

Marking the end of a wasteful experiment

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

When No Child Left Behind was being launched, it wasn't all that hard to find teachers who viewed it as a not-too-subtle plot to destroy public schools.

Over the top?

Hysterical?

Paranoid?

Sure. But educators felt shut out of former President George W. Bush's 2002 response to faltering inner-city schools, which imposed:

- An impossible goal - 100 percent of students be proficient in reading, math and English language arts by 2014.
- An overly punitive system - Schools that failed to attain adequate yearly progress toward the proficiency goal would be labeled failures and face steadily escalating punishment, from bad publicity to a wholesale replacement of the teaching and administrative staff.
- A testing minefield - Students would be subjected to testing in grades 3 through 8 and then again once in high school. It pressured schools to "teach to the test." It also tempted some to game the system.

As the years passed, educators waited for the inevitable result - virtually every school would be declared a failure. Fed-up parents and taxpayers would demand changes, up to and possibly including a voucher system that would steer students into private academies.

Then a funny thing happened.

As more of these official notices were mailed out, parents drew on their own experience.

Their children weren't failing. Some were actually thriving. In fact, these parents trusted their teachers. They believed their own impressions. Emboldened by the response, local school administrators began including their own editorial rebukes along with the mandatory NCLB letters.

Once that happened, No Child Left Behind was on life support. In Idaho, erstwhile champions of the federal act such as former Idaho schools Superintendent Tom Luna yielded to the pressure. They devised alternative school evaluations and secured federal waivers from NCLB's more draconian remedies.

Luna's successor, Sherri Ybarra, has gone even further, declaring the state should back away from focusing so much time and effort on standardized testing. Nor does Ybarra believe those tests be tied to teacher evaluations.

Because Washington lawmakers refused to accept the use of standardized testing for holding teachers accountable, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan withdrew the state's waiver. That triggered limitations on how Washington could spend some federal dollars - and roughly 90 percent of the schools notified parents their children were attending "failed" schools.

All of which mercifully came to an end last week with passage of No Child Left Behind's successor - the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

ESEA leaves in place requirements that students be tested in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school, but with this caveat: The government is encouraging schools to back away from tying students down for hours at a time in standardized test-taking.

No longer will those tests drive the definition of a school's success or be the sole measure of a teacher's effectiveness. Whatever tools are used to hold educators accountable - standardized tests, graduation rates or something less tangible - will be a matter for state decision-makers, not the federal government.

Remedies are no longer punitive. Schools that fall into the bottom 5 percent will be eligible for more - not fewer - resources.

Much of this is mixed with some trepidation about what's in the fine print. But after years of having their concerns, even warnings about a national education template going unheeded, professional educators - whose careers are bound up in the unpredictable world of working with children - will tell you their voices were heard this time.

All to the good. Just the same, it marks the close of a sad, failed experiment with public education. The price was a lost decade. - M.T.