

'No Child' law gets an 'F' from education professor at Illinois

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Sarah J. McCarthy, a professor of language and literacy in the department of curriculum and instruction in the College of Education, says the controversial No Child Left Behind law has forced teachers in low-income school districts to craft a curriculum that marginalizes writing at the expense of teaching to the test.

Credit: Photo by L. Brian Stauffer

The controversial No Child Left Behind law has forced teachers in low-income school districts to craft a curriculum that marginalizes writing at the expense of teaching to the test, resulting in educators who feel straitjacketed by a high-stakes test, according to a U. of I. education professor who has studied the issue.

Sarah J. McCarthy, a professor of language and literacy in the department of curriculum and instruction in the College of Education at

the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, has studied the impact of the 7-year-old law on teachers' writing instruction in both high- and low-income schools. She discovered that teachers, especially those in low-income schools, are increasingly jettisoning writing from their language arts block in favor of reading comprehension, one of the subjects along with mathematics used to benchmark a school's progress through an annual battery of federally mandated tests administered by the states. The federal government then uses the test score data to either reward states with federal education funds or to impose punitive measures.

McCarthy, who published her findings in an article titled "The Impact of No Child Left Behind on Teachers' Writing Instruction" in the October issue of *Written Communication*, said that because the federal government uses only math and reading scores to measure a school's progress, there's little incentive for schools to teach students non-tested subjects such as writing, music, art and science.

"Writing instruction has been neglected at the expense of teaching to the test," McCarthy said, noting that from a pedagogical standpoint, that strategy is somewhat counterintuitive, considering that reading and writing are complementary cognitive activities.

"Being able to write well can make a student a better reader," she said. "But only teaching reading isn't going to make that student a better writer."

The effect on writing instruction has hit underperforming lower-income schools the hardest. In those schools, teachers often had pre-packaged teaching materials foisted upon them by their district, McCarthy said.

"Because they were deemed an underperforming school based on the test results, the district had to legislate the curriculum they were using in

both reading and writing. So when they taught reading and writing, they had to use this canned material."

For teachers in struggling schools, the imposition of a district-mandated, one-size-fits-all curriculum turns all the fun and spontaneity of learning into a forced march.

"Both teachers and students became so tired of focusing on and preparing for the test that by test time, they were mentally exhausted," McCarthy said. "For teachers still on probation or in their first three years of teaching, that loss of control over curriculum inevitably leads to a loss of morale and, in some cases, turnover."

McCarthy found that younger teachers in low-income schools felt more pressure to teach to the test than their more experienced counterparts in high-income schools.

"Young teachers in low-income schools are monitored to a greater degree than teachers in high-income schools," she said. "When that happens, there's that much more pressure to perform. Veteran teachers have the latitude to be a little more cavalier, but younger teachers felt much more beholden to the test because the stakes were so high for them."

The problem is compounded because the best veteran teachers invariably end up in higher-income schools, leaving the least prepared and least experienced teachers disproportionally assigned to schools with the greatest needs and challenges.

"Our most-qualified veteran teachers are not ending up where they're needed most," McCarthy said. "They're typically in the higher-income schools because they can afford to pay them more money."

For all of its negatives, McCarthy did note that one positive consequence of No Child Left Behind was that teachers were forced to lavish attention on low-achieving students.

"This is actually one of the benefits of the law, that teachers are thinking a lot more about their low achievers," she said.

But even that benefit has a downside that is symptomatic of the unintended consequences brought about by the law.

"The flip-side is that average and high-achieving students in high-income schools don't receive the attention they deserve," she said. "So we're undermining their educational progress by not challenging them enough."

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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