PACE

COMMENTARY

The Effects of No Child Left Behind on Teachers

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As a new Congress attempts to sustain momentum towards reauthorizingNo Child Left Behind (NCLB), the question of just what impacts NCLB has had on schools is an important part of current policy debates. Researchers have documented a number of effects of the law, including increases in school spending, a focusing of instructional time towards core subjects, and an uptick in student achievement in math and reading, particularly in lower grades and among students from traditionally disadvantaged demographic groups. Missing from this research, however, has been a close look at how NCLB has impacted teachers or, more specifically, how it has affected teachers' perceptions of and attitudes towards their jobs. Certainly, anecdotal evidence abounds that NCLB's accountability pressures and relentless focus on testing have burned teachers out, undermined their morale, and driven them from the profession. Whether these anecdotes generalize to the teaching workforce nationally has remained an open empirical question.

In this study, Sean Nicholson-Crotty, James Harrington, and I analyzed four waves of teacher survey data from the federalSchools and Staffing Survey (SASS) in an attempt to assess whether NCLB indeed has negatively impacted teachers' attitudes. These data span 1994 to 2008, so cover both before and after the law's implementation. Each SASS wave surveys a nationally representative sample of teachers and asks a number of questions about how teachers view their work. These data allow us to look over time at policy-relevant teacher-level attitudes, such as job satisfaction and commitment to remain in teaching, plus potential intermediate variables that might link NCLB to satisfaction and commitment, such as perceptions of job autonomy and feelings support from principals, parents, and other teachers.

The empirical challenge in isolating the effects of NCLB is that every school was affected by NCLB at the same time, so we could not just look at changes before and after NCLB and assume that any changes were due to NCLB and not some other factor. We make use of a number of strategies for trying to get closer to the causal impact of NCLB. One is to compare changes in teacher attitudes before and after NCLB in states without prior accountability policies—in those states, NCLB introduced high-stakes accountability for the first time—to states that already had an accountability system in place prior to NCLB. Since NCLB accountability impacts should have been more apparent in states without prior accountability systems, the difference in how they changed over time should provide an estimate of NCLB's impact (called a "difference-in-differences" approach). We can also add some nuance to this approach by utilizing other researchers' ratings of the *strength* of those prior accountability systems, again with the idea that, if NCLB had impacts, they should have been larger in states with weak systems than in states with strong ones. An additional strategy is to go a step further and compare changes over time in high-poverty schools—where Title I-linked accountability pressures presumably are higher—to low-poverty schools, then further tease out the comparison across states with and without prior accountability systems (a "difference-in-differences-in-differences" approach). The idea is that NCLB effects should have been most apparent in high-poverty schools with no prior experience with accountability. If trends in teacher attitudes across the implementation of NCLB in those schools looked very similar to, say, low-poverty schools already subject to state-driven accountability, we might question whether NCLB is having big impacts.

The study uncovered some surprising results. First, descriptively, we show that teacher job satisfaction and job commitment

among teachers are both significantly higher post-NCLB than they were in the years prior to the law's implementation. For example, in 1994, only about 65% of teachers nationally intended to remain in the profession until retirement, but by 2008, this fraction was 77%. Also, although teachers report working more hours, they also feel more autonomy in their classrooms and perceive greater cooperation with other teachers and more support from principals and parents. Second, across our empirical strategies, we find little evidence of important effects of NCLB accountability itself. There is some indication that teacher cooperation is lower post-NCLB than it would have been in the absence of the law, but also indications that teachers' feelings of classroom control and perceptions of administrator support are higher as a result of the law. This mixed bag—some small negative results and some small positive ones—may explain why NLCB seems to have had no impact on overall job satisfaction or intent to remain in teaching.

NCLB no doubt has changed the way teachers approach their work, but these results suggest that the conventional wisdom that those changes have created a workforce of unhappy, stressed-out public school teachers may not be correct. Perhaps teachers have been more resilient in the face of the changes NCLB has brought about than they have been credited, or, as we suggest, maybe NCLB has brought some benefits to teachers that have balanced out its costs. There are many reasons for lawmakers to revisit NCLB and its design, but the idea that it has had big negative effects on teachers' feelings about or commitment to their work probably is not one of them.

The full study is in Grissom, Jason A., Sean Nicholson-Crotty, and James Harrington, Estimating the Effects of No Child Left Behind on Teachers' Work Environments and Job Attitudes," Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, December 2014, vol. 36, no. 4, 417-436. An earlier, ungated version is available here.

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