

# Education Matters

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## Choosing the Path of Least Resistance

**NCLB has created unintended consequences, but it can't be blamed for everything.**

By Michael J. Petrilli

Most schools are deemphasizing history, science, and the arts in order to make room for teaching basic reading and math skills, according to a new study. Who is to blame for this? Critics of reform point to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act.

They are right to do so—to a point. NCLB mandates that schools boost achievement in reading and math—only reading and math—or face tough consequences. The incentive has worked, to the surprise of some, but so, too, has the law of unintended consequences.

This is not the only example of that phenomenon. NCLB puts pressure on educators to get all students to achieve at least a low level of proficiency, so schools ignore kids at the top of the class. The act leaves the standards setting to the states but ties sanctions to the results, so the states “race to the bottom” and lower their standards. And yes, the act focuses its accountability provisions on reading and math, so schools ignore everything else. The latter problem is easily fixed, although the fix is politically unpopular. Congress should add history testing to the law’s requirements, and make the history and science results count. (Science testing will be re-

quired next year, but the results will not count for accountability purposes, unless President Bush has his way.) Now that we know that schools will respond to incentives, we should be clear about our aims.

However, tweaking the law’s carrots and sticks is not enough, and NCLB is not completely to blame. We must also address the fact that schools are choos-

**Now that we know that schools will respond to incentives, we should be clear about our aims.**

ing the path of least resistance by narrowing the curriculum. After all, pushing other subjects aside is not the only choice schools face. Great schools beef up their students’ basic skills while also providing them a broad, rich education. Why don’t most schools do this? There are two reasons—one ideological, and the other political.

E.D. Hirsch tackles the ideological problem in his new book, *The Knowledge Deficit*. Hirsch identifies an obvious solution to the challenge schools face: teach

reading through history, science, literature, and the arts. He argues persuasively that most of the students who have been “left behind” have successfully learned to decode words and sentences but can’t comprehend much because of their limited vocabulary and knowledge base. Especially in the upper elementary grades and middle school—where we see student achievement plateau

and then begin its long, precipitous decline—the best way to teach reading is to teach content. Instead of “doubling up” on rote, mechanical reading instruction, schools can engage students

with compelling historical accounts, fanciful stories, fascinating science, and riveting poetry. In fact, it is this kind of rich content that students find in Hirsch’s Core Knowledge schools, and that accounts for their strong gains in reading and math achievement.

So why don’t schools embrace Core Knowledge or something like it? Hirsch comments:

“The reason for this state of affairs—tragic for millions of students



as well as for the nation—is that an army of American educators and reading experts are fundamentally wrong in their ideas about education and especially about reading comprehension.”

Still enamored with romantic beliefs that children can learn to read as naturally as they learn to talk, disregarding knowledge and content as nothing but “mere facts,” the leaders of the education establishment and their comrades in schools of education continue to indoctrinate teachers and principals in self-defeating ideas. The solution to schools’ reading woes and their curricular conundrum is right in front of them, but these misguided ideas get in the way.

There is another solution to curriculum narrowing: expand the school day. Excellent charter schools such as KIPP and Amistad Academy use this strategy and record great results.

The KIPP middle schools, guided by their philosophy that “there are no shortcuts,” equate their efforts to a ball game. A fifth-grader who enters KIPP several years below grade level is like a team down by two touchdowns in the fourth quarter. There is no time to spare. The only way they are going to make it is if they work harder than their competition. Consequently, KIPP runs from 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., assigns several hours of homework daily, brings students in for Saturday morning classes, and adds

a month of school in the summer. This allows them to provide extensive instruction in reading and math. It also engages students in a full, rich curriculum, complete with history, science, foreign language, physical activity, and the arts. What is most remarkable about the KIPP model is how un-innovative it is. Anyone could think of it.

So why doesn’t every high-poverty public school embrace the KIPP model and lengthen its day? In this case, the answer is politics: It is not allowed under the collective bargaining agreement. As Frederick M. Hess and Martin R. West make painfully clear in their manifesto, *A Better Bargain: Overhauling Teacher Collective Bargaining for the 21st Century*, teacher union contracts dictate every facet of school life. Consider the contract from Eau Claire, Wisconsin, which Hess and West quote at length:

“A standard day shall be defined as 435 minutes, excluding lunch but including a morning homeroom period of 7-15 minutes, e.g., where teachers will supervise students entering the building, take roll, take lunch count, make announcements, etc. The teaching day shall not exceed 349 minutes of classroom teaching, thirty (30) minutes for lunch and thirty (30) minutes of recess....”

The reality in many big city districts is even worse; a five-or-six hour school day

is not uncommon. Of course, schools cannot fit remediation in reading and math and broad exposure to the core curriculum into such a crammed schedule. But the unions are loathe to give up their hard-fought “gains”—in this case, the right of teachers to be home by 3:00 p.m. School board members, most of whom are elected with union money and union votes, just sit and watch.

Yes, let’s tweak NCLB and undo its perverse incentives. However, we must also address the crazy ideas that still delude the education profession and the ridiculous union contracts that hamstring common sense reforms. If the traditional K-12 system is unwilling to be so bold, then we should create an alternative system of schools that is. Narrow-minded solutions will not produce the schools our children deserve. ■



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# What's It All About, Alfie?

One man's war against competition among students

By Will Fitzhugh

In many books, more articles, and perhaps 200 appearances a year, Alfie Kohn does what he can to spare United States students the evils of competition. While he can't do much about athletic competition, or economic competition, or the unfairness of love and war, he tries hard and successfully to persuade educators that making academic distinctions among students hurts them.

A story is told of an unpopular officer at the U.S. Naval Academy who knew he was disliked (his nickname was "The Wedge" as in "the simplest tool known to man"), and he was always on the lookout for ways to assert his dominance. Once he berated a formation of midshipman for being unsatisfactory by pointing out that while their toes were all lined up, their heels were as much as two or three inches out of line! The officer candidate in charge of the formation replied that he recognized the problem, and would try to see that all midshipmen in future could be issued the same size shoes!

Of course, Mr. Kohn would not, I believe, argue that having different size feet should be corrected to prevent some students from feeling inferior, but he does object to anything in school that might reveal that some are brighter and some more diligent than others. It is not clear how he thinks students can be prevented from noticing this for themselves, but he is insistent that testing and other forms of academic competition should not be allowed to reveal such differences.

Some people feel that in law, for instance, competition among arguments makes arriving at the facts of a case more likely. Competition among the producers of goods and services is thought by some to make improvements in quality and reduction in price more likely. It is even claimed that some works of art and literature are better than others, although serious efforts have, of course, been made to

Is it bad to make academic distinctions among students?

make such judgments less common.

In the past in the U.S., and in present in the rest of the world, academic competition has been seen as beneficial in inspiring many students to try harder, to learn more, and to become more competent. For much the same reason that every athlete does not receive a gold medal for showing up at the Olympic Games, it is believed that recognizing academic achievement will encourage effort and emulation, and benefit all the students who are willing to try.

Perhaps Mr. Kohn is just hoping to mitigate, in his own small way, the workings of Natural Selection. He may shudder at the characterization of "Nature, Red in Tooth and Claw," and be determined to protect students from all bad feelings and experiences.

One problem is that students are not so easily fooled into believing that they are all equally capable and equally proficient. And for thousands of years, human beings have been able to survive the discovery of such differences. That is not to say there have been no feelings of envy, and no murders and wars, but in general people have found a way to accept, even to celebrate, the achievements of some of their number.

Mr. Kohn, however, continues to make *The Case Against Competition*, as one of his books is titled, and he evidently continues to think that if all students could be mediocre, all could be spared any invidi-

ous and soul-crushing academic distinctions that might otherwise be made.

It might be noted, in a world in which India and China are making great strides in promoting academic achievement and in which the United States students often place near the bottom academically in international assessments, that ideas such as Mr. Kohn's, while very widely admired among some of our educators, only serve to promote even lower academic standards for our schools. Removing challenges, standards, and assessments from our education is probably the very best way of ensuring an increase in mediocrity and scholastic incompetence.

Nevertheless, if the goal is keeping students, to the greatest extent possible, from having any disappointments or bad feelings, Mr. Kohn seems to believe that the assault on academic standards and distinctions of all kinds must be carried on, and he is surely our undisputed National Champion in that effort. ■



Will Fitzhugh is a Harvard graduate who taught high school for ten years in Concord, Massachusetts. He founded the Concord Review, the National Writing Board, and the National History Club. For more information visit, [www.tcr.org](http://www.tcr.org).



# TEACHING TOLERANCE

The role of character education in creating a healthier school climate.

By Eric Buehrer

Schools are giving an increasing amount of attention to issues surrounding diversity and tolerance. Character education courses, multicultural material, and even health curricula weave the theme of tolerance through their lessons.

It must be pointed out that incidents of hate crimes are relatively rare. For example, incidents of hate crimes in 2004 were only 0.077 percent of all crimes (including intimidation—causing reasonable fear of bodily harm though none occurs). Known offenders made up only 0.0025 percent of the population.

Clearly, we are not a nation of bigots and haters though the spotlight put on certain incidents might make it appear that way. The need for tolerance is not because of an epidemic of hate crimes, but because of the much more mundane and daily social interactions that require treating each other with respect and dignity. It is in these interactions where educators deal with intolerance most frequently: hallway insults, angry outbursts, and smug dismissals of others' viewpoints during class discussions.

Not only do educators deal with these types of social interactions among students, they, too, are tested in their tolerance for student clothing, hair styles, body piercing, attitudes, morals, and behaviors.

## Defining Tolerance

When some use the word tolerance, they mean the first definition you find in the dictionary: recognition of and respect for the opinions, practices, or behavior of others. However, it is important to under-

advocating bigotry, intolerance, and even hate. This is because those promoting the most open-ended view of tolerance have staked out the playing field by defining the terminology. Pressure then gets placed on colleagues and students to adopt this

Students need to be taught that tolerance arises from character. If they don't understand this, they will think they are being tolerant when they are actually only expressing indifference ("whatever"), or apathy ("who cares?"), or even recklessness ("why not?").

stand that respect here means, not veneration, but the avoidance of interference. Without this clarification, the definition of tolerance comes to be viewed as a gushing acceptance of just about everything someone says or does. Some even go so far as to define tolerance as the embracing and celebration of the opinions, practices, or behaviors of others.

Many educators and parents, however, cringe at the moral relativism of this approach. Yet, they feel boxed in by the current talk of tolerance. If they oppose it, they run the risk of being accused of

view of tolerance. To resist is to appear intolerant.

## Tolerance Requires Virtue

Tolerance, in and of itself, is not a virtue. If a student tolerates drinking and driving, his tolerance is not virtuous. Tolerance is neutral. Tolerance derives its value from what it is the student tolerates, and the manner in which the student expresses his tolerance and intolerance. This involves character.

When a student uses a racial slur, his



problem is not a lack of tolerance, but a lack of kindness and a problem with pride (the root of belief in racial superiority). When a student makes fun of a classmate's point of view during a class discussion, his problem isn't a lack of tolerance, but a lack of courtesy. When one student spits on another student because he thinks his schoolmate is gay, tolerance isn't the issue so much as is self-control.

Proper tolerance is the outgrowth of moral character qualities such as kindness, patience, courtesy, humility, love, self-control, and courage. Even intolerance should be expressed through these qualities.

Students need to be taught that tolerance arises from character. If they don't understand this, they will think they are being tolerant when they are actually only expressing indifference ("whatever"), or apathy ("who cares?"), or even recklessness ("why not?").

Improperly taught, "tolerance education" can lead to disarming students of their proper convictions. Tolerance Requires Standards The view that tolerance means, "accepting everyone's ideas and behaviors" is impractical in the real world. It sounds nice in classroom discussions and school board declarations, but it won't work in the hallways.

You will find a more practical definition of tolerance in the dictionary's sec-

ond definition of the term: the allowable variation from a standard. For instance, an engineer might ask about the tolerance of a metal beam in a building during an earthquake. How far should it bend before serious structural damage is done?

This is the definition by which we most commonly live. We establish a standard of what we think is best (even if somewhat vague). We then establish an allowable variation from that standard (often more vague). Then we judge the ideas and actions of others based on what we've established. This is as it should be. To do otherwise is to invite social and moral anarchy. The problem for many people isn't intolerance; it is in not clearly defining their standards.

Even so, we establish standards in hundreds, even thousands, of categories. For example, our standard (ideal) for marriage may be two people who love each other deeply in a supportive and nurturing relationship. However, our allowable variation from the standard is a marriage filled with anger and disharmony. But, what goes beyond the allowable variation; what is intolerable, is spousal abuse.

Within the school setting, this definition of tolerance is applied in many places: dress codes (pants are allowed, but not hot pants), hallway conduct (conversation between boys and girls is allowed, but not sexual harassment), and classroom

participation (students may not have to participate in discussions, but they can't fall asleep).

This practical definition is valuable for classroom instruction because it honors students' moral frameworks developed by their religious education and families. Rather than teach them that tolerance is best demonstrated by an absence of judgment, it teaches that tolerance requires making judgments: first, establishing a standard, and second, establishing the limits of the allowable variation.

If students aren't taught to clearly establish their standards and allowable variations, they will struggle with what to tolerate. In frustration, they may simply jump to the sophomoric view that they should just accept everything. This doesn't require hard thinking and yet has the appearance of taking the moral high ground.

Some may raise the concern that making judgments will only add to someone's existing prejudices. There are two reasons why this doesn't have to be. First, as we have seen, the reality is that this is the way tolerance really works, so the best course of action is to help students think deeply about their standards. Secondly, no matter what their standards are, they should act virtuously toward anyone who varies from those standards.

Ironically, educators can create more "tolerant" school climates by focusing not on tolerance, but on character. ■

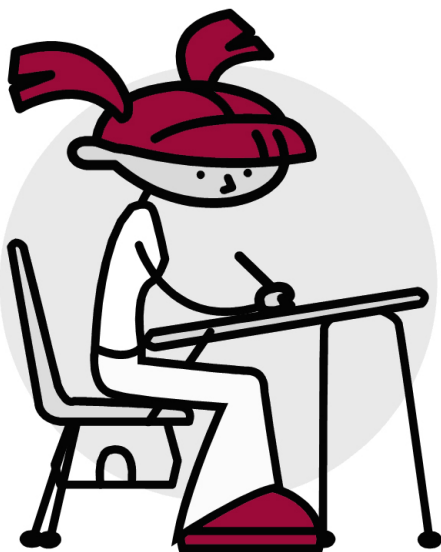
### To Get Students Thinking

Have students apply the definition of tolerance to everyday situations around them. Individually or in groups, students should think of one standard, one allowable variation, and what is intolerable in the following areas:

1. A school rule.
2. The way they like a meal prepared.
3. An expectation for a friend.
4. A homework assignment.
5. Music they enjoy.
6. The neatness of their bedrooms.



*Eric Buehrer is the president of Gateways to Better Education and hosts a national radio commentary on education ([www.gtbe.org](http://www.gtbe.org)).*



## CERTIFYING THE FACTS

### Education Foundation Calls for Release of Study on Board Certified Teachers

The Education Consumers Foundation (ECF) recently called on the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) to release the Sanders, Alston, and Wright study of NBPTS-certified teachers.

The study was commissioned by NBPTS in January 2002 in response to growing questions about whether NBPTS-certified teachers produce greater student achievement gain than their noncertified

colleagues. The reported findings raise doubt about the validity of the NBPTS credential and the educational value of the tens of millions per year now spent on salary bonuses for NBPTS-certified teachers.

According to a report issued last spring in *Education Week*, Sanders found virtually no difference in student achievement gains between NBPTS-certified teachers and teachers without such certification.

“The National Board needs to do the right thing,” said ECF President Dr. J. E. Stone. “The results of this study have been in their hands for over a year. If there was a question about Sanders’ methodology, NBPTS should have made the report public, stated its critique, and let readers judge for themselves.” Thus far, NBPTS has released only an overview and a critique of Sanders’ methodology but not the study itself.

The Foundation has good reason to care. In May 2002, Dr. Stone released a brief report on the value-added teacher-effect scores earned by NBPTS-certified teachers in Tennessee. He concluded that they differed little from other teachers

in the same school districts—essentially the same finding that the Sanders study is reported to contain.

In 2004, three large studies were said to have found solid support for NBPTS certification. However, contrary to the triumphant tone of their press releases, all found statistically significant but educationally trivial differences between NBPTS-certified teachers and their peers.

For more information, visit [www.educationconsumers.com](http://www.educationconsumers.com).

### JUST FOR LAUGHS!

**Teacher:** Willy, name one important thing we have today we didn't have ten years ago.

**Willy:** Me!

## Girls, Math, and Science

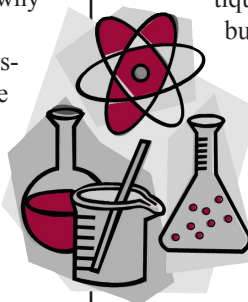
Government data show that girls fall behind boys in math and science as they progress through school. In the fourth grade, 68 percent of boys and 66 percent of girls say they like science, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

“We need definitive insights into what goes wrong, when, and why,” said Education Secretary Margaret Spellings. According to the Associated Press, she asked the Institute of Education Sciences to review existing research and determine why girls are not as well represented in the sciences as boys.

Only one-third of high school students enrolled in Advanced Placement physics classes are girls, Spellings told summit attendees. At the college level, she continued, fewer than one-fifth of engineering majors are women.

A National Mathematics Advisory Panel created by Bush last month is scheduled to issue an initial report on how to improve math teaching, by the end of next January and a final report a month later.

Source—Associated Press.



## Colleges See Double-Digit Drops in SAT Scores

“Some colleges are reporting double-digit drops in the average SAT scores of applicants this year, even as other credentials, such as class rank and college-prep coursework, remained similar to or grew stronger than last year’s,” reported Mary Beth Marklein in *USA Today*.

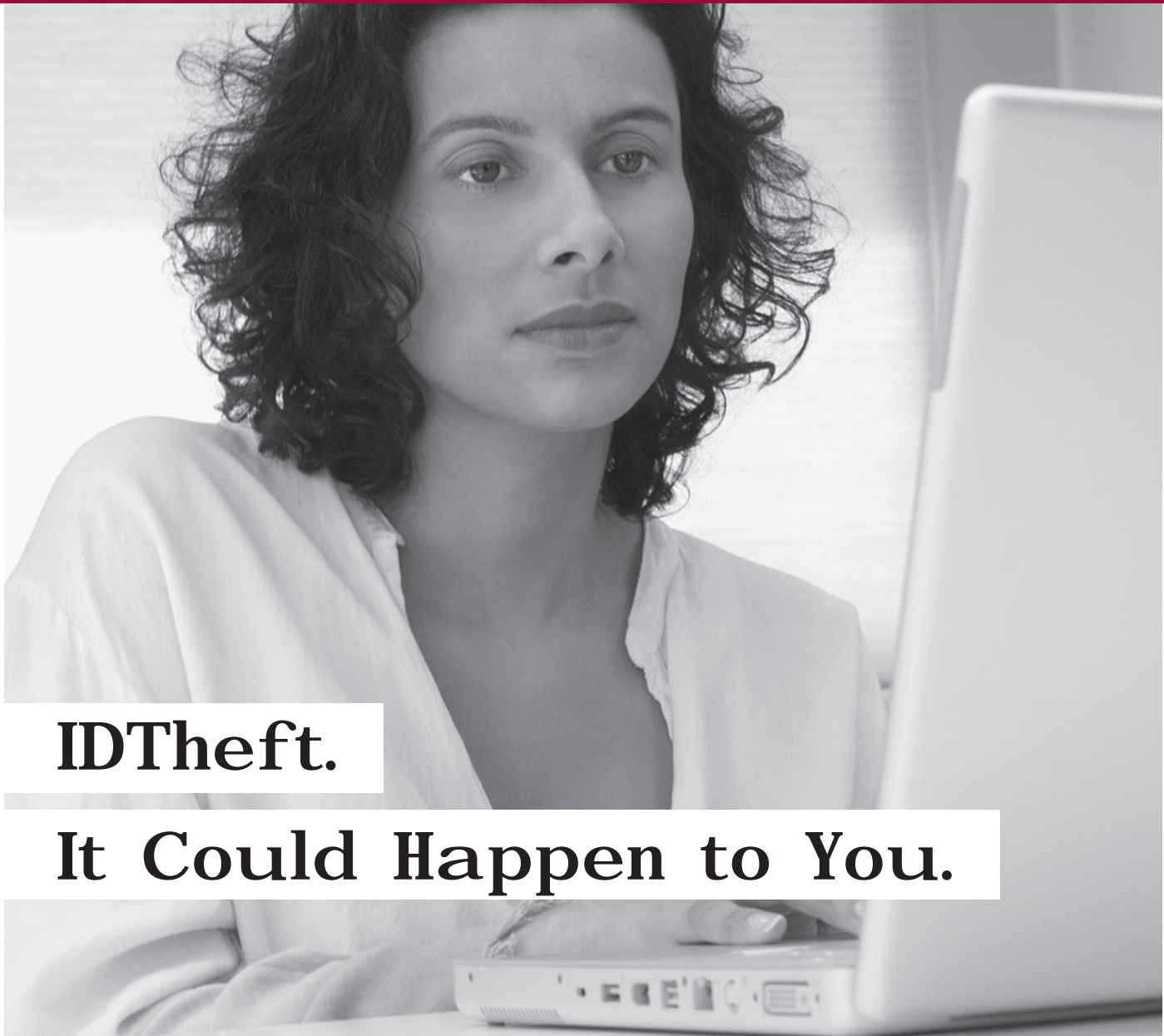
The nine-campus University of California system saw a 15-point drop on average among applicants. The average composite scores for the ACT, a rival college entrance exam, were unchanged from last year. The University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill saw a 12-point drop in SAT scores.

“It’s not yet clear what the drops mean,” Marklein commented, “but colleges are

particularly curious because the scores are almost completely based on the new SAT, introduced last year by the nonprofit College Board, which owns the test.”

She interviewed Brad MacGowan, a college counselor at Newton North High School in Newtonville, Massachusetts. He suggested that fatigue could be a factor. “A typical student gets three hours and 45 minutes to complete the new three-part test, which includes a writing section,” reported Marklein. “The old two-part version lasted three hours.”

Source—Mary Beth Marklein, USA TODAY



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# Still Left Behind

The growing problem of schools not making adequate yearly progress.

By Dan Lips

Think back to the year 2000. President Clinton was in the White House. The dot-com bubble was still inflating. The Twin Towers were standing, and Saddam Hussein ruled Iraq. It's amazing how much has changed over the last six years.

For many of America's schoolchildren, however, far too little has changed. Millions were enrolled in persistently failing public schools back in 2000, and millions are enrolled in struggling schools today.

The Department of Education recently reported that 1,065 public schools across the United States qualify for "restructuring" under the No Child Left Behind act. This means that a school has failed to make adequate yearly progress on state tests for six years or more. By September of this year, the list of "restructuring" schools could grow to as many as 2,000.

Not surprisingly, many of these schools can be found in our nation's biggest cities. The Department of Education estimates that there are 167 "restructuring" schools in New York City, 181 in Chicago, 75 in Los Angeles, 82 in Philadelphia, and 48 in Detroit. In these cities alone, as many as 500,000 children are enrolled in "restructuring" public schools, according to a new Heritage Foundation report.

## Definitions

"Restructuring" can mean different things in different states and school districts. Though reforms are required by



NCLB, the school district can choose which reforms it will undertake to satisfy the law. The reforms range from the expected (such as redesigning the curriculum and changing school programs) to the drastic (such as becoming a charter school). If history is any guide, few school districts will choose the latter option. Last week, for example, Chicago announced that its schools would implement the weakest range of reforms allowed under NCLB.

## Not surprisingly, many of these schools can be found in our nation's biggest cities.

In contrast, President Bush has proposed an emergency plan to make good on NCLB's original promise and give thousands of children trapped in persistently failing public schools the opportunity to choose a better school. In his 2007 budget, President Bush included \$100 million for the America's Opportunity Scholarships for Kids initiative. The plan would provide grants to local organizations to award private school scholarships, worth \$4,000 apiece, to low-income children enrolled in "restructuring" schools. In all, more than 23,000 underprivileged children could receive scholarships to attend better schools.

Children in persistently failing schools already are entitled to public school choice and subsidized after-school tutoring under

No Child Left Behind. But Department of Education statistics suggest that far too few children benefit from these limited choice options. Less than one percent of the 3.9 million eligible students used the public school transfer option in the 2003-04 school year. Fewer than 17 percent participated in after-school tutoring.

## Implementation

Evidence suggests that poor implementation by school districts is partly to blame for the low participation rates. For instance, the Department of Education reports that half of all school districts notified parents of the public school transfer option after the school year had already begun. In these school districts, these letters came, on average, five weeks after the first day of school.

During an election year, many members of Congress may prefer to avoid a political battle over school reform initiatives, fearful that powerful interest groups like the

teachers unions will fiercely oppose any threat to the status quo. Some members of Congress may try to dismiss figures showing that millions of children are still trapped in failing schools as just another statistic. But for every child denied the opportunity to receive a quality education, it's much more than a statistic. It's a tragedy with lifelong consequences. ■



*Dan Lips is Education Analyst at the Heritage Foundation, and the author of a new report, "America's Opportunity Scholarships for Kids: School Choice for Students in Underperforming Public Schools."*