

## **A Low Grade for No Child Left Behind**

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Something is seriously out of whack in the system for evaluating performance when such high-quality institutions as Hersey High School in Arlington Heights, Highland Park and Hinsdale South high schools are warned that they might have to offer students transfers to other schools because the quality of their education just isn't good enough.

This is absurd, yet those three and other high-achieving schools have shown up on a list of underperformers. The reason? Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, a school must demonstrate a certain annual score progression by each subgroup within its student population. If the scores of any one subgroup - special education or low-income, for instance - fail to improve by a certain amount year to year, then the school must take specified steps, such as offering tutoring or offering transfers. This is the case no matter how small the subgroup whose scores fall short of the standard. It is the case even if the vast majority of a school's students are scoring well above the standards. Moreover, if the scores of even one subgroup continue to come up short of required levels, the consequence become more severe.

Fortunately, most suburban parents are sharper than members of the Bush administration and Congress who wrote and approved No Child Left Behind. If Hersey parents receive letters offering their child a transfer, 99 percent will know that their student is being as well-served at Hersey as he or she would be at any neighboring school. Same thing with Highland Park and Hinsdale South parents. But because virtually no one will want a transfer, the very offer is an inane legislative and bureaucratic requirement that saps resources better used elsewhere.

Moreover, the Illinois State Board of Education's timing in releasing the preliminary list was poor. Most suburban schools will open their doors next week, which means districts that have to offer transfers have about a week to set up the logistics of doing so. In the case of Elgin Area District U-46, this means working out the details for 10 schools - a task that goes beyond daunting.

Hidden behind the heavy-handed consequences of No Child Left Behind is the very worthy goal of prodding every school to do its best in ensuring the academic success of all children, including those who typically have been economically and educationally disadvantaged.

But this isn't the way to do it - slapping a failure label on high-achieving schools. Unfortunately, Congress shows little interest in revising No Child Left Behind. Even though Congress and the Bush administration chose not to adequately fund the law, members like to cite it as evidence of their commitment to quality education. But the law has spawned such irrational results and disproportionate sanctions that its very credibility is in tatters. If Washington insists on continuing to tell local school districts what to do, it should at least revise the law to bring the requirements and consequences within reason.