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Achievement Gains under No Child Left Behind Test-Based Accountability Projected To Yield Large, Long-Term Economic Returns

Fact-checking analysis of recent National Research Council report shows that seemingly modest gains are significant

CAMBRIDGE, MA – An analysis of a new report by a committee of the National Research Council (NRC), the research arm of the National Academy of Sciences, shows that average student gains from the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) test-based accountability measures would yield, over the next 80 years, a national economic benefit of approximately $14 trillion. When examined in this light, the impacts of NCLB – which the NRC estimates at a 0.08 standard deviation improvement in average achievement nationwide – are far greater than suggested by the NRC committee, which concludes that test-based accountability under NCLB had minimal impact and probably should be abandoned.

Eric A. Hanushek, a senior fellow of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, prepared the analysis. His critique, “Grinding the Antitiesting Ax: More bias than evidence behind NRC panel’s conclusions,” will appear in the Spring, 2012, issue of Education Next and is currently available at www.educationnext.org.

The NRC report, titled “Incentives and Test-Based Accountability in Education,” was released in draft version to the media five months in advance of its expected publication date, an indication, notes Hanushek, that the NRC “clearly wants to enter the current debate about the reauthorization of NCLB.” Hanushek examines the report’s two main conclusions: a) that test-based incentive programs “have not increased student achievement enough to bring the United States close to the level of the highest achieving countries;” and b) that high school exit exam programs “decrease the rate of high school graduation without increasing achievement.” He finds that the report’s “strongly worded, unequivocal conclusions” about test-based accountability “are only weakly supported by scientific evidence.”

Hanushek writes that the NRC’s average estimated impact of test-based accountability at 0.08 of standard deviations of student achievement “may well be too low.” The NRC committee considers a 2008 review of 14 studies, as well as 4 studies conducted after that review. He notes that these studies produce a wide distribution of estimated impacts, and that the committee chooses to emphasize the 10% of these studies with negative findings, while downplaying the 90% of these studies that have positive findings. Even leaving this concern aside and accepting the 0.08 of standard deviation achievement boost, Hanushek finds that “we are hard pressed to come up with any other education program working at (national scale) that has produced such results.” Further, the cost of designing, administering, and reporting the results from statewide examinations have been estimated at between $20 and $50 per pupil, a small sum compared to the average
U.S. per-pupil education expenditures of above $12,000 annually, or to the costs of reforms such as in-service training programs or class size reductions.

Drawing on his previous work on the impact on U.S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of higher levels of student achievement, Hanushek explains that an NCLB impact of $14 trillion over 80 years is “very close to the current $15 trillion level of our entire (annual) GDP.” If a $100 per student testing cost is assumed and the U.S. tested students in all grades (rather than grades 3-8 and 10, as is now the case), the rate of return on investment would be 9,189 percent. “Not a bad return,” he states.

About the Author
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