

PARENTS LEFT BEHIND

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A TOP DOWN POLICY STUDY OF
SECTION 1118 OF NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

KYSHUN ANDRE WEBSTER SR.



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*Parents Left Behind:
A Top Down Policy Study of Section 1118 of No Child Left Behind*

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PREFACE

Parents Left Behind is a policy implementation study of Section 1118 of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), parental involvement provisions. This study was completed as a doctoral thesis in 2005, approximately 4 years after then President George W. Bush (43rd) had signed into law the intractable reforms of “No Child Left Behind.” The year 2005 bears significant meaning to the context in which this study was completed—New Orleans. It was the year that Hurricane Katrina and Rita devastated the Gulf Coast region. The epic flooding that overwhelmed New Orleans, my home, forever changed the city and the landscape of public education. This study uses the pre-Katrina New Orleans Public Schools as a local case example of how school districts understand and implement parental involvement policies.

Admittedly, much has changed in New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina, as New Orleans has emerged as the centerpiece for the largest national experiment of charter school development. The majority of the schools that re-opened post-Katrina are public charter schools, leading to fragmented constellations of public school systems. Albeit the overhaul of the old system, the New Orleans Public School System has emerged post-Katrina with new leadership, fewer schools and a higher rate of student achievement.

Publication of this study is still timely as the top down examination of policies to increase parental involvement under the Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA), renamed No Child Left Behind (NCLB), have implications for federal, state and local bureaucrats and advocates for greater parental involvement that are generalizable. The Presidential election of 2008 has produced new leader-

ship for this country that will usher in yet another wave of policy changes and federally induced education reforms, liberating smothered partisan conversations regarding needed changes to NCLB and other education reforms. This study contains a set of lessons learned from the Bush Administration and provides President Obama and his new administration with a diagnosis that can help fix the failures of the past. It is designed to be used as an advocacy tool by scholars and policymakers who embrace the notion of parental involvement and someday dream of actualizing its promise. In their hands, the evidence contained in this study could become an instrument for building a strong lobby and educating congressional representatives on what is needed to fix future reiterations of ESEA.

For more than forty years a growing body of literature has proclaimed the importance of parental involvement in education and its direct positive correlation to student achievement. Despite the evidence that exists, the promise of parental involvement in education still remains elusive in the nation's public schools. While some scholars have successfully sold books that promote de-contextualized cookie-cutter approaches for schools to fix the problem of the perceived lack of parental involvement, those recommendations are typically only band-aids and do not address the larger failures of policies intended to increase parent involvement in schools, including the lack of program planning and implementation. Federal policies such as No Child Left Behind mandated "building capacity for greater parental involvement." However, missing has been true "how to" guidance and funding resources from the federal government for school leaders to build capacity for greater parental involvement. This study helps to illuminate the gaps between rhetoric and actual implementation of the mandates.

The first chapter of the book lays out the political debate and context regarding parental involvement policy as vetted in Congress prior to the passage of NCLB. It includes excerpts from the congressional records where the late, but well-regarded Senator Paul Wellstone, a liberal Democrat, passionately admonishes the Congress of needed language to strengthen policies for parental involvement without repeating the failures of past attempts.

Chapter 2 weaves together an historical overview and critique of some of the prevailing theories, practices and models regarding parental involvement and the unresolved matters in the field. These include the lack of consensus regarding what "parental involvement" is, its purpose and intent, what it can achieve and how these things

are inconsistently operationalized in practice and the political implications that result from this conceptual discord. Chapter 3 provides a theoretical framework for understanding policy implementation, using the classic Van Meter and Van Horn policy implementation framework.

Chapter 4 provides an explanation of the context and research methods for this study. Chapter 5 highlights rich text obtained through one-on-one interviews with government agents and from focus groups at every level with street level bureaucrats, such as teachers, principals and parents. In the direct quotes taken from each group, the obvious conflicts and tensions arise to make evident the lack of awareness and sheer complacency that exists regarding stakeholders' understanding and compliance with the parental involvement provisions of NCLB.

Chapter 6 begins to synthesize the findings and gives the reader revelations into the evident breakdowns and implementation failures of this NCLB policy initiative and related programs. The Van Meter and Van Horn Policy Implementation framework provides the lens for analysis. Chapter 7 provides conclusions and recommendations for practice and policy.

It is my hope that this study provides insights into the implementation loop holes that will inform future iterations of the parental involvement provisions of the ESEA so that the promise of greater parental involvement and the benefits that accrue to student achievement in the nation's public schools can be actualized.

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Thanks to you all.

THE FLOOR DEBATE AND THE POLITICAL PROBLEMS WITH PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Very little may really be decided by the words of a decision or a statute: the enunciation of such national policy may be just the beginning of the decisive process of determining what will happen to whom, and understanding this further stage is essential to a full understanding of politics. (Dolbeare and Hammond, 1971, p. 149)

Background and Significance

Throughout the years, I have followed the growing body of literature exploring the notion of “parental involvement” in schools. My interest in this area comes from the promise that parental involvement can increase student achievement in schools and provide underserved minority families deeper and more effective access to the educational system. My stance has been shaped by my experience working with youth and families in an urban community context where I observed parent involvement every day. Clearly, what schools call parental involvement does not match the lived-experience and expectations of parents in low-income and minority communities; to them, schools marginalize their interests, as well as their efforts (Lightfoot, 1978; Tomilson, 1993; Tett, 2001) to become “involved.”

The focus of this study is parental involvement in the education of their children, particularly the implementation of the parental involvement component of current federal, state, and local educational policy. The issue is imbedded in politics.

In 2001, George Bush became the 43rd President of the United States. He was called a compassionate conservative Republican for his platform, which included a plank on improving the quality of education for all the nation’s children. After only three days in office,

he sent his education reform package to the 107th Congress; he called it No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Approximately one year later, January 8, 2002, NCLB became federal law and national policy.

In 2004, President Bush achieved a tight victory over Senator John Kerry. During the campaign, there was much criticism of NCLB, with Democrats questioning its impact on student achievement and pointing to its burden on the states, local districts, and on educators. They also attacked it as an under-funded mandate, alleging that its funds were redirected to fight the wars in Iraq and against terrorism. The Republican counter-argument pointed to the increasing appropriations for NCLB (Title I) funds.

Indeed, political debate was focused on the testing and school performance mandates with parental involvement seldom, if ever, discussed.

Under NCLB, rhetorical campaigns by the Bush Administration and Republican spin doctors touting parental involvement have equated parental involvement with school choice and greater parental options for children. Although Section 1118 is undoubtedly the most substantive part of the law that deals with the issue of parental involvement and “describes specific activities that schools must engage” in to that end, there is no mention of parent options or school choice. Unfortunately, and probably not surprisingly, implementation of the parental involvement provisions required under Section 1118 has not been given political priority or new funding.

Section 1118: A Focus on Parent Involvement

Although parental involvement has been federally mandated for all U.S. public schools since the early 1960s, beginning with the passage of the first ESEA (Williams, 1989), Section 1118, NCLB renews this goal (Appendix A). The language of Section 1118 shows signs of changing federal policies to support such involvement. For the first time in the history of ESEA, a statutory definition for involvement is provided. Neither law nor academic research encouraging greater parental involvement has been effective in implementing sound parental involvement programs (Winters, 1993). Thus, neither parents and children, nor schools have fully seen the benefits of parental involvement, including increasing student achievement. Basic to this is the failure of school-level efforts to building capacity among faculty, administrators, staff members, and parents to create a readiness for and skill in parent involvement; also crucial is the lack of a clear

set of federal policies and resources supporting this capacity development (Winters, 1993; Atkin, Bastiani, & Goode, 1988).

Floor Debate Leaders for Stronger Parental Involvement Policies

All this was noticed and several senators pushed for change, among them Senator Reed (Democrat, Rhode Island) was the central advocate for strengthening the parent involvement provisions and for clarifying the expectations of such in federal policies. On the Senate floor, he argued:

While ESEA currently contains parental involvement provisions, they mainly apply to Title I schools and students, and have not been fully implemented... ESEA did not go far enough to ensure the parental involvement provisions of ESEA are actually implemented.

In the 1994 reauthorization, in Title I, we understood that parents were a critical aspect of education. But the existing Title I law before that was merely suggestive of parental involvement. So, in 1994, we put in real requirements for parental involvement, authorizing the States to use a certain amount of their Title I monies—in fact, we directed them to use it for parental involvement plans. (May 1, 2001)

Joined by Senators Murray (Democrat, Washington) and Wellstone (Democrat, Minnesota) they introduced Parent Act (S. 372) in the 107th Congress during these floor debates that occurred around May 1, 2001. This Act was introduced as floor debates continued regarding the passage of NCLB, and served to focus and heat up discussions about school accountability, schools' supplemental services, parent choice, and parent options. Among allies was the National Parent Teacher Association. The Parent Act focused attention on the weakness of federal policies aimed at increasing parental involvement, showing that most of these efforts were not implemented, in part because of statutory language that suggested rather than required this involvement. Also shown was that no resources were provided, e.g. funding, technical assistance, and school reporting. Senator Reed reminded the Senate:

Legislation that has been on the book for years now—Section 1118, requires districts all across this country to develop written parental involvement policies and requires schools to develop school parent compacts. It also requires that schools hold annual

meetings for parents, and it would require that parents be involved in school review and improvement policies. That is the law today, but the reality is not enough schools are doing this because the funds are not there because other priorities, as they always seem to, intrude. Districts are actually required to spend 1 percent of their Title I allotment for the purposes I just discussed...In many school districts, this 1 percent is less than \$5,000. As a result, this legislative standard is seldom achieved. (June 6, 2001)

Section 1118 in its current form, borrows much of its language from the Parent Act in addressing Senator Reed's concerns.

Larger concerns about how the federal bureaucracy impacted parental involvement and student achievement were noted by Republican Senator Gregg (New Hampshire). From the Senate floor he argued:

The question of quality education.... is a good teacher, a good principal, but most importantly it is a parent who gets involved in their child's daily activity of going to school and learning. Unfortunately, the Federal role in education has historically undermined the ability of the parent to be a participant in that activity. In fact, Title I, as it has been structured over the last 25–30 years, has been a school-based, bureaucracy-based funding mechanism. It has not been directed at benefiting the child so much as benefiting the bureaucracy....As a result, I would argue that is probably one of the primary reasons Title I has failed.... Today the low-income child reads two grade levels below their peers...the same level of inefficiency or inability that the low-income child was reading at 20 years ago... We have seen a huge amount of money spent on Title I over the last 20 years—\$120 billion—but we have seen...no improvement in the performance of low-income children...so they have been...left behind. (SCR, May 1, 2001)

In the current climate of increased accountability, schools are challenged to ensure student achievement. Because parental involvement has been found to correlate with student achievement, many school districts are experimenting with strategies to increase parental involvement; (Epstein, 2001; Gillum, 1977; Henderson & Berla 1994; Moles 1982). Successful efforts embody the spirit and intent of ameliorating inequity and exclusion of low-income and minority parents. These problems continue and argue for continuing federally mandated parental involvement in public schools. Yet efforts to authentically involve parents have been few and of limited

success, with part of this failure due to the limited availability of resources, and another part being the relationship between teachers and parents, which historically has not been supportive of such participation.

Undoing the Faulty Logic of Parent Involvement Policies

While schools, policymakers, and scholars have framed educational policy supporting parental involvement, little is known about what parents are actually doing to support their children's schooling outside of the context of the school. It may be that there is little acute grasp of what goes on and, in turn, what goes on may be quite different than the "parental involvement" imagined and required in educational policy. Up until the 1990s, a fallacy in past federal education policy was that minority students were underachievers in part because their parents were undereducated and their homes were "broken."¹ This was a belief and without strong support in academic research. Policies were thus framed to include parents as a remedy to quietly assimilate and acculturate minority parents into mainstream education. Since the 1994 Reauthorization of ESEA, current policies have to some degree moved beyond such parent deficit theories to allow more opportunities for them to become full participants in decision-making, program development, evaluation, and improvements so as to help shape the future of the educational system, as well as to contribute to their own children's educational success. All this comes together in NCLB, the major federal policy on parental involvement.

With renewed political interest created by Section 1118 of NCLB, much current interest in parental involvement results from its politicization on the federal, state, and local levels. In response to the recent mandates found in Section 1118 (Appendix A) states are beginning to require such involvement and are reshaping federal law into state statutes. For example, Arkansas (HS Bill 1387), Louisiana (SN Bill 706), and Minnesota (HS Bill 217) introduced and passed in 2003 state policies to reinforce federal mandates. This has resulted in a range of state level enforcement policies, from mandating schools to develop actual written plans to involve parents to grading parents in Maryland (HS Bill 979²), Chicago Public Schools, and

¹ Cultural deficit theory was the prevailing thinking toward minority children and families that intrusively shaped educational policies and practices.

² Introduced in the Maryland Legislature in the 2004 session.

Richmond Public Schools.³ Policies at the state and local school board level now include a range of consequences for parents defined by schools as “uninvolved.” Yet many schools have not acted to fully involve parents in meaningful ways as legally required. Why?

It may be that the policies are misdirected, indeed counterproductive and surely against the spirit and intent of parental involvement and legislative attempts. Rhetorically, these are poor in logic. For example, it is illogical to punish parents for noninvolvement, while schools are not held accountable for implementing parental involvement initiatives. This point was made in the U.S. Senate debate:

A National Assessment of Title I found that a quarter of Title I schools do not have required school parent compacts, more than four years after they were required. As Secretary Paige stated at his confirmation hearing, “increased assistance will be needed” to enhance parental involvement. (February 15, 2001)

Moving Beyond Parents as the Scapegoat

Because schools have not actively implemented these policies, to criticize parents is patently unfair, and will surely not enhance local parental involvement. Such actions seem counterproductive at best, while at worst, they feed long-time beliefs by parents that the schools are also “against them” and their children. Additionally, policymakers do not understand that there is little scholarly consensus as to how to define and study parental involvement and how to operationalize and implement it at the school level in policies, procedures, and programs.

Another issue is around school accountability: what this is, how it is measured and how data are collected. Until now, schools have self-reported parent involvement, while being legally accountable for ensuring such engagement, thus creating opportunity for schools to over- or under-report such involvement. Obviously, reports of high parental involvement may win recognition and political support in some local arenas, while reports of low-involvement may serve to explain children’s failure or win the school additional funding. Blaming low-income and minority parents for a perceived lack of involvement is a form of “blaming the victim” and results in making

³ Initiated through Mayor Douglas Wilder through a unique partnership between the city and schools. *Richmond Times Dispatch*, Friday March 4, 2005

parents plausible scapegoats for the school system and local schools' failures.

If properly implemented, Section 1118 presents the greatest hope for a radical shift towards empowering parents in the nation's public schools. Yet this potential is not being realized, with early indications suggesting continued poor implementation of the law and this section.⁴

The Problem

The question of how Section 1118, in No Child Left Behind, is understood and is being implemented is not answered fully. Neither is Section 1118. Why? To get at this, the practice must be located in the question of how education administrators at all levels interpret parental involvement requirements and translate their institutional beliefs and practices into policies and programs intended to involve parents. Winters (1993) argued:

Following decades of a research and design intervention approach, these programs (parental involvement programs) demonstrate that urban school systems cannot undertake substantive enduring programs of parent involvement without outside support. Parent involvement is a complex and complicated process that evolves over time, becoming a key element of other processes in the school, before leading to long-term institutionalized commitment. Implementation cannot be left to nonprofessionals. Sustained leadership, fiscal support, on-going training, and redevelopment are key factors. (p. 4)

Winters was not alone in her critique. Atkin, Bastiani, and Goode (1988) also noted how schools must be adequately and appropriately staffed to address their new roles, responding to and involving parents, as natural and local governments and politicians have shaped parental perspectives on their right to be involved. They assert that:

Working effectively with parents takes time, energy and commitment. Producing materials to support such work needs all of those and financial resources as well. Teachers cannot be expected to

⁴ In a phone conversation (2004), a legislative aid from Senator Jack Reed's office gave the report that Section 1118 was not being implemented properly.

take on a new and demanding role without the means with which to fulfill it. (p. 175)

Winters (1993) suggested that there must be active, focused, and appropriate leadership at the federal level to develop policies, implement procedures, and evaluate outcomes if parental involvement is to become an ordinary part of everyday school practice. Unless parent involvement is legitimized and institutionalized at the national level and schools are provided with necessary support, it simply won't happen, given all else that must be done.

To that end, The National Parent Teacher Association has led advocacy on this, along with Senator Reed. Among their priorities is that the General Accounting Office (G.A.O.) commission a study of how Section 1118 parental involvement efforts are being implemented. No such data exist. Hence this study.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study is to learn about the implementation of Section 1118 of NCLB. The focal research question is: How is Section 1118 of NCLB understood and being implemented by selected stakeholders, from the local, state, and federal levels?

Eight guideline questions expanded this major research question:

1. What was the legislative intent of Sec. 1118?
2. What are the federal implementation guidelines and rules, regulations, procedures, and practices?
3. How does one southern state interpret these guidelines?
4. What are Louisiana's rules, regulations, procedures, and practices for implementation?
5. How does each of these comply with federal guidelines, rules, regulations, procedures, and practice?
6. How does a local school district interpret these guidelines, rules, regulations, etc.?
7. What are the New Orleans Public School guidelines, rules, regulations, etc. for implementation?
8. What should be the role of existing parent groups in the process?

Anticipated Benefits

The benefits of this study could inform our understanding of how this federal policy is implemented. Beyond that, it could provide to those within the educational system at all levels nuanced understand-

ing of what must be done to effectively implement parental involvement requirements. By providing clear descriptions of how NCLB is being understood and implemented as programs, policies, and procedures by key stakeholders affected, it could invite and facilitate more effective local to state practice.

Parents, parent advocates, and other stakeholders and benefactors interested should also benefit by its insights suggesting how they might better argue their rights and their case, and become more effectively integrated into the schools (Hill & Hupe, 2002). And if theory is partially right, they and their children will benefit. Given the use of a policy implementation model, this case study tests its utility and value.

THE SCHOLARLY DISCOURSE ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

The body of writing on family involvement in education is vast, and draws from literature in psychology, sociology, education, and anthropology. This review begins in the early 1960s, as compensatory education policies began to require parental involvement, while simultaneously “deficit theory interventions” had peaked and were being integrated into programs. During this period of intense examination of the school and family relationship, researchers used terms such as parental involvement, family-school partnerships, and home-school relations to describe and understand the connection between school and family. The term “parental involvement” came into use in American Education in the late 1800s during the Post Industrial Revolution and has come to include a variety of activities (Jordon, Orozco, & Averett, 2001) such as parents assisting at schools and advocating on behalf of school-age children. In later years, as this literature review will chronologically demonstrate, the meaning and underlying purposes of the notion shifted and became politicized. Consequently, a preoccupation with clarifying and substantiating definitions for parental involvement resulted.

This review focuses on definitions and models of parental involvement, parental involvement policies, factors impacting such involvement, and limitations in the models. The review is prefaced with a brief historical overview, beginning in the 1960s, when the