

COMMENTS ON LIEBMAN AND SABEL: *A PUBLIC LABORATORY DEWEY BARELY IMAGINED*

DIANE RAVITCH*

In their article, James Liebman and Charles Sabel put forward an interesting and provocative thesis: that the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001¹ (NCLB) is a continuation of the educational goals of the civil rights movement. NCLB, they argue, is “the legitimate legatee of the concern for equal treatment in a diverse society that motivated the earlier and heroic attempts to recast the school system”² Liebman and Sabel see great promise in the act’s combination of both top-down standards-based reforms with bottom-up, highly autonomous and localized reforms. To demonstrate their thesis, they describe historical and logical connections between NCLB and a variety of school reform programs.

As a historian and also as someone who has closely observed educational policy over the past two decades, I was fascinated by their analysis. I am persuaded by their argument that NCLB gained its bipartisan momentum because policymakers believed that it would ensure equity for those who are least well served by existing arrangements. For several years, the racial gap in academic achievement has been well documented, and policymakers have eagerly sought strategies to reduce or close the gap. NCLB, as the authors note, owes a great deal to earlier reforms in Texas, where annual testing and reporting were used to stimulate academic improvements. The Texas experience suggests that accountability reforms might be a valuable means to identify the specific children who are falling behind and to help them before it is too late. The Texas reforms embodied certain principles, such as the importance of clear academic standards; regular assessment of student performance, based on the standards; public release of ample information disaggregated by race, gender, and other categories; and academic interventions to aid lagging students. Such reforms are at the heart of NCLB, along with a requirement that districts achieve “adequate yearly progress” for students in meeting academic goals. Liebman and Sabel are optimistic that NCLB will bring concrete results and academic improvement, specifically for the poor and minority students who are now so frequently “left behind.”

The most controversial part of their analysis, in my view, is their contention that NCLB can be linked to small school activists like Ted Sizer and Deborah

* Research Professor of Education at New York University and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

1. Pub. L. No. 107-110, 115 Stat. 1425 (2001).

2. James S. Liebman & Charles F. Sabel, *A Public Laboratory Dewey Barely Imagined: The Emerging Model of School Governance and Legal Reform*, 28 N.Y.U. REV. L. & SOC. CHANGE 183, 300 (2003).

Meier, to pedagogical reformers in District 2 in New York City, and to other “bottom-up” reformers. Furthermore, they imply that there is a line that can be drawn from John Dewey’s laboratory school in Chicago (the paradigm of school-based, localized reform) to NCLB, because it encourages schools to meet the goals of the legislation in whatever ways they think best.

I admit that I found these linkages difficult to follow. I know of nothing in Dewey to support this argument (Dewey did not believe that children should be taught to read earlier than age eight or nine, for example, and he certainly would not have supported districtwide or statewide standards and assessments). The authors acknowledge that Meier and Sizer prefer “portfolios” for individual evaluation and that these two reformers share “a vehement rejection of standardized tests in any form.” Inasmuch as these small-school reformers object to the principal demand of NCLB (that is, for annual testing and reporting of student progress from grades three through eight), it is hard to understand how their activities can be seen as contributing to the emergence of this legislative strategy for school improvement.

Similarly, the authors’ linkage of New York City’s District 2 and NCLB was confusing. District 2 is one of New York City’s thirty-two school districts, located in a relatively affluent area of the city; it has achieved renown for its professional development activities. I was unsure whether the authors meant to suggest that District 2 had influenced the legislation or whether they saw the district’s emphasis on professional development as a likely outcome of NCLB. There is no doubt that states and cities will invest more in professional development to help teachers achieve the goals of NCLB, but it is not sure that these activities will mirror those in District 2.

Liebman and Sabel seem convinced that NCLB will provide support for the progressivist pedagogies of the kind found in the schools of District 2. That district is well known for its preference for “whole language” and other “progressivist” pedagogies. However, there is no reason to believe that NCLB will promote those approaches, and some reason to believe that it will not. Certainly critics of standardized testing have loudly complained that the annualized testing demanded by NCLB has encouraged “teaching to the test” and an undue amount of time devoted to test preparation, rather than the student-centered inquiry learning associated with progressive practices. NCLB has certainly turned the nation’s focus to improving student achievement. Whereas we have had numerous anecdotal reports over the years about successful teachers or successful schools, NCLB has inspired an intensive search for means of improving entire school districts. A recent report³ from the Council of the Great City Schools, an advocacy organization for urban education, identified three school districts that have made strong achievement gains in recent years:

3. COUNCIL OF THE GREAT CITY SCH., FOUNDATIONS FOR SUCCESS: CASE STUDIES OF HOW URBAN SCHOOL SYSTEMS IMPROVE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT (2002), available at <http://www.cgcs.org/reports/Foundations.html>.

Houston, Texas; Sacramento, California; and Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina. This report describes the steps that these districts took to change their culture and achieve test-score gains for children of all racial groups. Among the strategies they adopted were these: they set specific performance goals tied to an accountability system, not only for students but for professionals as well; they provided recognition and rewards to improving schools; they focused relentlessly on low-performing schools, diagnosing their needs and developing a plan of action with additional resources; they established uniform, district-wide curricula and instructional frameworks (the district curricula, especially in reading and math, tended to be fairly prescriptive and aligned with state standards).⁴ This last approach does not reflect the bottom-up style of District 2 in New York City. Indeed, the leaders of the three successful urban districts agreed that a centralized curriculum would be most beneficial for poor and minority students, who tend to have the highest rates of mobility. Interestingly, all three of these districts selected the same reading curriculum—Open Court, published by McGraw Hill, which has a prescriptive program of phonics and literature. In these districts, students of all racial groups experienced solid achievement gains.

As I read the Liebman and Sabel article, I remembered that I had accumulated a large file of articles critical of NCLB. NCLB has become a synonym for testing. If one believes that tests play a positive role in diagnosing educational problems and developing a plan of action, then NCLB has a beneficial role to play in school reform. If one believes that tests are a major part of what is wrong with American education, then NCLB is a symptom of educational failure, not a mechanism for improvement. Right now, the critics are far louder than the supporters of NCLB. Hardly an issue of *Education Week* goes by without another complaint from a superintendent or an anti-testing group complaining that NCLB is underfunded, unrealistic, diversionary, misguided, harmful, etc. Some even complain that it is impossible for all children in grades three through eight to learn to read and do mathematics. Many of the complaints come from the very bottom-up groups that Liebman and Sabel consider to be part of the NCLB coalition of reformers.

But I don't want to end without acknowledging that the NCLB strategy has some very important strengths and that these strengths support the authors' belief that NCLB will help those children who are usually left behind. A couple of years ago, before passage of the federal law, I was part of a team of independent reviewers for the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). MCAS tests English language arts and mathematics beginning in grade ten; students have five chances to pass in order to qualify for a high school diploma. Our group heard from supporters of MCAS as well as its critics. Then we visited a school district in suburban Boston, where we met with teachers and administrators. After the usual grouching about the time spent on testing, the

4. *See Id.*

teachers described some positive changes that followed the introduction of state testing. One said, "We used to close our doors and teach whatever we wanted. Now we talk to each other and agree on our goals." Several explained that they were using the results of state testing to identify the students who were falling behind. After each test administration, the pool of students who had failed got smaller, and the teachers focused on that group "like a laser." Teachers said that they met regularly to discuss individual students and to try to figure out how to help them. The school's reputation in its community depended on their success.

Based on what I learned in Massachusetts, I believe with Liebman and Sabel that NCLB may well focus new energy and resources on the children who need it most. The rising tide of professional opposition to NCLB indicates that this will not occur automatically or easily. But the potential for change is surely there. For those who oppose testing and who discount the importance of test scores, the changes will not matter. For those who believe that tests measure skills that matter in higher education and the workplace, such changes will be welcome news.