

No Child Left Behind Leaves Behind Logic

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Another year, another new batch of evidence that the well-intentioned No Child Left Behind law is a mess in actual practice.

Exhibit A, from the Northwest suburbs, and Exhibit B, from Chicago, emerged this week.

In the Northwest suburbs, all six District 214 high schools have now been deemed failing under No Child Left Behind definitions. Never mind that three of the schools rank among the top 25 in Illinois for ACT scores and that all six offer programs judged outstanding by just about any gauge imaginable - except one. According to the federal No Child Left Behind law, an entire school is categorized as "failing" if even one small subgroup of students falls short of the goal on standardized tests. Granted, this effort to hold schools accountable for educating students with special needs, those who know little English and students of all races and ethnicity is laudable. But No Child Left Behind features impossibly high standards and, worse, backs them with consequences that require school officials to burn time, energy and money on hoop-jumping that will not produce one iota of educational improvement.

Returning, for a moment, to Exhibit A, the law demands that District 214 offer transfers to students from Elk Grove, Rolling Meadows, and Wheeling, the district's three so-called failing schools that still accept federal money. But transfer to where? The district's other schools are "failing," and Barrington, York, New Trier and other schools have told District 214 they are in no position to accept any of their students.

What makes this exercise a virtual joke - at best a waste of time - is that District 214 expects few students, if any, to request transfers. Why would they? Why would students choose to leave schools in their home communities that are widely recognized for excellence by everybody except the geniuses in Washington who wrote No Child Left Behind?

Exhibit B comes from Chicago, where schools deemed failing for three straight years must provide tutoring. The city schools have been doing that, using federal funding. But now the U.S. Department of Education has told city school officials they cannot run the tutoring program because they are the ones who previously failed the kids. Education Department officials say the city must shut down its program and either send all students to private tutors or assume the cost of the tutoring. And by the way, this must be accomplished by mid-January. Chicago school chief Arne Duncan correctly calls the order "ludicrous," pointing out that the city cannot afford to pay for the program itself and that there are far too few private tutors to absorb 80,000 eligible students.

These are the kind of debacles that should make everyone cringe when any presidential candidate or federal official talks about Washington assuming a larger role in education. Again, the federal act's goals are commendable. But the details of No Child Left Behind have severely eroded its credibility, to the point where none will remain if legislators don't reopen the act to set reasonable standards and consequences.