department of Education, the school district's attorney, Walter Harvey, said the potential for litigation over the delayed applications was "minimal."

Of the 14 applications up for approval, four are from the Somerset Academy network of schools — the largest school network in the region, with 22 schools in Miami-Dade and Broward counties. The Somerset schools are managed by Academica, the state's largest charter-school management company.

"We have a proven track record of positive results," said David Concepcion, a Somerset Academy board member and the city clerk of Hialeah.

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