FOREWORD

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The major finding of this dual study is that, in one respect at least, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is working precisely as designed. A good thing, surely, but not entirely so. What we see in this study is one of its unintended consequences—and one that's worrisome for America's future competitiveness.

Congress was quite clear about NCLB's objectives. Right on its cover, it's termed "An Act to close the achievement gap." Congress followed through with accountability mechanisms that have one clear and explicit purpose: drive up the achievement of low-performing pupils. As for students on the other end of the spectrum, indeed all youngsters who could already be termed proficient, NCLB's core provisions treat them with benign neglect. Let them fend for themselves. Let someone else worry about them. Let them eat—well, whatever is left over at the bakery when the bread runs out.

And lo and behold, six years after the law's enactment, what do we find? Low-achieving students made solid progress on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) from 2000 to 2007 (an accomplishment surely worth celebrating, even though these students are still far, far behind). Meanwhile, however, the progress of our top students has been modest at best. And teachers report feeling pressure to focus on the classroom's underachievers versus the overachievers—and, with guilty conscience, have by and large done exactly that.

On this score, No Child Left Behind appears to be meeting its objectives: narrowing achievement gaps from the bottom up. Some may declare this to be a wonderful accomplishment: the performance of low-achieving students is rising, while those at the top aren't losing ground. But is that outcome good enough for a great nation? If we want to compete in a global economy, don't we need all our young people—including our highest achievers—to make steady progress too? And if so, isn't our current approach to standards-based reform in need of a make-over?

Followers of Fordham's work know that we've been tracking NCLB since before its enactment. They also know that the education of high achievers is a subject about which we've long been concerned. (Myriad employers, economists, tycoons, and elected officials are similarly fretful about America's competitiveness in a flatter, brainier world.) So we decided to look into the connection between the two.

Two years ago, we approached the John Templeton Foundation about supporting a major research initiative on this subject. They had already waded into these waters with their landmark 2005 report, *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students*. After some fruitful back-and-forth, the foundation agreed to

underwrite our project. We are immensely grateful for their partnership, support, and good counsel.

We signed up Tom Loveless, director of the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution, as well as Steve Farkas and Ann Duffett of the Farkas Duffett Research Group. We've been privileged to work with all three on earlier Fordham projects (with Loveless on a paper on tracking and with Farkas and Duffett on innumerable survey-research ventures). Each is careful, creative, and rigorously objective.

They agreed to collaborate with us on a multiyear, five-part investigation of the state of high-achieving students in U.S. schools. Within these covers are the findings from the first two parts of that initiative. (Future studies will look at the impact of de-tracking on achievement and at the expansion of the Advanced Placement program.)

Templeton insisted, and we happily agreed, to appoint an independent review committee to help steer these studies. Committee members provided immeasurably useful input on the study design and on early drafts of these reports. Our thanks to Cynthia Brown, Director of Education Policy, Center for American Progress; Paul Gross, Professor Emeritus, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Virginia; Frederick M. Hess, Director of Education Policy Studies, American Enterprise Institute; Richard Light, William H. Gale Professor of Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education; Stephanie Pace Marshall, Founding President and President Emerita, Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy; Delia Pompa, Vice President of Education, National Council of La Raza; and Joyce Van Tassel-Baska, Executive Director, Center for Gifted and Talented and Smith Professor of Education, College of William and Mary. Let's be clear, though, that not every suggestion of every committee member could be incorporated into the final product, so any complaints and critiques should be addressed to Fordham and the authors, not to the reviewers.

We also appreciate the myriad efforts of Fordham's team who helped this massive effort across the finish line. They include program associate Christina Hentges, new research director Amber Winkler, copy editor Anne Himmelfarb, and designer Bill Buttaggi. It surely takes at least a small village to produce a research report of this sophistication, and we are grateful for everyone's help. Finally, we thank our own sister organization, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, for additional financial resources that made this study possible.

CAN WE BE EQUAL AND EXCELLENT, TOO?

That's the question the late John W. Gardner asked about Americans in his seminal 1961 book, *Excellence*. It remains a profoundly important query in 2008. Hence our original questions for these first two studies were straightforward: How are high-achieving students performing in the NCLB era? Has the introduction of NCLB been associated with any change in their long-term trends? How do trends in their performance

compare to those for low-achieving students? What can we learn from teachers about how high achievers are treated in their schools? What do teachers think about NCLB's focus on low-achieving pupils?

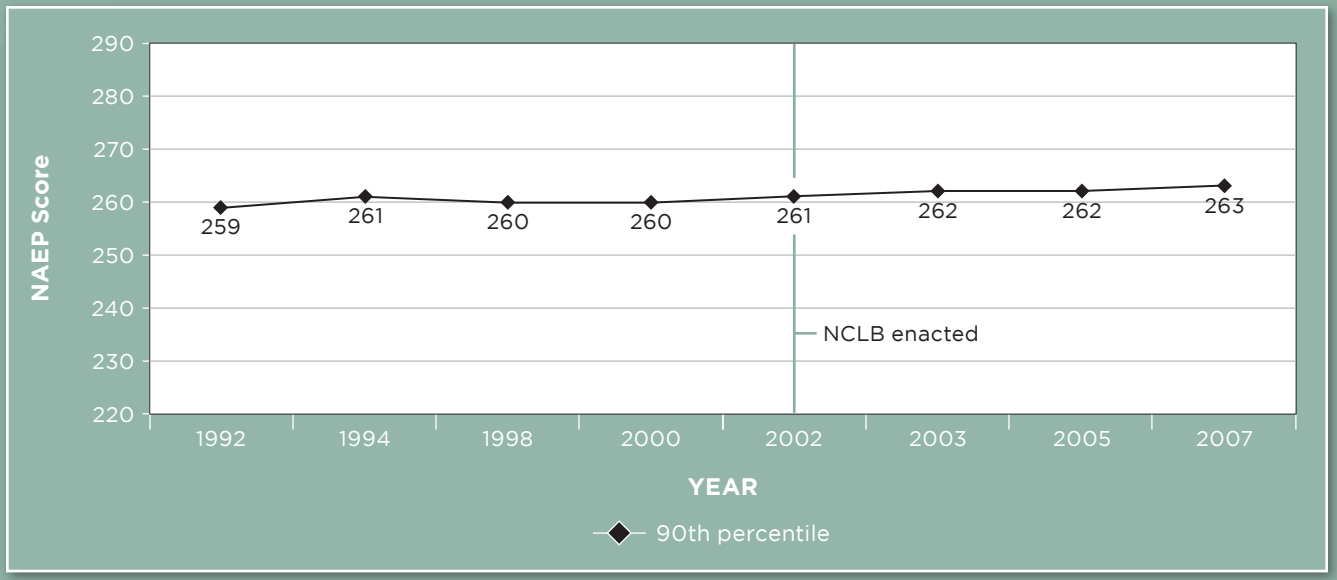
Many of the answers aren't surprising, though they are illuminating. Low-achieving students (defined by Loveless as the 10 percent with the lowest scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress) made big strides from 2000 to 2007, gaining sixteen points (on NAEP's 500-point scale) in fourth-grade reading, eighteen in fourth-grade math, and thirteen in eighth-grade math. (Eighth-grade reading was a bit of an anomaly throughout this time, as Loveless explains in detail.) Meanwhile, however, the performance of high-achieving students is, in Loveless's word, "languid." Their test scores haven't fallen, mind you. This isn't a "Robin Hood" effect, where the bottom went up and the top went down. But the bottom went up rather more than the top did. Looking at long-term NAEP trends for the top 10 percent, one spots a steady line inching ever-so-slowly upward from the early 1990s to today. Enter NCLB, and nothing changes. It's "benign neglect" in pictures. (See figures i and ii.)

It's no great surprise, then, to learn that classroom practitioners feel much pressure to focus on the needs of the worst-performing youngsters. In their national survey of third- to twelfth-grade public school teachers, Steve Farkas and Ann Duffett found 60 percent saying that low achievers are a "top priority" in their schools, versus 23 percent who say that high achievers are.
And what about existing special programs intended to serve high-achieving students? Can they be counted on to challenge these students and boost their achievement even more? Teachers don't see them as terribly valuable. In fact, a full 40 percent of teachers say that the content and curriculum of honors and accelerated classes is "too often watered down and lacking rigor."

You may have expected this. But other findings of this study are notably less predictable. Loveless performs a unique analysis of NAEP data that shows big gains for low performers and stagnation for top performers associated not just with NCLB but with standards-based reform in general. States that adopted their own testing-and-accountability reforms in the 1990s witnessed similar trends. And for good reason: most state accountability systems, like NCLB's, put pressure on schools to get students over a fairly low bar. That meant helping low achievers. And voila.

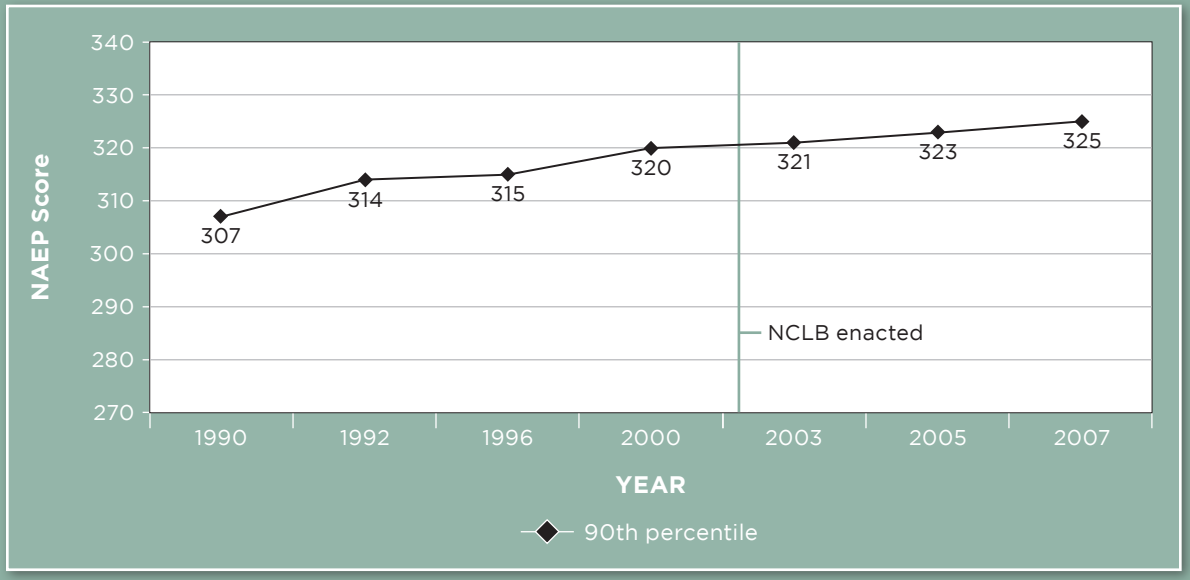
Loveless also introduces us to a very interesting subset of high achievers who had been largely invisible before: poor, African-American, and Hispanic students who scored in the top 10 percent on the 2005 eighth-grade math NAEP. How do they manage to do so well? Partly, it's luck; 41 percent of them were born to mothers who graduated from college—compared to only 19 percent of low-achieving students (and 37 percent of all students).

***Figure i**—4th Grade Reading NAEP Scores, 1992-2007 (90th percentile)*



***Note:** National means: 2000= 215, 2007=222, a change of +7*
Source: Main NAEP data explorer, National Public sample

***Figure ii**—8th Grade Math NAEP Scores, 1990-2007 (90th percentile)*



***Note:** National means: 2000 =274 and 2007= 281, a change of +7*
Source: Main NAEP data explorer, National Public sample

But teacher quality probably plays a role, too. By and large, these disadvantaged high achievers are taught by instructors who majored or minored in math and have greater classroom experience under their belts. On paper at least, the teachers of these kids resemble the teachers of all high achievers—and are much more qualified than the teachers of low performers.

Farkas and Duffett also encountered some telling surprises. Most notably, they explore the psyches of U.S. teachers to understand their views on "equality and justice" vis-à-vis low- and high-achieving youngsters. Teachers were given the following forced-choice question: "For the public schools to help the U.S. live up to its ideals of justice and equality, do you think it's more important that they (A) focus on raising the achievement of disadvantaged students who are struggling academically OR (B) focus equally on all students, regardless of their backgrounds or achievement levels?" Only 11 percent chose the former, while 86 percent chose the latter.

Think about that. It's an overwhelming repudiation of one of NCLB's core tenets. And perhaps it explains why the achievement of our top students hasn't fallen in recent years—teachers' personal views have "mediated" the federal law's intentions and incentives. In other words, teachers haven't totally yielded to NCLB's pressures because doing so would force them to abandon their own values.

We can hear NCLB boosters cringing. "That's a false choice" they may say. "We never said to ignore the other students. We just want disadvantaged kids to have their fair share."

This evokes Gardner's question. "Can we be excellent and equal too?" Of course we want that answer to be yes. We'd like to believe that lawmakers will find a technocratic solution to NCLB's flaws. (Loveless suggests a creative one.) Perhaps through the right "growth model," the perfectly chosen "multiple indicators" or "multiple measures," we can provide incentives to schools to focus on low performers, and high performers, too, and also everybody in between.

Perhaps. But listen again to the teachers, who have limited time and finite resources and must make painful choices about how to spend them. And so we learn that *81 percent* of teachers say that "academically struggling" students are likely to get their one-on-one attention, versus *5 percent* who say "advanced students" are.

So let's bring some honesty to this debate. How should we define "justice" in America's public education system? Does it mean doing everything to bring up the performance of low-achieving students, or does it mean helping all students—rich and poor, black and white, low and high achieving—equally? Count us with the teachers on this one. If the United States is to compete with the rest of the globe, and, more crassly, if No Child Left Behind is to survive politically, then no students, even those at the top, can have their needs "left behind."

Our low-performing students are starting to make respectable gains. By all means, let's keep that trend going. But if gains by low achievers are our only measure of success, America faces big challenges in the years ahead.