

# Curriculum Leadership Institute E-Hint

## Now is the Time to Keep Our Eyes on the Educational Gold Standard

For the last seven years American school districts have been told to comply with the provisions of No Child Left Behind if they wished to avoid any of their schools being classified as “under performing.” Adequate Yearly Progress provisions have been instituted in most states under the Bush Administration’s version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which includes accountability through standards and implementation of high stakes tests. The initial versions of those tests focused on mathematics and reading, and student performances on multiple choice examinations were reported in order to: (1) determine and report cut-score adequacy, (2) compare schools, (3) provide services to schools needing assistance, (4) give parents information as to which schools do or don’t do well, and (5) implement “best practices” that meet scientifically-based research sponsored or approved by the United States Department of Education.

As we approach a possible new era of federal involvement with the nation’s public schools, it’s easy to see why some educators might believe NCLB is the way educational policy must always be. After all, any teacher having graduated from college in 2002 or after has experienced nothing but an NCLB dominated education culture. Those who graduated about 2005 or after probably received undergraduate professional preparation with NCLB at its core.

One can argue that NCLB has been helpful in such areas as: development and use of criterion-referenced assessments, data collection and management, creation and use of state standards, and a more intense focus on teacher and school accountability. However, an argument can also be made that the federal government has imposed its will onto the education profession in ways that are inappropriate by: (1) reducing the curriculum to prescribed content fields, (2) focusing on narrow aspects of a subject’s knowledge or skill domains, (3) placing teachers in the position of causing their students to meet prescribed goals regardless of their background or instructional conditions, and (4) treating principals and teachers as functionaries in a performance-based system measured by superficial student learning results.

Therefore, there are widespread opinions that NCLB is not reflective of the educational “gold standard” created by men and women who spent decades researching and developing models for creating and conducting school programs. As shown in the materials that support our school improvement model, we in the CLI believe that the gold standard remains fixed on the work of respected contributors to our craft such as Ralph Tyler. In a famous interview with Tyler in 1981 (Occasional Paper Series, No. 13, Evaluation Center, College of Education, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo [Jeri Ridings Nowakowski]), Tyler is quoted as saying,

**"...in deciding what the school should help students learn, one must look at the society in which they are going to use what they learn and find out the demands and opportunities of that society. To learn something that you can't use means that in the end it will be forgotten. One must also consider the learner – what he has already learned, what his needs are, and what his interests are, and build on them; one must also consider the potential value to students of each subject."**

So, from Tyler's perspective, if there is any one foundation on which a local educational program can be based, it is the importance of local actions to ensure that curriculum, instruction and assessment are seen by students as having a personally felt imperative. Student perceptions of NCLB are typically associated with a *bureaucratic* imperative – in some cases it has no meaning to them beyond an impersonal approach to holding the schools they attend statistically accountable. In other cases, it affects them tremendously, as it may dictate whether they are promoted or allowed to graduate, but this is at best only an *extrinsic* motivator – it does nothing to develop in students an *intrinsic* desire to learn and achieve.

Consider the strong possibility that conditions will change in Washington as soon as the spring of 2009, and that a new policy will emanate from perspectives like these taken from the recently issued Forum for Education and Democracy:

***Rather than developing schools' capacity to improve their practice, NCLB has substituted test-based sanctions as remote controls for micromanaging schools. In implementing the law, states have relied mostly on tests that measure low levels of knowledge and skill. Because the test scores are used to determine a school's standing under the law's accountability system, schools have responded by teaching to those tests. High-achieving countries have assessments that require students to conduct research and scientific investigations, solve complex real-world problems in mathematics, and defend their ideas orally and in writing. This focuses students' and teachers' attention on the skills that democracy, higher education, and 21st-century jobs will require. Those countries also ensure that schools have the resources they need so that students have the opportunity to learn the challenging material and demonstrate the advanced skills that appear on those tests.***

The Curriculum Leadership Institute accepts the perspectives of Tyler and the Forum for Education and Democracy as being reflective of our profession's gold standard. We believe in the potential local schools and their professional staffs have for building powerful curricula and effective instructional programs. We celebrate the professionalism of teachers and will work to help them become ever more effective as academic leaders and effective classroom instructors. Only in that kind of environment can students become inspired to really learn, thereby becoming intellectually engaged and vigorous members of our American community.