

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS
OF NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

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Elementary School Teachers' Perceptions of *No Child Left Behind*

Since 2001, *No Child Left Behind* has seemed to affect teachers' and administrators' views toward school curricula. Broad and inclusive curricula that facilitate the development of well-rounded students have been abandoned in favor of narrow, exclusive models that specifically prepare students for standardized assessments (Zastrow & Janc, 2004). Teachers, often sensing great pressure to prepare students for these assessments, are continuously reacting and adjusting to curricular changes. Some teachers feel too much emphasis is placed on test preparation, essentially limiting teachers' ability to capitalize on teachable moments that might enhance student learning (McCombs & Russell, 2006). Other teachers feel pressure to organize curricula and base instructional plans and strategies on test scores rather than personal experience or best practice. Although teachers believe they know what is best for students, they often feel their hands are tied because of a responsibility to prepare students for successful performance on mandated tests (Snow-Geroni & Franklin, 2007).

A common curricular adjustment among many school officials in the wake of *No Child Left Behind* has been to reallocate instructional time to the benefit of tested subjects like reading language arts and mathematics, especially when students do not meet minimum requirements in these areas (McMurrer, 2007). Consequently, instructional time for other subjects like the fine arts, social studies and science has been reduced. This has been especially noticeable at the elementary level. In a nationally representative sample study, 71% of districts reported to have reduced the time spent on other, non-tested subjects in elementary schools (Jennings & Rentner, 2006). On average, the

amount of time spent on these other subjects was reduced by 75 minutes or more per week (McMurrer, 2008). State-level assessment directors have also indicated that teachers of non-tested subjects are more often being asked to incorporate core content into their daily instruction and subject matter (Pederson, 2007).

In addition to the reallocation of instructional time, research also suggests that *No Child Left Behind* may be having an effect on teacher morale and attitude (McCombs & Russell, 2006). In this era of accountability, more educators seem to wonder whether they should continue in the teaching profession. Such thoughts have been shared by both pre-service and in-service teachers. A mentor teacher and 13-year veteran felt that her job was becoming less enjoyable because of the long-term effects of standardized testing. Likewise, an intern teacher decided not to continue in education because of the focus placed on standardized testing. Among both of their concerns was the emphasis placed on memorizing facts and test strategies rather than authentic, hands-on learning and a general lack of variety in educational experiences (Snow-Gerono & Franklin, 2007). In light of these facts, researchers have raised concerns about how to recruit and retain quality teachers within the profession (Snow-Gerono & Franklin, 2007).

While research exists on the perceptions of secondary educators in specific content areas, few studies have explored the perception of *No Child Left Behind* among elementary school teachers. This gap in knowledge should be of significant concern. Indeed, elementary teachers are charged with teaching “the basics,” providing students with a foundation that may ensure success on all assessments until students’ completion of the twelfth grade. The purpose of this study, then, was to determine elementary teachers’ perceptions of *No Child Left Behind*.

The following research questions were used to carry out this study:

- 1) What is the perception of *No Child Left Behind* among elementary school teachers?
- 2) Which teachers are likely to have more favorable perceptions of *No Child Left Behind*?
- 3) What is the relationship between teachers' perceptions and years of teaching experience?
- 4) How, if at all, has *No Child Left Behind* affected teachers' morale?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The implementation of *No Child Left Behind* has changed education in myriad ways. For example, education officials in Maryland and Maine have abandoned comprehensive, performance-based assessment systems in lieu of the testing requirements mandated by *No Child Left Behind*. Performance-based assessments are typically utilized because they more accurately assess the breadth of skills and knowledge that students are learning (Flinders, 2007). And, many school officials and teachers question whether the standardized tests mandated by *No Child Left Behind* can accurately assess higher-level thinking and critical evaluation skills (Garcia, Mathis & Wiley, 2005). Standardized tests, however, are often cheaper to administer and evaluate. Furthermore, standardized tests provide data that are objective rather than subjective. Considering that federal funding is often determined from these data, objectivity remains especially important.

Gerrity (2007) attempted to determine the impact of *No Child Left Behind* on Ohio's music education programs. A representative sample of public school principals from Ohio were asked to provide input on the status of music in their schools as well as their attitudes toward music. It was determined that principals had mostly positive attitudes towards music. Music, however, was still seen as least important when compared to the other core subjects. What is notable here is that principals cited an inability to avoid many of the reported effects of *No Child Left Behind*, specifically a narrowing of the curriculum and the reallocation of instructional time. In fact, 60% of Ohio's principals reported that they expected music teachers to devote a portion of their instructional time to the teaching of other core subjects (Gerrity, 2007).

In a study completed by the Ohio Department of Education, it was found that Ohio teachers in high-poverty and urban schools tend to leave the profession most often. Schools labeled as “academic emergency” or “academic watch” were most affected by teacher attrition. Attrition of Ohio teachers remained constant at about 7% for the years of 1998 and 2002, but significantly increased at the end of the 2003 – 2004 school year. In this year, 10,202 teachers left the teaching profession, representing the highest amount in recent years and 11% of all teachers in Ohio (ODE, 2005).

Another study on teacher shortage by Ingersoll (2003) indicated that approximately 50% of all teachers leave the profession before the sixth year of teaching. Of the 50% leaving the profession, half of the teachers indicated reasons of job dissatisfaction or wanting to find what they perceived as a better job. Job dissatisfaction was related to several factors, including lack of administrative support, low salaries, student discipline problems and the exclusion from decision making (Ingersoll, 2003).

A study with mentor teachers in the *No Child Left Behind* era indicated a strong relationship between job dissatisfaction and increased pressure and stress in one’s life. Unsurprising, then, that an emphasis on test preparation and additional content coupled with less instructional time negatively influenced teachers’ job satisfaction. Although teachers acknowledged the benefits of standardized testing and the need for accountability in teaching and learning, they were often reluctant to accept a teaching position in a high-stress environment, characterized by a narrowed curriculum and skill-based teaching and learning. (Snow-Gerono & Franklin, 2007).

Johnson, Arumi and Ott (2006) explored the perceptions of local school leaders and those concerned with reforming public schools on a national level. Two hundred,

fifty-four superintendents, 252 principals, 721 teachers and 1,300 parents who have children in the public schools participated in the study. The researchers discovered that local school leaders remained positive about the education of students and the quality of teaching occurring in their districts. However, on a state wide level, the Department of Education found that no states had successfully achieved the benchmark of improving teacher quality under *No Child Left Behind in 2006*. This discrepancy provides evidence that federal, state, and local standards for teacher quality are not yet uniform.

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is another phenomenon that researchers have explored with regard to *No Child Left Behind*. For purposes of AYP, standardized test scores in the basic academic subjects serve as the primary indicators of success. Schools in the Great Lakes Region of the United States are particularly in jeopardy of failing the AYP requirement established by *No Child Left Behind*. In Indiana, for example, 23% of public schools did not achieve their AYP goals in both 2003 and 2004. It is projected that more and more Indiana schools will fail to meet their AYP goals, with as many as 85% of schools failing to meet AYP goals in 2014. This is due in part to the lack of funding for *No Child Left Behind*. In particular, 46 studies on the adequacy of state education funding revealed that a 27.5% increase in overall education spending was necessary to bring all students up to standard. However, on a federal level, education spending for *No Child Left Behind* increased by only .9%. This only represents a small amount of the 27.5% increase needed to ensure that goals of the law are met (Mathis, 2005). In addition, little evidence exists to suggest that growth assumptions necessary to achieve and maintain AYP year after year can be achieved resulting in more and more schools failing AYP goals (Garcia, Mathis, & Wiley, 2005).

Another issue regarding AYP explored by Garcia, Mathis & Wiley (2005) was the lack of responsiveness to poverty in education. Schools which have more diversity (several student subgroups) are generally identified at greater rates than schools with less diverse populations. AYP requires that all students achieve the same standards regardless of student background and socio-economic status. When considering achievement gaps, students from poorer backgrounds score lower than students from more affluent backgrounds. It is believed that more funding and resources for housing, food, medical care, pre-school programs and afterschool programs must be in place before achievement gaps can be narrowed among student sub-groups. Under current conditions, poorly-funded schools servicing at-risk student populations may experience great improvement and still not meet AYP goals. Conversely, affluent schools need only make minimal gains to meet AYP goals (Garcia et al., 2005).

A study by Sunderman, Tracey, Kim, & Orfield (2004) set out to gain an understanding of teachers' reactions to accountability under *No Child Left Behind*. A questionnaire was completed by teachers from two different districts on opposite sides of the country: Fresno, California and Richmond, Virginia. While supplemental services offered to improve student performance on tests were received favorably, participants still felt that identifying schools that did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress would not lead to school improvement. It was felt that sanctions placed on schools not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress would result in teachers transferring to other, higher-performing schools. Teachers believed that public recognition and rewards were more effective for improving student performance than sanctions (Sunderman, Tracey, Kim, & Orfield, 2004).

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

This research is descriptive in nature. Data about elementary school teachers' perceptions of *No Child Left Behind* were sought from a convenience sample of elementary teachers from four schools within the same educational corporation of a mid-western state. Sixty-seven K-5 and special area teachers were considered for participation in the study. To ensure anonymity for the participants and the educational corporation, pseudonyms are appropriately used throughout the report in place of actual school names.

The primary variable considered was elementary school teachers' perceptions of *No Child Left Behind*. As such, the researcher created a measurement instrument which incorporated both Likert-type items meant to quantify the respondents' perceptions and demographic items that were utilized to determine more distinct differences among the participants. The questionnaire addressed teacher morale, use of instructional time, and specific subjects' perceived value as phenomena related to *No Child Left Behind*. Ultimately, elementary teachers' perceptions of *No Child Left Behind* were operationally reflected in the summated score of fifteen Likert-type items. Responses for each item ranged from 1, very strongly disagree, to 6, very strongly agree. Possible perception scores ranged from 15 to 90, with higher scores indicating a more favorable perception of *No Child Left Behind*. A mixture of positively- and negatively-phrased items appeared in the instrument. Negatively-phrased items were reversed scored in order to avoid any distortion of respondents' perception scores.

Scores were classified using the following rubric:

<i>Perception Score</i>	<i>Classification</i>
15 – 26	Extremely Unfavorable
27 – 39	Very Unfavorable
40 – 52	Unfavorable
53 – 65	Favorable
66 – 78	Very Favorable
79 – 90	Extremely Favorable

Content validity for the measurement instrument was established with the help of a panel of experts. Four music education professors completed a content validation form for the questionnaire items. The panel reported the overall clarity and appropriateness of each item in determining respondents' perceptions. Suggestions for questionnaire improvement were also requested from the panel. Based on their responses, items were reworded in an attempt to increase clarity.

A pilot test was conducted with teachers from an elementary school that was not part of the educational corporation where the study took place, but was within the same geographical area. As pilot test participants, these teachers were asked to complete the questionnaire and report on its readability. No changes to the questionnaire resulted from this effort. A Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .74 was calculated from the data provided by the pilot test participants. Since the participants in the pilot test are similar to the true research participants, the coefficient of internal consistency should remain a good indication of reliability.

Considering the conduct of the study, questionnaires were sent to each of the participating elementary schools and distributed to the teachers identified for

participation. Teachers were given a week to complete the questionnaire. Following the response period, completed questionnaires were collected by a chosen building representative and returned to the researcher. Ultimately, thirty-nine usable questionnaires were subjected to data analysis, resulting in a response rate of 58%. While item non-response was controlled using the mean replacement method, no procedures were utilized to control for complete non-response. This effort was thought to be unnecessary. The researcher only sought to determine the perceptions of *No Child Left Behind* among the elementary school teachers of a specific educational corporation in a mid-western state. Furthermore, the use of a convenience sample makes it impossible for results to be generalized to a larger population. Accordingly, the results of this inquiry will be true only for those who participated in the study.

RESULTS

Data analysis revealed that the perception of *No Child Left Behind* among elementary school teachers (n = 39) was unfavorable, with a mean of 44.7 and a standard deviation of 6.4. A breakdown of participants' perceptions is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1 (Frequency distribution for participants' perceptions)

<i>Perception</i>	<i>Perception Score</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Cumulative %</i>
Extremely Unfavorable	15 – 26	0	.0	.0
Very Unfavorable	27 – 39	8	20.5	20.5
Unfavorable	40 – 52	28	71.8	92.3
Favorable	53 – 65	3	7.7	100.0
Very Favorable	66 – 78	0	.0	100.0
Extremely Favorable	79 – 90	0	.0	100.0

To determine a clearer view of elementary teachers' perceptions of *No Child Left Behind*, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was completed for each of the following variables: grade level taught, teaching assignment, and highest degree earned. No significant differences among elementary teachers' perceptions were revealed. However, the analysis of variance outlined in Table 2a confirms that the school in which one teaches may indeed influence his or her perception of *No Child Left Behind*. The mean perception score for the teachers of Blueview Elementary School (n = 5) was 48.5 with a standard deviation of 4.56. The mean perception score for the teachers of Redview Elementary School (n = 14) was 47.1 with a standard deviation of 4.53. The mean

perception score for the teachers of Yellowview Elementary School ($n = 5$) was 47.0 with a standard deviation of 6.00. And, the mean perception score for the teachers of Greenview Elementary School ($n = 15$) was 40.5 with a standard deviation of 6.64. Scheffe's post hoc test in Table 2b illustrates that the perception of *No Child Left Behind* among the teachers of Greenview Elementary School is significantly less favorable than that of the teachers of Redview Elementary School.

Table 2a (ANOVA: perception score as dependent variable)

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	441.969	3	147.323	4.646	.008
Within Groups	1109.929	35	31.712		
Total	1551.897	38			

Table 2b (Scheffe's Post hoc test)

School (I)	School (J)	Diff. (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Yellowview	Blueview	-1.500	3.561	.981	-11.958	8.958
	Redview	-0.071	2.933	1.000	-8.687	8.544
	Greenview	6.500	2.908	.192	-2.039	15.039
Blueview	Yellowview	1.500	3.561	.981	-8.958	11.958
	Redview	1.429	2.933	.971	-7.187	10.044
	Greenview	8.000	2.908	.074	-0.539	16.539
Redview	Yellowview	0.071	2.933	1.000	-8.544	8.687
	Blueview	-1.429	2.933	.971	-10.044	7.187
	Greenview	6.571*	2.093	.032	0.426	12.716
Greenview	Yellowview	-6.500	2.908	.192	-15.039	2.039
	Blueview	-8.000	2.908	.074	-16.539	0.539
	Redview	-6.571*	2.093	.032	-12.716	-0.426

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

When considering the relationship between years of teaching experience and teachers' perceptions, the Pearson Correlation ($r = -.342$) illustrated in Table 3 indicates a "moderate association" based on the *Conventions for Describing Magnitude of Relationship* by Bartz (1999). This is a negative association, meaning that as years of experience increase, teachers' perceptions of *No Child Left Behind* tend to decrease.

Table 3 (Correlation between perception score and years of experience)

		Perception Score	Years of experience
Perception Score	Pearson Correlation	1.00	-.342*
	Significance		.033
	N	39	39
Years of experience	Pearson Correlation	-.342*	1.00
	Significance	.033	
	N	39	39

* indicates a 2-tailed test for significance.

When considering item analysis, 46.2% of the participants agreed, to some extent, that ramifications of the *No Child Left Behind* Act had negatively affected their morale. Likewise, 79.5% of the participants indicated that they have considered leaving the profession because of ramifications brought about by the *No Child Left Behind* Act.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The mean attitudinal score achieved by the participants ($M = 44.7$; $SD = 6.4$) indicates that these elementary school teachers have an unfavorable view of *No Child Left Behind*. While perceptions were not specifically measured, the participants in Sunderman, Tracey, Kim & Orfield (2004) and Snow-Geroni & Franklin (2007) expressed similar views. What is most significant is that 92.3% of the participants in the present study expressed no more than an unfavorable view of *No Child Left Behind*. Only 7.7% of the participants perceived the Act favorably. In light of the overwhelmingly negative press that *No Child Left Behind* has received, it is not surprising that teachers will perceive it in a disapproving manner. However, a greater than 90% disapproval rate seems especially high. Future status studies that specifically explore teachers' perceptions of *No Child Left Behind* and can achieve greater generalizability may allow researchers to better determine if this population of elementary school teachers is unique in its tremendously negative perception of *No Child Left Behind*.

A finding that may support the assumption that this, and any population will have a unique response to *No Child Left Behind* is the significant statistical difference among the perceptions of teachers at various schools. Results indicated that the perception of *No Child Left Behind* among the teachers at Greenview Elementary School ($M = 40.5$; $SD = 6.6$) was significantly lower than the perception of the teachers at Redview Elementary School ($M = 47.1$; $SD = 4.5$). In fact, the teachers at Greenview Elementary School recorded the lowest mean perception score of all four schools. In a follow-up exploration of this phenomenon, the researcher discovered that the teachers at Greenview Elementary School recorded the greatest amount of teaching experience ($M = 16.2$ years). On

average, the teachers at Greenview Elementary School recorded 6 more years of teaching experience than the teachers at Redview Elementary School. The researcher believes it is plausible that teachers with greater experience may be more likely to have unfavorable perceptions of *No Child Left Behind*. Indeed, teachers with several years of experience have probably witnessed several educational reform movements. In this context, *No Child Left Behind* may be seen as one of many reform movements that seem to come and go on a whim. As a result, experienced teachers' reactions to *No Child Left Behind* may not be based on the legislation's merits, but rather on the simple fact that it is yet another mandate to which they must adjust.

Another result that seems to corroborate this belief is the relationship revealed between years of experience and teachers' perceptions of *No Child Left Behind*. Data analysis showed that as years of teaching experience increase, perceptions of *No Child Left Behind* had a tendency to decrease ($r = -.342$). Although this is not a causal relationship, the researcher believes that if teachers' perceptions of *No Child Left Behind* decrease over time, teacher attrition may become an even greater problem within the education profession. Considering that those who have recently joined the teaching ranks will have always taught in the *No Child Left Behind* era, more research is needed to determine if this observation will persist over time.

In this study, 79.5% of the participants indicated that they have considered leaving the profession because of ramifications brought about by *No Child Left Behind*. Again, the researcher believes that other teachers beyond the researched population may experience similar thoughts of departure. Remembering the study results of the Ohio Department of Education (2005), teachers serving in high-poverty and/or urban schools

tend to leave the profession at greater rates. And, schools labeled “academic emergency” or “academic watch” were most affected by teacher attrition. The educational community represented in this study shares similar characteristics with high-poverty, urban, and lower-performing schools. Consequently, a large percentage of teachers who have considered leaving the teaching profession may be expected.

Finally, it is interesting to note that no significant differences, with regard to grade level, teaching assignment, and highest degree earned, were revealed within teachers’ perceptions. This was especially surprising when considering highest degree earned, since this variable is often a reflection of years of experience. One explanation for this finding might be that all teachers share common issues and concerns with *No Child Left Behind*. However, it is just as likely that the mostly negative perceptions among teachers remained too homogenous. Without an appropriate amount of variance, statistically quantifying observable differences remains difficult.

Based on the results of this study, the researcher recommends that college and university teacher-preparation programs take pro-active steps to ensure that pre-service teachers are well-informed and equipped to take on the challenges of *No Child Left Behind*. This might include the addition of courses that explore the history, rationale, requirements, and various viewpoints of *No Child Left Behind*. Additionally, a solid, well-defined partnership between university and school-based education should be emphasized so that new teachers will be ready to work with and within a high-stakes testing environment (Snow-Gerono & Franklin, 2007).

Another recommendation for the profession would be to foster an environment in which teachers more regularly offer encouragement and support to fellow colleagues. In

this study, 46.2% of the participants agreed, to some extent, that ramifications of the *No Child Left Behind Act* had negatively affected their morale, a finding that is echoed in other research studies (McCombs & Russell, 2006). Negative attitudes are infectious and can create an environment that is not conducive to teaching and learning. As *No Child Left Behind* and testing are positioned to remain a part of American education, it is important for educators to encourage and support one another. After all, if teachers do not support each other, who will? Teachers need to feel like they are making a difference in the lives of their students and realize the positive impact they are capable of providing. Therefore, it is also important for school and community leaders to acknowledge teachers for all the good things they are doing to promote educational growth among students and help their schools meet Adequate Yearly Progress goals. As an example, school and community leaders might establish an annual award that recognizes a teacher who has had a positive impact on the lives of his or her students.

Meeting the most basic needs of students is another theme that should be explored. We must realize that no matter how much pressure we as teachers and administrators perceive, the students who are taking the tests are under just as much, if not more pressure. As such, we cannot blindly commit ourselves to our content more so than our students. After all, students are not likely to do well in any content area unless they possess basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills. To this end, Flinders (2007) states that teachers need to place priority on being accountable to students first. To do so, teachers might explore several school-related factors that help increase student achievement. Specific factors might include being familiar with the economic and social challenges of students, building better relationships with students, and assuring school

safety. Other factors could include giving rewards to teachers for staying in the profession and attracting others to the profession, promoting authentic assessments, reducing the number of students in a class, and providing for curriculum enrichment.

Finally, teachers must be encouraged to develop and implement authentic experiences to ensure that elementary curricula are not limited by the testing requirements of *No Child Left Behind*. The ultimate goal of education should be student learning, rather than a concern with whether or not they can pass a test. Although teachers believe that testing is an important part of the teaching and learning process, many have called for greater balance in education. A singular emphasis on test preparation and test results affects students and teachers in negative ways. For example, “teaching to the test” is often boring and tedious for both students and teachers. Furthermore, many teachers feel that the focus of raising test scores has led to an emphasis on test strategies and rote memorization rather than active learning. Instead of focusing solely on test scores, it is important to emphasize and celebrate the holistic development and academic progress of all children (Snow-Gerono and Franklin, 2007). “Teaching to the test” may also lead to other educational problems like teacher attrition. As noted, testing is causing schools to focus on making Adequate Yearly Progress over individual learning (Snow-Gerono and Franklin, 2007). Teachers feel pressured to raise student test scores, often at the expense of real learning.

As educators, we can’t let this happen. Our children deserve to be taught in an environment offering a well-rounded education instead of a narrowed curriculum focused on passing a test.

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APPENDIX A

A list of the Likert-type items as they appear in the survey:

- 1) Ramifications of the No Child Left Behind Act have negatively affected my morale.
- 2) As a result of NCLB, I voluntarily incorporate reading activities into the curriculum I teach.
- 3) I believe it is acceptable for instructional time to be taken away from music and reallocated to subjects covered on state standardized tests.
- 4) I have considered leaving the profession because of ramifications brought about by the No Child Left Behind Act.
- 5) I believe the skills and content covered on state mandated tests are more important than other skills and content.
- 6) As a result of NCLB, I voluntarily incorporate mathematics activities into the curriculum I teach.
- 7) I believe that rewarding schools for improved student performance is more effective than placing sanctions on schools for poor student performance.
- 8) I believe that state mandated tests are an effective means for measuring students' learning.
- 9) I believe the No Child Left Behind Act has compromised the development of well rounded students.
- 10) My teaching morale has improved since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act.
- 11) I would prefer not to give up instructional time for the teaching of tested subjects mandated by NCLB.
- 12) Ramifications of the No Child Left Behind Act have influenced me to continue teaching.
- 13) I believe an equal emphasis should be placed on both the skills and content covered on state mandated tests and the skills and content not covered on state mandated tests.
- 14) I believe that state mandated tests are not an accurate means of measuring students' learning.
- 15) I believe the No Child Left Behind Act has led to the development of well-rounded students.

