This article is neither a study nor a review; rather, it is a thought piece from a contributing editor concerning issues associated with the state of gifted child education, as it exists today in the shadow of the effects of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The primary purpose of this article is to stimulate thought, discussion, and action concerning the effects of NCLB on gifted child education. Seven effects are highlighted, namely: remedial, deficit-based emphasis; teaching what it tested; delivering a standard, one-size fits all education to diverse students; increased numbers of dropouts; educators afraid to teach; cheating; and unsubstantiated alternatives. A change in focus, questioning, and appropriate educational actions are suggested.

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Recently, I was asked to participate in a panel discussion concerning the No Child Left Behind act and its effects on gifted child education, an invitation that came with a charge to write a short, scholarly article on the topic. Without giving it too much thought, my response to the invitation was, “Sure, sounds like fun!” However, upon further reflection I realized that while short was no problem as there is little relevance for gifted children in NCLB, scholarly and No Child Left Behind created an oxymoronic conundrum—clearly, NCLB is antithetical to scholarship. NCLB is a politically charged, top-down, hostile take-over of America’s schools that has, in effect, ignored progress of individual children in favor of closing gaps and emphasizing perceived proficiency scores for schools and group of children using questionable standards and measures of achievement. Little exists in the act to encourage schools, as they are held accountable to a throng of unfunded requirements, to develop individual differences, creative thinking, innovation, or individual potentials, some of the very things in our public education system that, in the past, have helped to make ours a great nation. Instead, states are being forced to create high-stakes tests to which educators must teach and on which groups of students must show “Adequate Yearly Progress” or face the demoralization of being labeled a failing school, and all the sanctions that accompany such a designation. And none of this has much to do with how much actual learning, quality instruction, and individual student progress occurs in the schools (Mayer, Mullins, & Moore, 2000).

Then it occurred to me that I would also be preaching to the choir, as most educators are aware of the negative impact of NCLB, especially gifted education professionals whose programs and students have already become marginalized in its wake. This realization led me to question why we as educators have allowed this legislation and the thinking that underpins it, to, in effect, rise to power. Perhaps, over the past two decades, we have spent too much time and energy trying to conform and comply with the reform of the month and too little time and commitment to the art and science of educating children and youth for life-long learning so that they can become productive citizens in our democracy. In doing so, we have bought the idea that education in America needs the federal government to fix it, and now we have NCLB.

By conforming and playing the score boosting game, we are denying an entire generation of children quality education while we scramble to raise test scores. NCLB has created an environment in which school administrators have no incentive to concentrate on educating gifted children or developing talents of any children. It will take years before we know the true reaches of this legislation, but early studies and observations are not encouraging (e.g., Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Moon, Callahan, & Tomlinson, 2003; Nichols & Berliner, 2005).

From this panel discussion and “assignment” I have created a thought piece with the aim to stimulate thought, discussion, and action concerning NCLB and its influence on gifted child education in this country. Consider the following points before deciding what role you might play in reversing what even those who voted for it in Washington are now recognizing as the devastating effects of the NCLB legislation.

Remedial, deficit focus designed to increase proficiency of low-achieving students

Troubling for many reasons, this focus has made education punitive for students and teachers alike. Students are being forced into drill and kill type learning as well as being expected to attain “grade level” skills at the same rate as their higher-achieving peers. This approach is counterintuitive, as children learn best when they have elements of interest, challenge, choice, and enjoyment in their learning experiences—elements lacking in remedial based approaches. Tragically, if the remedial drills do actually raise test scores, it indicates the test measures low-level outcomes (Popham, 2001). As Tomlinson (2002) clearly articulated, proficiency is not enough, yet with NCLB proficiency is the goal and the focus, leaving the many students who can exceed proficiency in educational deprival. Already, many individuals have pointed out that the language of proficiency without language of excellence in NCLB puts at further risk the very students it purports to help—poor and minority students (e.g., Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Gallagher, 2004; Golden, 2004; Elmore, 2003; Neill, 2003; Tomlinson, 2002). As Moon et al. (2003) concluded based on their national data concerning the effects of state testing on impoverished children,

While some will argue that the testing initiative’s purpose is to ensure educational equity for all American students, regardless of economical circumstances, the reverse appears to be the reality. Based on this study, students from poverty are less likely to be exposed to challenging curricula and instructional methods.

Results from this study would suggest that accountability through student testing is a vehicle to restrict educational opportunities from those who need opportunities most. (Summary and Conclusion section, ¶ 6)

Since NCLB fails to address the clear educational needs of gifted children and educators’ responsibility to develop and meet their needs, school districts across the country have cut already small gifted programs and reallocated the funds to remedial programs due to fear of sanctions if students’ scores aren’t increased (Golden, 2004). As described in the National Excellence Report (US Department of Education, 1993), gifted children require special services partly because the regular curriculum does not challenge them, and many have already mastered half of the required curriculum. Sadly, gifted child education has lost ground since 1993 in the public schools, due in part to the emphasis on remediation without similar language to support educationally necessary enrichment and acceleration. Yet, it is precisely the type of education that occurs in gifted programs that has the potential to increase meaningful student learning and move students well beyond proficiency (Kaplan, 2004).

**Teaching what is tested**

Curricular content identified and assessed by high-stakes tests has resulted in the elimination of other content areas and activities such as electives, the arts, enrichment, elementary science, foreign language, gifted programs, and even elementary recess (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Kohn, 2000; Popham, 2001). This ends/means, teach what is tested approach leaves little room for imagination, scholarship, critical or creative thinking, and problem solving, by focusing educators on the target—a marginalized core (Eisner, 2001). The result is a system that offers less to students who would benefit from a rich and diverse complement of curricular and instructional offerings. High test scores do not necessarily reflect quality schools, nor do low test scores reflect poor schools (Popham). Rather, test scores often better reflect the socio-economic make up of the students who attend the school and/or the amount of time that educators spend preparing for the tests (Popham). Quality schools embody much more than a bottom line test score average. A quality school is a place where students learn to think and apply knowledge to new situations, where students are involved in and excited about their learning, where students make individual gains in process and knowledge, where adults know and care about individual students, where students develop “I can” attitudes and efficacy about learning, and where the type of learning that occurs prepares students for success after school (Eisner; Popham).

In 2000, Mayer et al., in a National Center for Educational Statistics report, identified 13 indicators of school quality and none of these indicators had to do with high test scores. Rather, they included indicators such as teacher skills, assignments, and experience; curriculum content; pedagogy; use of technology, class size; school leadership, goals and academic environment. Schools are dynamic and complex, and to determine the quality of a school, one must look beyond the test scores. Recent studies have revealed that the higher the stakes, the more time educators spend teaching to the test, with detrimental effects on student learning (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Clarke et al., 2002; Moon et al., 2003; Pedulla et al., 2003). These effects include decreased graduation rates, increased drop out rates, lower scores on national comparative tests, narrowing curriculum, reclassification, expulsion and retention of students, and blatant cheating. Further, and of particular concern to those of us in gifted education, Amrein & Berliner found a decline in academic achievement as measured by ACT, SAT, and AP scores in states that implemented high-stakes graduation exams. They suggest too much time was spent attending to state requirements, or teaching to the test, with a cost of lower scores on more substantive measures.

Another area of huge concern regarding teaching to the test lies in the fact that many of the tests in use today yield scores of questionable validity and reliability (Popham, 2001; Smith & Fey, 2000), correlate with shallow thinking and socioeconomic status (Kohn, 2000), and while they may predict other test scores well, have little to do with actually measuring student achievement (Popham). Further, in a high-stakes environment scores become less meaningful: “The greater the pressure to do well on the tests the more likely is the meaning of the score obtained by students or schools uninterpretable” (Nichols & Berliner, 2005, p. 5). In some instances, such as in Indiana, little validity or reliability information exists concerning the state assessments, but children and schools are held accountable to the outcomes on these very tests. Yet, we continue to base our judgment of a school’s quality on such scores; we need to ask if we want our children prepped for the test of the month, or whether we want them taught to think, to find out, to want to know, to learn.

**Delivering a more standard, one-size-fits-all education to increasingly diverse students with differing needs, regardless of their individual needs**

This one-size expectation does not account for variation among individuals on variables that affect learning such as socioeconomic status, environmental experiences, aptitude, school readiness, and home environment (Kohn, 2000; Ohanian, 1999; Popham, 2001). It has been well documented that low-income students lose ground during the summer while other students gain (Bracey, 2002; Entwistle, Alexander, & Olson, 2000). In short, the accountability imposed on schools holds them responsible for learning based on factors over which they have no control (see Barton, 2003). Children are individuals, and they learn at different rates; they come with different skills and different experiences; to expect them to be the same defies the ability to nurture individual children and to help them reach their fullest individual potentials. The concern of NCLB is comparative group scores. The concern ought to be individual growth—where did each student start and how far can educators take him/her? Further, NCLB has resulted in a lack of choices, instead assuming that the destination of graduates should be college. Career and technical education has been marginalized (Laitsch, 2005), elementary science, social studies, and recess eliminated (Kohn, 2001), and high-school electives, advanced courses, and the arts eliminated (Amrein & Berliner, 2002) as the focus has become increasingly narrowed by a one-size-fits-all, accountability movement. Yet these areas represent important educational venues that lead to diverse and well-prepared graduates.

**Increased numbers of dropouts, pushed out, and left out**

Despite the vigor with which accountability has been pushed and the speed with which states have implemented high-stakes tests and high standards for all, the dropout rates in most of these states have steadily increased while graduation rates have decreased (Amrein & Berliner 2002). Or worse, as in the now exposed “Texas Miracle” the number of dropouts...
has been hidden and underreported (Dobbs, 2003; Schemo, 2003). Further, since the Texas test is given in grade 10, students have been intentionally held back in ninth grade with one school reporting 1,160 students in grade 9 but only 281 students in grade 10 (Dobbs). Yet, this is not simply a Texas problem as Amrein and Berliner pointed out in their analysis of the unintended negative effects of high-stakes testing. They describe students who are retained, expelled, reclassified, or exempted to keep them from taking the tests in many different states. Of course, poor and minority children are disproportionately affected by these actions, further reinforcing the contention that this legislation hurts the most vulnerable children.

How does this relate to gifted education? As NCLB narrows the focus of what educators can teach, fewer students fit the system. Thus we are failing to meet the needs of the students who need quality educational experiences. Instead they drop out, only now they are not even counted among the dropouts. Not left behind, but lost and ignored. The bonus? When the students who don’t do well on the tests leave, the scores go up. But at what cost?

**Teachers afraid to teach, administrators afraid to let them**

Fifty percent of teachers are now leaving the profession within their first 5 years of employment, making teacher retention a national crisis (Hunt & Carroll, 2003). Attrition and turnover are issues nationally, with low-income urban and rural communities experiencing the highest rates due to conditions that simply do not support quality teaching. Much of the punitive, test driven, proficiency-based underpinning of NCLB does not support quality teaching. Teachers no longer have the freedom to teach, to ignite their students, rather they have test-based curriculum to deliver. NCLB and the accountability movement have taken the art out of teaching in efforts to standardize, control, and teacher-proof what is taught in our schools to our children. NCLB has increased paperwork, test preparation, added threats of failing labels to schools, making teachers afraid to differentiate curriculum, to go into depth in a unit, to fail to prepare students for the tests. All this and there is no clear evidence that teaching to the test actually improves learning. The joy of teaching and learning is being systematically removed from our classrooms. Administrators are under intense pressure to show AYP or maintain high scores, and therefore, they pressure their teachers to conform to the requirements. What must it be like to be a student in such a system? What must it be like to be a student who has already achieved proficiency, or who had the ability to achieve proficiency but chose instead to drop out because school was unengaging and uninteresting? Recently, Johnson (2005) reported that a new law in Texas will allow students who have shown proficiency on state tests to take 2 weeks off while teachers prepare others for the tests. This reinforces the notion that once students reach proficiency, teachers’ jobs as educators are done. Such a notion doesn’t bode well for students who may need the curriculum extended, accelerated, or enriched, or for teachers who might have wanted to do more with them.

**Cheating, lying, and fuzzy math become common means of reporting school data**

One only has to turn on the news or open a newspaper to find instances of bogus data, illegal test preparation, blatant cheating, manipulated statistics, underreported dropout rates and the like. The most glaring example has unfolded in Houston Public Schools, which had been recognized as exemplary by the state of Texas in 2002 and as Best Urban School district in the United States by the Broad Foundation in 2003. It was touted as the “Texas Miracle” by President Bush and former Houston Superintendent and now former Secretary of education, Rod Paige, who about a year ago referred to the National Educational Association as “terrorists.” With gains in graduation rates, a narrowing achievement gap between minority students and others, a decrease in high-school drop outs, and increases in graduation rates, Houston served as a model for the NCLB act, thus bringing the educational reforms that had “worked” in Texas to the rest of the country. Turns out, the claims were false—many of them, maybe all of them, depending on whose “data” one believes in the massive misrepresentations and blatant lies. The readings on this debacle are depressing, informative, and important if we want to really learn from the “Texas Miracle” and ensure the rest of the country doesn’t continue down this slippery slope (e.g., Amrein & Berliner, 2002; CBSNEWS.com, 2004; Dobbs 2003; Haney, 2000; Schemo, 2003).

**Public education is undercut by un-substantiated alternatives**

Alternatives such as charter schools, school choice, vouchers, take-overs, and alternate pathways to teacher certification are being touted as cures to the ills of public education. Given the lack of clear data that our public education system is indeed in peril, and that these alternatives offer substantial improvements, I am compelled to reexamine the real motivation of legislation such as NCLB. Could the larger goal be privatization of what has been one of our country’s greatest assets—a free and public education? Or is undermining our schools in an effort to “help” them improve just another unintended consequence of legislation that sounds good on the surface but, like the Texas Miracle, is rotten underneath.

In summary, NCLB rings hollow for gifted students and for students who need quality education the most. Instead of requiring the same of everyone—proficiency—maybe NCLB ought to focus on strengths, interests, and talents of students (and their teachers), and fund-intervention programs, gifted-education programs, alternative programs, career- and technical-education programs, and special-education programs. Changing focus might actually help students reach their potentials rather than leaving them languishing in or dropping out of schools in which no place exists for them.

Sadly, NCLB is unlikely to change focus, but educators and parents can if they have the courage to question the law and do educationally what is best for the children. We can ill afford to sit by, make the best of it, and wait for someone to show us the way out. We must speak up, question, and take professional initiative to do that which we were trained to do: help individual children reach their fullest potentials. Since system-wide change isn’t likely in the near future, individual educators must have the courage to teach the children in their care, even if this means closing the door and de-emphasizing the test in favor of more engaging learning. Educators must recognize that proficient is not enough, that students deserve an education that pushes them to achieve; then provide opportunities to their students to achieve much more than simple proficiency. Scant evidence exists that teaching to the test improves learning (Popham, 2001), yet evidence from gifted child education suggests that an enriched curriculum can reveal students’ “hidden talents” (Gallagher, 2004, p. 123). Change happens one child, one educator at a time, and collectively, if enough educators stop playing the score-boosting game, America’s schools can return to the business of educating children.
Administrators can look for measures that show individual gains, then report those gains. At the same time they can de-emphasize the importance of testing and encourage their teachers to deliver meaningful and high-quality learning experiences to all students.

Researchers can continue to study the effects of NCLB and the high stakes that accompany it on student learning and performance. Gifted-education researchers can study what happens to student learning in impoverished schools when educators learn and use gifted-education strategies to develop student performance. They can also investigate learning and cognition when children receive enriched curricula matched to their skills, and where the focus is on learning rather than testing. Through these actions we will attract quality teachers, reach students, develop talents, and nurture gifts.

Nothing less is acceptable.

REFERENCES