



10 Years Later, No Child Left Behind Ignores Plenty

by Julianne Hing, Hatty Lee

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No Child Left Behind turned 10 years old this week, and few threw it a joyous birthday. The landmark law called for all U.S. schoolchildren to be proficient in math and reading by the year 2014, but it was hardly successful. It turns out that idealistic goals attached to punitive sanctions levied without adequate support aren't an equation for success.

The law explicitly highlighted the racialized achievement gap, but set about ameliorating it with a set of punitive measures based on competition and other market principles.

Most significantly, it solidified the centrality of testing as the way to measure student achievement and demand accountability. The law was the first to require states to report annual testing data to show how much, or how little, progress students are making. In doing so, it ignored the myriad social factors that impact students' ability to learn; students facing homelessness or whose parents were dealing with joblessness are expected to perform just as well on tests as students who got three hot meals a day and had a quiet, stable place to do their homework every night. Critics have argued that NCLB, in its quest to eradicate educational inequality, has actually only solidified and further entrenched them.

In the decade since No Child Left Behind has been on the books, income inequality has worsened and economic disparities have meant that communities of color, who are disproportionately poor, have gotten squeezed tighter and tighter by policies that ignore their everyday reality [<http://colorlines.com/archives/2011/05/educationreform.html>].

—Julianne Hing

**This article had been updated since publication*

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No Child Left Behind aimed to eliminate the achievement gap, yet its reforms overlooked the structural roots of educational inequality. Instead, thanks in large part to NCLB, high-stakes testing is the primary mechanism for gauging progress and measuring teacher effectiveness today. Based on extensive interviews with students, educators and advocates, we compiled a composite of a day in the life of a student in a struggling school. Ten years into NCLB, it's little surprise the achievement gap persists.

- Student's mom, who has to leave the house early wakes him up so he can drop his younger sister off at her school across town before he gets back on the bus to go to his school.



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- Student is late to class and hungry because he missed the breakfast offered by school.



②

- Student, anxious about his parents' job woes and perpetual housing search, finds his mind drifting in class.



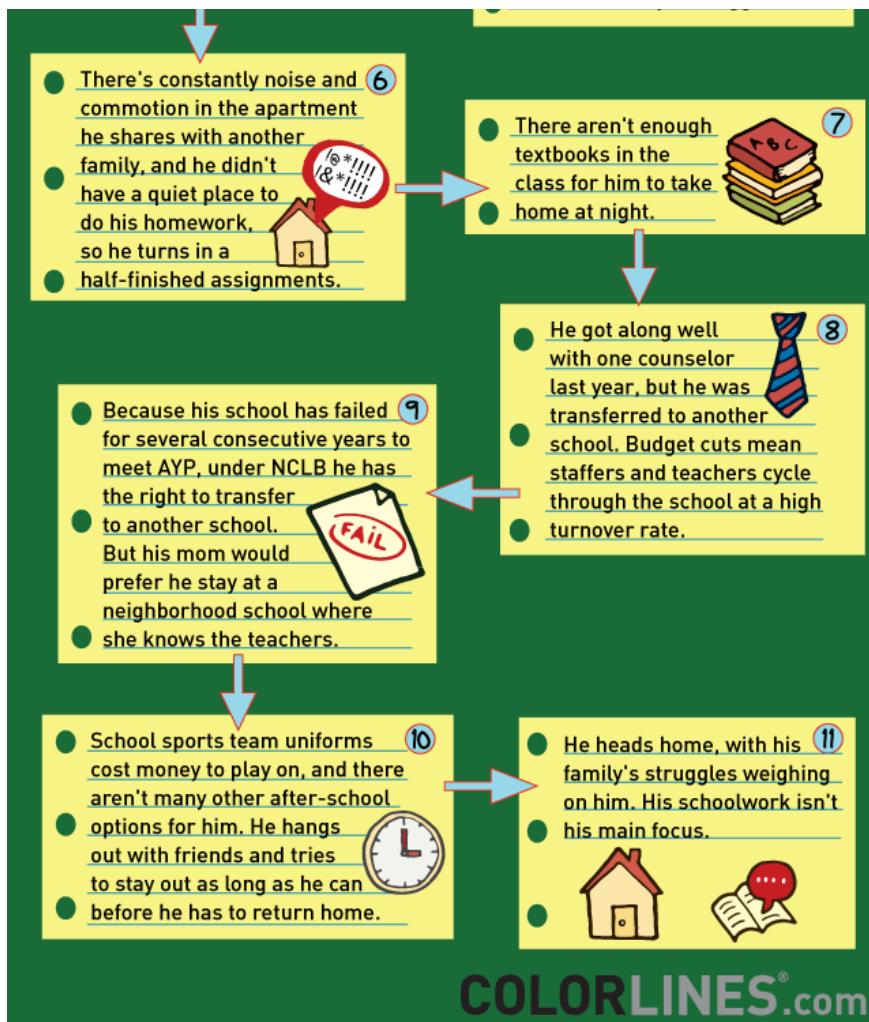
③

- He goes to lunch, which has become his only reliable hot meal of the day. Like him, a growing bulk of his peers qualify for free and reduced lunch.



⑤

- He's heard about food and clothing donations the school offers for the growing homeless student population, but doesn't want to let people know about his family's struggles.



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