

Educational Policy Developments in North Carolina and its Impact on African American Students: Policy Brief

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Currently, public schools in North Carolina must respond to the confluence of a multitude of altered or recently developed state and federal education policies. For example, North Carolina adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS); the state redesigned its high stakes assessment model; the state received a waiver to alter its obligations to the federal education act known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB); and the state now receives federal funds as a recipient of the Race to the Top (RttT) education grant, which also serves as the catalyst for many of the above mentioned policy changes (<http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/>). With the implementation of these policies, which directly impact the classroom, a critical analysis of their potential impact on African American students is warranted, especially given the historical role of African American students within the context of education reform. Finally, due to the particular implications of education reform for African American students, this policy brief utilizes a post-NCLB framework to examine North Carolina's current transformative reform endeavors.

Snapshot of Educational Policy Reforms

To begin, an historical perspective is needed to illustrate the significance of the recent reform measures in North Carolina. In 2002 the authorization of NCLB mandated profound changes to federal education policy, including emphasis on a strict accountability model (Rebell & Wolff, 2008). Because NCLB dictates the disaggregation of test results into sub-groups defined by such categories as race, gender, or economic status, and because overall school proficiency hinges on the adequate yearly performance (AYP) of students within each sub-group, schools must now address the academic needs of all students in all sub-groups to ensure that no student is left behind (Rebell & Wolff, 2008). Additionally, schools that fail to meet AYP goals receive progressive penalties designed to mandate improvement (Duncombe, Lukemeyer, & Yinger, 2008). It should be noted that the civil rights community initially supported this education law because NCLB forced schools to seriously engage in educating all students or risk severe sanctions for failing to meet the AYP goals (Rebell & Wolff, 2008).



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Yet, as many education critics noted, Linda Darling-Hammond included, NCLB possessed inherent flaws that resulted in many unintended consequences. In response to the heavy emphasis on testing and sanctions, schools stopped teaching non-tested subjects, which essentially narrowed the curriculum. Students lacking basic skills were often placed in classes emphasizing rote learning and test preparation in lieu of instruction infused with higher order thinking. Finally, this back to basics approach and narrowed curriculum typically comprised the primary means of instruction in high poverty schools—schools with demographic compositions consisting mostly of African American and Latino students (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Racial Disparities in Assessment and Achievement

In contrast, the emergence of the knowledge economy now dictates that students possess a combination of soft skills (i.e. critical thinking and problem solving) in conjunction with hard skills (i.e. science and technology), which means schools must now provide students with higher order thinking and problem solving experiences (Grubb, 2006). Whereas the global-economic conditions dictate that individuals possess more than rote skills, key data points reveal the complications of a demographic divide. For example, recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results in 8th grade reading illustrate a disparity between White students and African American students. While 83% of White students achieved the basic level in reading, only 58% of African American students scored at the basic level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Additionally, national unemployment statistics point to the existence of an unemployment gap. The current national unemployment rate for Whites is 6.8% in comparison to 13.2% for African Americans (<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t02.htm>). With the existence of a disparity in achievement

scores and unemployment, it underscores the importance of these incipient education policies, policies which will effectively prepare students for a 21st century education. There also exists an imperative to ensure that all students have access to this curriculum. As Darling-Hammond (2010) explains, “The kind of curriculum that supports these qualities has typically been rationed to the most advantaged students in the United States—a strategy that is increasingly problematic as demand for these skills becomes universal,” (p. 54). Because of this scenario, the current education policy developments in North Carolina deserve further analysis. Also, an important question must be answered: For African American students, how will schools bridge the transition between the previous basic demands of NCLB and the current education policy changes that place greater emphasis on critical thinking?



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Consider for example the Common Core State Standards, which represent a set of nationally recognized standards developed by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) in conjunction with the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). The standards apply specifically to English Language Arts and Mathematics and emphasize college and work expectations along with rigor and higher order thinking skills (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). As of 2012, forty-five states have



adopted the Common Core Standards, which includes the adoption of the standards in June of 2010 by North Carolina (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Within the same framework as the Common Core Standards, North Carolina also developed Essential Standards designed to include other content areas, such as science, social studies, world languages, art, healthful living, and English as a second language. According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction timeline, the 2012-13 school year marks the first year of full implementation of both CCSS and the new Essential Standards (<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/acre/timeline/timeline.pdf>). With these standards, North Carolina's focus becomes one of preparing students to succeed as 21st century learners, particularly since the standards that students must master emphasize critical thinking and college readiness.

Yet, the question remains: how will our students, especially students who lack basic skills, respond to these academic changes? Educators and policy makers understand that teachers can bridge the gap between deficient skills and critical thinking as long as the teachers are sufficiently trained for this task. Yet, it should be noted that these changes to the North Carolina curriculum directly contrast with previous years in which high stakes testing promoted a focus on a narrowed curriculum.

Similar questions arise with the redesign of the statewide high stakes assessment model. Just as the CCSS has replaced the previous standard course of study with standards based on higher order thinking, the state must now adjust its assessment model to adequately measure higher order thinking. Essentially, the test drives instruction at schools, and if the test does not require higher order thinking, then schools, in spite of the new standards, will not pressure teachers to incorporate higher order thinking into instruction. However, in this case, the state "will

develop new tests that will include open-ended, constructed-response test items to better demonstrate what students know and can do," (<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/acre/assessment/>). While traditional complaints about high stakes education included concerns over the lack of higher order thinking in multiple choice assessments, the proposed adjustments clearly address these concerns; end of year tests will now include open ended response questions designed to assess higher order thinking. Schools must now confront the challenge of transitioning from the traditional test of basic skills to the new model of assessing higher order thinking.

Recent Reform Initiatives

Recent federal policy changes in North Carolina include waivers to the strict obligations of NCLB and the implementation of new federal guidelines stemming from the state's successful bid to receive federal grant money from the RttT initiative. To begin, in May of 2012, North Carolina received approval from the federal government to make significant changes to the federal requirements under portions of NCLB, including adjustments to the measure of Adequate Yearly Progress, parent notifications, public school choice, and Supplemental Education Services (<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/nclb/>). A primary component of this particular waiver allows the state to abandon the all or nothing rigidity



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of the adequately yearly progress model and replace it with annual measurable objectives (AMO), which will allow the state to retain its emphasis on growth while still measuring the yearly academic performance of the students. North Carolina's Race to the Top initiative, which the state terms Career and College: Ready, Set, Go!, consists of four pillars: teachers and principals, standards and assessments, school turnaround, and data systems. Also, RttT serves as the umbrella for the myriad of educational changes impacting North Carolina. For example, adopting the CCSS is a component of the RttT standards and assessments pillar. Adjusting the state assessment model will not only allow the state to align its testing to the new standards, but it will also allow the state to identify effective teachers—another element of RttT. Finally, the RttT funds encourage the creation of charter schools as a means of improving education in North Carolina overall. With these changes, the hope is that the state will implement policies that challenge students to achieve beyond the basics while still utilizing an accountability model that remains not only transparent but also ensures that the academic performance of all sub-groups remains visible to the public.

After an initial review of North Carolina's recent education reforms, it is clear that the state is progressively moving forward with initiatives that will enhance state standards, improve testing, and provide the tools to make strategic staffing decisions. These policies are clearly informed by 21st century objectives designed to prepare students to participate in a knowledge economy. Yet, even as this educational paradigm shift occurs, policy makers and educators must critically reflect on these recent policy changes given the historical framework and context of the previous policies these initiatives are reforming. Because an achievement gap still exists, as educators proceed with the implementation of these reforms, measures should be taken to ensure their success. Therefore, this policy brief concludes with several recommendations to ensure that these policies fully accomplish their potential goals.

Recommendations

It is suggested that as part of the implementation process, schools focus on utilizing a culturally relevant curriculum, providing teachers with the training needed to bridge the gap between skills teaching and higher order thinking classroom instruction, and maintaining a transparent focus on student achievement to ensure the adequate performance of all students on end of year assessments. The first area of importance, culturally relevant curriculum, equates to “. . . a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes,” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 17). Through this form of instruction, teachers essentially connect the curriculum to the lives of the students while still fulfilling the state and local curricular expectations. With the CCSS, which establishes challenging standards, an opportunity exists for teachers to apply rigorous curriculum expectations while also infusing the instructional content with material and experiences relevant to the lives of the individuals in the classroom. Essentially, the CCSS affords teachers the latitude to explore the standards with culturally relevant instructional materials. Thus, the success of African American students in particular depends on the reliance of a culturally relevant curriculum in order to fully engage these students as learners.



Additionally, because the end-of-year assessments now include open ended questions, the curriculum and high stakes assessments now not only align with each other but also emphasize higher order thinking skills. To ensure that all students achieve success, schools will need to focus on bridging the skills gap that existed under NCLB with the higher order thinking expectations of the CCSS. For example, it can be a challenge for teachers to provide students with inquiry based lessons when the students lack basic skills. Therefore, as schools progress with the implementation of the CCSS, an effort must be invested in providing students with a combination of basic skills and higher order thinking opportunities. By bridging the skills gap, students will be afforded the academic tools needed to successfully engage in higher order thinking lessons. Finally, the expectation that schools report disaggregated data must remain in place to ensure that schools teach all students with fidelity. The provision from NCLB that requires the reporting of disaggregated data essentially serves the purpose of promoting the honest pursuit of success for all students, and thus ensures that schools will continue to pursue methods to adequately educate all students. With these policy changes and transitional recommendations, the possibility exists for genuine reform that will result in the adequate education of all students.

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