

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

## Special Issue on the Twentieth Anniversary of No Child Left Behind

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No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is arguably the most important piece of educational legislation in recent US history. It has transformed school organization and practice, realigned governance relationships, and structured a new way of thinking and talking about student learning. In light of this, NCLB has been the subject of countless books and articles, the vast majority of which have sought to understand the impact of the law.

This issue of *History of Education Quarterly*, which marks the twentieth anniversary of NCLB, asks a different question: Where did this landmark legislation come from?

When George W. Bush signed NCLB into law two decades ago, it caught many by surprise—not just in the sense that it was a federal mandate out of step with 150 years of convention, but also in how it framed the work of teachers and the meaning of school. Yet NCLB was no more a bolt from the blue than any other significant historical event. And in this issue, we seek to better understand the origins of this law by stepping back and seeing it within a broader historical context. Specifically, the articles featured in this issue situate NCLB in three different storylines, each of which begins long before 2002.

In an essay informed by his extensive personal experience, Maris Vinovskis reminds us that today's federal project in public education began in 1965, and he illustrates the ways in which NCLB was an artifact of four decades of presidential and congressional ambition (and disappointment). In an article that draws on her prior research, Diana D'Amico Pawlewicz makes the case that NCLB was also the result of cultural beliefs about teachers and the distinctly American tendency to blame them for the shortcomings of schools. And in a third piece, Christian Ydesen and Sherman Dorn locate NCLB within a broader effort to establish a global architecture of accountability—a project that tracks almost perfectly with the rise of neoliberalism.

This special issue also includes a fourth feature article, which is unrelated to NCLB, but which we have included because of its topical relevance. That piece, by Wade H. Morris, examines the use of report cards by juvenile courts in the early twentieth century, and tells a powerful story about the demand for surveillance tools in education, as well as about their limitations. The issue closes with a Policy

Dialogue. In it, historian and *HEQ* editorial board member Diane Ravitch is joined in conversation by three policy leaders who represent a range of viewpoints on data use and testing: Denise Forte, CEO of The Education Trust, Princess Moss, Vice President of the National Education Association, and Paul Reville, former Massachusetts Secretary of Education.

Today, the logic of standards-based accountability is well established in schools; it is an accepted part of the backdrop against which public schooling unfolds in the US. For evidence of this, one need look no further than the 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which saw NCLB rebranded as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The new law responded to some of the most obvious excesses of its predecessor legislation, sanding down NCLB's sharper edges. Yet in both principle and in practice, ESSA was nearly indistinguishable from its forerunner.

This issue of *HEQ* is not an attempt to sway readers toward a particular viewpoint about measurement and accountability. But we do hope to contribute to the broader policy conversation by creating what philosopher Maxine Greene called "the possibility of looking at things as if they could be otherwise."<sup>1</sup> As the articles in this issue remind us, NCLB was the product of a particular time and place, and was informed by assumptions and beliefs about how the world works. Seeing that history more clearly, we believe, makes us more critical observers of the present, as well as better stewards of the future.

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<sup>1</sup>Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 16.