

Is the No Child Left Behind Act actually helpful to students?

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The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, which is the current version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, was designed to reward federally funded schools whose students perform well on standardized testing and to impose sanctions on schools whose students' scores fall below the threshold. Does this program serve its purpose?

In [“The impact of NCLB’s accountability sanctions on school performance: regression discontinuity evidence From North Carolina”](#) (National Bureau of Economic Research, working paper no. 20511, September 2014), authors Thomas Ahn and Jacob Vigdor implement regression discontinuity techniques to contrast North Carolina schools that fall short of criteria for adequate yearly progress during the 2002–2009 period. In so doing, Ahn and Thomas discover some of the NCLB accountability sanctions’ positive implications for student performance. The NCLB Act, implemented in 2001, mandated that schools receiving Federal Title I funding would track student performance on tests and impose negative sanctions up to complete closure or reconstitution of a school if student performance fell below state-established levels. Title I of ESEA provides financial assistance to schools and educational agencies that have high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families.

Perhaps surprising to some observers, the sanction that yielded the most positive results was the most negative sanction: school restructuring, which includes management and leadership changes. This result is consistent with Ahn and Vigdor’s larger findings that schools faced with the most negative sanctions benefited by restructuring leadership. Schools faced with intermediate sanctions did not necessarily benefit from such sanctions. Ahn and Vigdor also find that such restructuring measures positively affected both low-performing and high-performing students across the North Carolina school system. However, although low-performing students appeared to have benefited from many NCLB sanctions, there is no evidence to suggest that low-performing students benefited from reducing the resources of their high-performing student peers.