

**No Child Left Behind**  
and the Public Schools

# No Child Left Behind and the Public Schools

Scott Franklin Abernathy

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For my parents

*In memory of Annette*

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## Preface

Some time ago—in the eighth grade, I believe—I came to a sort of epiphany about U.S. politics. Reflecting on “I’m Just a Bill” from the *America Rock* Saturday morning educational series on ABC, I decided (for the purpose of realism) that Bill, our cartoon legislative friend trying to become a law, should be surrounded by ninety or so expired comrades scattered about on the steps of Capitol Hill. Too disturbing for little kids, of course, but a more accurate picture of the odds against success for any aspiring laws. In the world of public policy, the scene would be a little different but still a little scary. If, based on what I know now, I were to create a cartoon policy character—Polly might be a good name—I might place her instead among a collection of weird mutant policies, transformed in the process of their implementation from friendly and optimistic companions into a strange and unfortunate mélange of good intentions gone terribly wrong.

This book is about one such public policy. Its longevity and mutations have yet to be determined, but its ambitions are clear and sweeping. No Child Left Behind, signed into law by President George W. Bush in early 2002, was anything but a little bill—at nearly seven hundred pages long—and it is shaping up to be a very big policy indeed. The law promises to close the long-standing achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students in the United

States by using the results of standardized tests to identify, threaten, and, if necessary, sanction schools and districts that do not fulfill this promise. Like many other policies, this one is full of complications, contradictions, and challenges.

The central complication is that success in school has a great deal to do with being luckily born—into a family that values education and has the means to support its pursuit; into potential peer groups that reinforce the path to achievement; and into well-run, well-funded, and safe schools. There is also an inherent contradiction in applying the radically centralizing reforms of No Child Left Behind and the radically decentralizing reforms of giving parents more choices in education at the same time and without much thought about the potential synergies, conflict, and confusion that might result from this unusual combination. Finally, there is always the challenge of measuring something as fleeting and contextual as “good” schooling with any objective tools, no matter how well designed. In this book, I will deal with all of these issues in some detail.

While working for three years as a public school teacher, I learned two things. First, three years is only enough time to begin to understand how complicated schools and schooling really are. Second, those who would fix schools from above and from afar rarely take into account this complex reality.

My primary goal in this book is to explore the possibility of combining the on-the-ground understandings of schooling with the power and leverage of national and state policies. This combination of street- and elite-level approaches is not tried as often as it should be, which is unfortunate. By bringing them together, I argue that we can make it much more likely that the ultimate form of No Child Left Behind will resemble something close to what we had originally hoped for it—and something not too scary, at that.

In many ways, this book began on the third floor of Robertson Hall at Princeton University. There, in the coffee break room, Professor John J. DiIulio Jr. agreed to supervise me in an independent study on the American bureaucracy. It was just John and me, along with his peripatetic chalkboard analysis of Chester Barnard, James Q. Wilson, bureaucratic agency, the problem of supervision, and the

question of exactly when an organization is born. Down the hall was the office of my eventual dissertation adviser and friend, R. Douglas Arnold. I owe a great deal to both of these individuals. John, Doug, and all of the other scholars who have contributed to this book and to my education bear no responsibility for its arguments. All errors are mine and mine alone. They do, however, bear some nontrivial responsibility for instilling in me the beliefs that organizations matter, that rules matter, and that a useful path to understanding U.S. politics can begin with a study of the little details and unspoken assumptions that are often overlooked in the grand sweep of things.

Many scholars have provided invaluable comments and insight on early drafts of this work. For their comments and suggestions, I thank Larry M. Bartels, Sanford Gordon, Jacob Hacker, Jeffrey Henig, Jennifer L. Hochschild, Gregory Huber, Paul Manna, Rick Mayes, Christine Roch, Andrew Rotherham, Mark Schneider, Kevin Smith, Clarence Stone, and Paul Teske, along with anonymous reviewers of the manuscript. At the University of Minnesota, I am indebted to Teri Caraway, James Farr, Christopher Federico, Bill Flanigan, John Freeman, Lawrence Jacobs, Timothy Johnson, Daniel Kelliher, Joanne Miller, Kathryn Pearson, Wendy Rahn, Jason Roberts, Martin Sampson, Katherine Sikkink, Paul Soper, Dara Strolovich, and John Sullivan for their comments, suggestions, and support. I also thank Alexis Cuttance, Judy Iverson, Rose Miskowiec, Judith Mitchell, and Cheryl Olson for their invaluable assistance.

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Mostly, I thank Sara, my wife and my best friend. In terms of effort, commitment, and survival, this book is hers as much as it is mine.

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