

# **I'M FIGHTING A LION WITH A TOOTHPICK: THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF K-12 PRINCIPALS**

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To explore the degree to which No Child Left Behind legislation has become a major issue for principals, the authors conducted two studies using a sample survey technique developed by Gay. Approximately 150 K-12 principals responded to the surveys which asked them to provide their responses in rank order using an ordinal response format. Respondents were also asked to write a paragraph rationale pertaining to their most critical issue and in the second survey, their greatest impediment(s) to implementation of accountability programming. Due to the variety of verbatim responses, the authors used a selective coding technique to create topical categories for each response set. Survey data for the two studies was then quantified by recording the relative frequency with which each response category appeared. Results of the surveys indicated that accountability was the most critical issue confronting school principals and staff development/curricular alignment were the greatest impediments to the implementation of accountability programming. This work concluded with a discussion of implications and recommendations for P-12 principals to assist them in the fulfillment of No Child Left Behind mandates.

## **INTRODUCTION**

"I'm fighting a lion with a toothpick" is a direct quote from a principal who was asked to identify the most critical issues facing education today. The findings presented by the authors indicate that many school administrators share this principal's sentiment as they face urgent, resource-intensive and time-consuming tasks while being judged on the key issue: *school accountability*, i.e., the academic performance of students in their schools as mandated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. Additionally, this article will describe what school principals view as the greatest impediment to implementation of accountability programs.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Principals ordinarily use the term accountability to mean ways in which test data and other information (e.g., attendance and dropout rates) are used to assess teachers, administrators, and education in general. These outcomes of an accountability system influence high-level decisions regarding the allocation of any number of rewards and/or punishments to institutions and individuals at all levels of an educational system (Sirotnik & Kimball, 1999). Accountability has essentially become a process of high-stakes test-

ing, usually a single test for each grade. Although many factors can influence student performance, the blame for low student test scores is most frequently directed at teachers accused of being inadequately prepared and/or improperly delivering instruction, and at principals, accused of losing control of their schools and/or not providing adequate leadership. Unfortunately, this blame game is used to justify the punishment of teachers and administrators through reassignment or withholding of funding, among other means of punishment (Nevi, 2002).

The pressures resulting from this type accountability can be overwhelming for school administrators. Principals are increasingly being held responsible for students' standardized test scores. Recent reports of administrators who encourage cheating on standardized tests suggests a desperation felt by school officials whose jobs are on the line if test scores do not improve (Gilman & Lanman-Givens, 2001). Although at least 38 states had implemented some type of statewide accountability system (Olson, 2000) prior to 2001, the federal government became involved in the accountability movement with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (U.S. Department of Education, 2003a) signed by President George W. Bush January 8, 2002. The act mandates stringent accountability programming in every state.

NCLB requires accountability measures

to focus on the achievement of individual students and the achievement of members of subgroups within the school (U.S. Department of Education, 2003b) as opposed to previous accountability systems which considered overall student performance. NCLB sends a clear message from the federal government that there will be stricter demands placed upon local schools, school districts, and state departments of education to raise academic achievement and to take direct action on poorly performing schools. NCLB consists of four basic principles of reform: 1) greater accountability for student outcomes, 2) more flexibility and added state/district control, 3) more alternatives for parents, and 4) concentration on teaching techniques which have yielded positive results (U.S. Department of Education, 2003c). The act requires all states to implement statewide accountability systems that include all public schools "...based on challenging state standards in reading and mathematics, annual testing for all students in grades 3-8, and annual statewide progress objectives which ensure all groups of students reach proficiency within twelve years" (U.S. Department of Education, 2003b). School districts and individual schools that fail to make improvements in academic performance will suffer serious consequences including the loss of federal funding (Title I funds). To further ensure success of an accountability-based system, NCLB requires "assessment results and state progress objectives must be disaggregated by socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, disability, and limited English proficiency status to ensure that no sub-group is left behind." (U.S. Department of Education, 2003d).

Action taken against schools that do not meet their annual yearly progress includes allowing children enrolled in these schools the option to transfer to a better performing public school or public charter school. Schools that do not make acceptable yearly progress for five years must establish an alternative governance arrangement such as reopening as a charter school, replacing all or most of staff, contracting with a management entity, becoming subject to state control, or some other major restructuring reform (U.S. Department of Education, 2003b).

Many principals voice concern about the increasing use of students' standardized test scores

to judge their performance. Some say their district or state's use of standardized test scores is mediocre at best. Principals have also asserted that the use of a single measure (test) is an insufficient appraisal of student achievement and/or instructional excellence. As one principal put it, "Accountability is great, but schools should not be judged by what students do on one test on one day in March" (Johnson, 2002, p. 28).

Unfortunately, it appears that many principals are choosing retirement and/or finding a less stressful career to escape the stress of accountability. The stress also appears to be limiting the pool of entering and aspiring principals. A survey by the Educational Research Service found that fifty percent of the 403 school districts surveyed indicated problems in replacing school principals. The teacher shortage has been widely acknowledged; the principal shortage is just as real and no less significant (Gilman & Lanman-Givens, 2001).

Principals need help dealing with the additional stress placed on them by NCLB. When considering all the responsibilities of the principalship, requirements of NCLB, as currently implemented, may be the proverbial "straw that broke the camel's back" and is responsible for driving hundreds out of the profession and discouraging others from entering it.

## RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND DESCRIPTION OF METHODS

To explore the degree to which NCLB (i.e., accountability) has become a major issue for principals, the authors conducted a study using a sample survey technique (Gay, 1996). In the spring of 2003, over 100 K-12 principals responded to a survey (Appendix A) that asked them to identify what they felt were the most critical issues facing schools today. They were asked to list their most critical issues in rank order using an ordinal response format (Trochim, 2001). Respondents were also asked to write a paragraph rationale pertaining to their most critical issue. As noted by Trochim (2001) such qualitative data can provide "confirmatory and deductive" information (p. 158).

As a follow-up to this survey, in the fall of 2004, 50 K-12 principals responded to a survey

(Appendix B) that asked them to identify what they perceived as the greatest impediment to the implementation of accountability programs and/or policies resulting from NCLB. As with the previous survey, principals were asked to list the greatest impediments in rank order. Again, they were asked to write a paragraph rationale pertaining to their greatest impediment. In both surveys, participants listed the problems in rank order from most critical (1) to least critical (10). Responses were anonymous and no attempt was made to match surveys with individual participants.

Due to the variety of verbatim responses, the authors used a selective coding technique (Trochim, 2001) to create topical categories for each response set. These categories were then reviewed and revised by independent teams of graduate-student researchers who then grouped survey responses into appropriate categories. Table 1 and Table 2 lists the categories used in the study.

Survey data for the two studies was then quantified by recording the relative frequency with which each response category appeared as most critical. This method provided data ranking responses by the order given by participants. As shown below in Table 1, the issue most frequently identified as *most critical* fell in the category, *accountability*.

Issue	Percentage
Accountability	40%
Staffing	18%
Discipline	13%
Time	8%
Funding	7%
External Support	6%
Parents	5%
Safety	2%
Special Education	2%
Plant Operations	Less than 1%

Note (Figures add up to more than 100% because percentages for each category were rounded up where appropriate.)

Excerpts from participants' rationale for their *most critical issue* contained many heart-felt emotions reflecting the stress now felt by principals. The following are quotations from these responses.

- "State and federal accountability is an important focus that increases paperwork, increases parent/student conferences and staff development, strains budgets, and changes instructional strategies."
- "Accountability, although needed to some degree, has consumed the workday. Curriculum has been narrowed. Testing is too often and too much.....There is a lack of understanding as to the energy required to raise test scores."
- "The pressure for higher labels does not make learning fun!"
- "The issue of accountability is now also an issue of job security."
- "Accountability is the most significant issue facing administrators today. With test scores being compared from school to school, more administrators feel the stress."

As shown below in Table 2, staff development and curricular alignment were identified as the greatest impediments to the implementation of accountability programs.

Issue	Percentage
Staff Development	26%
Curricular Alignment	25%
Awareness/ Understanding of Accountability	13%
Funding	12%
Parental Involvement	10%
Time	8%
Personnel	7%

Note (Figures add up to more than 100% because percentages for each category were rounded up where appropriate.)

Principals were also asked to write a one-paragraph rationale pertaining to their greatest impediment identified. The following are quotations from their responses.

- “Teachers are not adequately trained to plan and implement instructional activities for a variety of skill levels.”
- “Teachers do not understand the difference in classroom management and discipline. Many do not understand their role as teacher in terms of appropriate instructional activities.”
- “We need more funds for innovative professional development.”
- “We want to have well-rounded students who will be productive citizens in our society. We also want our students to have high test scores. How do we teach our students to be able to do both?”
- “How do we narrow the achievement gap between minority, economically disadvantaged, and other student groups?”
- “Teachers need help understanding the accountability model itself!”
- “There is no time to train teachers.”

## IMPLICATIONS/CONCLUSIONS

Principals are feeling enormous stress over issues arising from NCLB and cite *accountability* as the number one critical issues facing school leaders today. Additionally, they cite a lack of *staff development* and *curriculum alignment* as the major impediments to effectively dealing with accountability. The lofty goals and punitive measures associated with NCLB are driving principals out of the field and preventing many others from entering. If the goals of NCLB are ever to be realized, more support must be given to those charged with its implementation, i.e., principals, and a greater focus must be placed upon training leaders and their faculties.

If more decision-making authority is given to principals, then some of this decision-making authority should be passed along to teachers by soliciting, organizing and utilizing their input in a meaningful way. This holds especially true for staff development. Principals must empower their

teachers through meaningful engagement in decision-making. It is the opinion of the authors of this work that if teachers are empowered to contribute in a meaningful way to accountability programs, they will! Teachers, by their very nature, want their students to succeed and if given the chance, will work hard to improve their students' achievement. As an instructional resource, principals must provide teachers with good information to make informed decisions. Once decisions are made, principals must provide the resources necessary to implement them. Once strategies are identified, principals and teachers can develop staff development programs aimed at improving student achievement. It is the job of the principal to work with central office and local universities to provide the required resources for staff development.

Parents must also be partners in the process of improving student achievement. Parental engagement increases student achievement. To have a program that successfully addresses NCLB, principals must engage parents and solicit their assistance. Communication is a key issue and informing parents of accountability issues and involving them in the formulation of school improvement plans is important in mobilizing their resources and securing their support.

NCLB accountability issues are not going away any time soon. Accountability is the name of the game today and for the foreseeable future. Principals must do everything they can to address the issue and make it work for them and their schools (Sirotnik and Kimball, 1999). It is our hope that this paper will help highlight the enormous pressure felt by today's principals and present some ideas for addressing what has emerged as the greatest impediment to implementation of accountability programming, professional development tools they now need.

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### Appendix A

#### Survey of Attitudes Regarding Critical Issues Facing School Principals

This survey is being conducted to ascertain the views of principals relevant to key issues they now face. Please respond to this voluntary survey. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated and your anonymity will be assured. Returning the completed survey implies consent for your participation.

Directions: Please circle your response

1. Gender:            Male                      Female
2. Age:    22-25            26-30            31-35            36-40    40 or older
3. What grade level is your school?  
Elementary                      Middle                      Junior                      High
4. How many years have you been in education as an administrator?  
Less than 1                      1-4                      5-8                      9-12                      13 or over
5. In which system are you currently employed?  
Public                      Private (non-parochial)                      Parochial
6. Highest Degree obtained: Bachelor    Master    Specialist    PhD/EdD
7. What are the most critical issues affecting the principalship today? Please list and rank in order of importance from most significant (1) to least significant (10).

### Appendix B

#### Survey of Problems Facing School Administrators When Implementing Programs Related to Accountability

This survey is being conducted to ascertain the problems experienced by principals when implementing programs and/or policies mandated by accountability programs. Please respond to this voluntary survey. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated and your anonymity will be assured. Returning the completed survey implies consent for your participation. Thank you for your input.

Please circle your responses

1. Gender:            Male                      Female
2. Experience:    1-5 yrs.    6-10 yrs.    11-15 yrs.    16 -20 yrs    21 or more
3. Grade level of school: Elementary Middle Junior High
4. Enrollment:    under 200    201-400    401-600    601-800    801-1000    over 1000
5. In which system are you currently employed?  
Public Private (non-parochial)                      Parochial
6. Highest Degree obtained: Bachelor    Master    Specialist    PhD/EdD
7. What are the most significant problems you face when implementing accountability programs and/or policies. Please list and rank in order of degree of difficulty from most significant (1) to least significant (10).