

National education policy -- oh, how it's changed

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The way legislators, experts and other opinion leaders discuss the role of parents and schools in reducing educational inequalities has changed dramatically since the Elementary and Secondary Education Act first passed in 1965. Put simply, parents were viewed as part of the problem then, with schools seen as the solution. In recent years, with No Child Left Behind and more school choice options, these roles have flipped.

"There has been a continued focus on reducing educational inequalities; however, there are stark contrasts in the way policymakers and experts talked about what they saw as the root problems and how to solve them from 1965 to 2001 -- especially the roles of parents and schools," said Emily Meanwell, sociology doctoral student in the College of Arts and Sciences at Indiana University Bloomington.

The 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act was the federal government's first major [education policy](#) and is described by Meanwell as "one of the most important education policies in American history. Created to reduce educational inequalities found across the country, its goal was to increase opportunities for poor and disadvantaged children as part of the War on Poverty."

It's notable, Meanwell says, that the act did not focus on content or curriculum, explicitly forbidding a national curriculum. Nor did it explicitly address race. Meanwell wrote that race and [desegregation](#) already were addressed in the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

"No Child Left Behind explicitly addresses achievement gaps between [racial groups](#)," Meanwell said. "The original law was technically race-neutral."

The federal education law has been reauthorized eight times, most recently in 2002 with the reauthorization of NCLB. Meanwell analyzed testimony given by a range of experts during congressional hearings in 1965 and 2001. In the early years, testimony portrayed parents as part of the problem when students' home lives and experiences left them ill-prepared for [school](#). Schools, then, with the help of extra funding, were expected to bring these students up to speed. Instead of focusing on "inputs," as in children's school readiness or school funding, No Child Left Behind focuses more attention outputs, largely in the form of standardized test scores. This casts schools more as the problem, particularly when they report poor test scores. Parents now are seen as part of the solution, with access to accountability data in the form of test scores and more [school choice](#) options.

"Poor students were framed as trapped in failing schools, and needing parents to rescue them, in 2001. This is a reverse of the framing in 1965, when they were portrayed as trapped in culturally impoverished families and needing schools to rescue them," Meanwell said.

Provided by Indiana University

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