When students across the country returned to school this fall, they did so under the Every Student Succeeds Act, which rolls back the style of accountability emphasized in the previous federal education law, the No Child Left Behind Act.

No Child Left Behind was passed with overwhelming support in 2001 and looked to be headed to easy reauthorization six years later. But the bipartisan consensus behind education accountability broke down, with no agreement on how to move forward.

What happened in 2007? Indiana University sociologists Tim Hallett and Emily Meanwell turn back the clock to understand. Analyzing transcripts from congressional hearings during the failed reauthorization attempt, they focus on social interactions that promoted an alternative meaning for the law's title:

"NCLB means children left behind."

"This was an important moment in time," Hallett said. "The law had support from both Republicans and Democrats. It had support from the Bush administration. And yet, through this process, its meaning started to get inverted, and people began to interpret it in different ways."

Hallett and Meanwell published their findings in the article "Accountability as an Inhabited Institution: Contested Meanings and the Symbolic Politics of Reform" in the journal Symbolic Interaction. Hallett
is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology in the College of Arts and Sciences. Meanwell is director of the Social Science Research Commons.

The paper draws on an approach called inhabited institutionalism to examine how participants in the hearings created "problem-meaning packages" that upended the understanding of No Child Left Behind. Applying a lens of sociological analysis to the process of making policy, the authors argue that understanding these dynamics requires paying attention to social interaction and the symbolic politics of reform.

The shift in accepted views of educational accountability that appeared in 2007 eventually culminated in the December 2015 passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act, which gives states and local school districts more flexibility to create their own forms of accountability, a system resembling the one in place in the 1990s under President Bill Clinton.

"We thought there was something missing in understanding the arc of accountability," Hallett said. "If we want to understand this circling back of reform, it helps to look at these congressional interactions and meanings."

The researchers analyzed and coded 1,790 pages of single-spaced text in the transcripts of 20 congressional hearings on reauthorization held in 2007. A consistent theme, they said, was that a law intended to serve all children had the perverse effect of causing some children to be left behind.

They identified problem-meaning packages that clustered around four issues:

- The requirement that schools show Adequate Yearly Progress by getting a fixed number of students to pass standardized tests
caused schools to focus on students who were close to passing. Higher- and lower-achieving students got less attention.

- The law's focus on test scores resulted in an overemphasis on teaching basic math and reading skills. A congresswoman argued that "we leave the whole child often behind" as a result.
- Schools were gaming the system by "pushing out" students who were unlikely to pass required tests. States gamed the system by setting standards low so more students would pass. Both tactics left children behind.
- Hearing participants disagreed on whether there should be loose or tight coupling between federal policies and local school practices. There was no consensus on whether school districts should have flexibility to set their own standards, or if that would leave some children behind.

The split over how strong a role the federal government should have "created strange bedfellows," Hallett said. Among traditionally Democratic constituent groups, civil rights organizations favored a strong federal role and teachers' unions opposed it. Among Republican-aligned groups, business organizations favored accountability and states' rights advocates opposed it.

With critics pointing out ways in which children were left behind, the effort to reauthorize the law didn't succeed. "It just sort of fizzled out," Meanwell said.

The failed reauthorization in 2007 meant the existing No Child Left Behind law remained in effect but became untenable until it was replaced this year with the Every Student Succeeds Act, reflecting a revised policy paradigm on school accountability.

More information: Tim Hallett et al. Accountability as an Inhabited Institution: Contested Meanings and the Symbolic Politics of Reform,

Provided by Indiana University

Citation: Sociologists examine shift from 'No Child Left Behind' to 'children left behind' (2016, September 28) retrieved 1 November 2023 from https://phys.org/news/2016-09-sociologists-shift-child-left-children.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.