

In the 21st Century, No Adults Should Be Left Behind.

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On January 12, 2005 the White House posted a speech by President Bush in which he discussed his plans to take the No Child Left Behind initiative to the high school level (www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/01/20050112-5.html).

In discussing the need for testing at the high school level, the President framed his comments in terms of workforce development and stated, "Testing in high schools will make sure that our children are employable for the jobs of the 21st century."

In his speech the President also said, "Out of a hundred 9th graders in our public schools, only 68 will complete high school on time. Now, we live in a competitive world. And a 68 percent graduation rate for 9th graders is not good enough to be able to compete in this competitive world."

Barton (2000) reports that some 85 percent of adults 25 to 29 years old in 1995 had completed high school (p. 36). So somehow between the 9th grade and age 25-29 high school completion increases from 68 to 85 percent. To a large extent this reflects the fact that many high school dropouts go to adult basic education (ABE) programs and study to earn a high school diploma or GED equivalency certificate. If the testing procedures that the President is recommending drives more students to dropout, as some have suggested has happened when high school achievement tests have been introduced in the past, then the ABE system will have to pick up the education of these young adults a few years later.

In program year 2001-2002 the ABE system funded by the U. S. government as part of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 enrolled 2,787,416 learners, of which 38 percent were in ABE, 20 percent in Adult Secondary Education, and 42 percent in English Language learning. That same year, in this education system, 181,642 adult students received a high school diploma or GED.

The President called for "a \$1.5 billion initiative to help every high school student graduate with the skills necessary to succeed." But if they don't, and if tens of thousands have to enroll in the ABE/ASE/EL system later on, they will enter a marginalized education system that is funded at the federal level at less than two-fifths (\$575 million) of what the President has proposed for his high school initiative. This is less than \$210 per adult student. Even with what the states add to the federal money, spending on ABE/ASE/EL programs comes to less than \$850 per enrollee. This is less than one-sixth of what the K-12 system spends on children's education per year.

As the President moves forward with his promotion of NCLB at the high school level, it is of great importance that he also moves to upgrade the present adult education and literacy system (AELS) that is serving millions of out-of-school youth, young adults, and older adults who need to improve their life chances, and those of their children, through education. It makes little sense to leave no children behind as they reach adolescence and then decide they can be left behind just because they fail to learn well and complete high school and grow into adulthood.

As our world grows increasingly complex, it is bad education policy to decide that simply because children grow up and become adults without having achieved high levels of basic skills and extensive knowledge, it is OK to cast them off into a marginalized remedial education system and focus on saving the next, upcoming generation. It is bad policy because it not only reduces the overall health and productivity of our nation's adult force, it promotes failure in the upcoming generation because undereducated parents are poorly prepared to provide for and transmit language and literacy skills to their children at home and hence influence their success in the K-12 system, including their likelihood of graduating from high school.

Now that the President has decided to leave no child behind from birth in Early Head Start, Head Start, Elementary and High School, it is time for him to attend to the education needs of children when they grow up to be adults. In our Nation's educational system of the 21st century, no adults should be left behind.

References

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