MOVING AHEAD OR FALLING BEHIND?: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE HISTORICAL AND SOCIO-POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT

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This dissertation entitled
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Public policy is full of rhetorical messages, and the ways in which politicians use rhetoric shapes the mindset of a society. This is especially true when it comes to federally mandated policy written in regard to America’s public education system.

The No Child Left Behind Act is by far the most controversial education reform artifact ever published due to its insistence punishing non-compliant schools. This system of surveillance, coupled with other issues that will be discussed herein, have caused most educators to loudly criticize the bill, while the Bush administration under which it was enacted refuses to back off on its insistence that the act will work.

In the field of communication studies, in order to gain a rhetorical perspective on discourse, it is vital to look at the relationship between historical events and the rhetoric surrounding them. Thus, in this dissertation I provide a rhetorical analysis of NCLB and how it measures in a rhetorical and historical context with other modern educational reform artifacts. I make the argument that an act cannot be successful on its name alone, but that is exactly the logic supporters of the No Child Left Behind Act are using.

Approved:

Scott Titsworth

Associate Professor of Communication Studies
To my wife Sherri and my daughter Courtney

for their patience, support, and sacrifice throughout this project.
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Chapter One

The study of history is a rhetorical construction providing a view of reality for its society. That history deals with particularistic topics in a time bound manner makes it none the less global in its implications. (Turner, 1998, p. 13)

Introduction

Rhetoric is a driving force behind public policy. Historically, the ways in which politicians craft arguments has a profound effect on all aspects of American Society. Turner (1998) maintains that in the field of communication studies it is vital to look at the relationship between historical events and the rhetoric surrounding them. Ball (1998) argues that “[a] rhetorical perspective prods us to ask what persuasive discourse means within its historical context” (p. 63). This is especially evident in the artifacts that have dictated public policy concerning American schools, and is an issue that remains relevant today.

Public policy in regard to the United States public education system has been a controversial issue since pre-colonial times (Hlebowitsh, 2001), and the subject is as hotly debated in the early years of the Twenty-first Century as it was more than three hundred years ago. Much has been written in regard to public education, especially since federally mandated education reform began to take root in the 1950’s. Since that time the rhetorical meanings behind educational discourse has shifted in light of changes in socio-political and socio-economic conditions in the eras in which the discourse was published. In an effort to rectify inconsistencies in public policy in regard to public education, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was enacted by the
United States Congress in 2002, and it has become a breeding ground for controversy since its passage.

Ostensibly, an act that rhetorically and literally purports to leave no child behind would do just that—it would ensure that every school-aged child in the United States would receive a free, high quality education. Despite its well-intended rationale, the act has created a great deal of controversy at every level. Across the board, students, parents, schools, and many government officials believe that The No Child Left Behind Act actually does the opposite of what its title implies and in truth leaves many children behind as far as receiving a quality education is concerned (Meier, 2004). Funding issues, assessment, and accountability demands are part of the problem, but of larger concern among educators is the fact that the group of students who are being left behind are mainly those who have for decades received a low quality of education. These consist of the poor, as well as racial and ethnic minorities (Jimerson, 2005; Freeman, 2005; Furumoto, 2005). Also included in this group are students who have physical or learning disabilities (Yell, Drasgow, & Lowrey, 2005).

Ball (1998) makes the argument that “high-level policy making, carried out over a long period of time, is a rhetorical activity” (p. 64). Therefore, in order to put the historical development of the United States education system and the effects of educational reform in better perspective, one must understand that history and historical discourse are both subject to analysis (Turner, 1998). Since history can be seen as both continuous and discontinuous (Foucault, 1998), then to accurately understand how and why historical events took place, one must first analyze events
within the contexts of the time periods in which they occurred. Therefore, an examination of events must be compared and contrasted in order for one to gain an accurate understanding as to how events have evolved in relation to each other (Foucault, 1998). Likewise, this same theory can be applied to looking at the rhetoric behind written and spoken discourse produced during specific historical eras. Thus, from a rhetorical perspective it makes sense to look at the relationship between historical events and the discourse surrounding them (Turner, 1998). To better understand the rhetorical implications of the No Child Left Behind Act, it is imperative to look at public education in the United States and the discourse that preceded it and currently surrounds it from a rhetorical and historical perspective.

The concept of a free, public education was addressed as early as pre-colonial times but received little support from the government until the mid 1950’s. This was in part because the United States Constitution made no provision for free public schools, so the responsibility of funding an education for the country’s youth basically rested on the shoulders of individual states, communities, and families until well into the Twentieth Century (Mondale, “The Common School,” 2001). However, the problem in developing a free public school system lay well beyond funding. Even though the United States Constitution superficially guaranteed equality for everyone as part of living in a democratic society, this was certainly not the case for many people—especially the poor, women, racial minorities, and children with disabilities. Just as it had an affect on Society as a whole, this unjust treatment of disadvantaged people was clearly present in regard to early schools and remained firmly entrenched well into the Twentieth Century when educational reform began.
In light of the historic precedent of discrimination that has traditionally saturated the United States public school system, in order to understand the need for a sweeping bill such as the No Child Left Behind Act, it is important to take into consideration the demographic of students that have traditionally received a free, quality public education system in the United States—as well as those who have been “left behind.” Even though a series of reform acts have been ratified over the past few decades, prior to the No Child Left Behind Act most did not carry strict accountability mandates (Cook, 2005). As a result, many poor, minority, and disabled students did not receive the benefits they deserved (Yell, Drasgow & Lowrey, 2005). In fact, studies have shown that many of today’s students are actually learning less than what students learned before federal intervention in public education began (Yell, Drasgow & Lowrey, 2005).

The No Child Left Behind Act is rooted in accountability—for the first time schools that perform poorly based on student achievement on standardized proficiency tests will face the loss of federal funding and are subject to other penalties (United States Department of Education, 2002). The surveillance aspect of the No Child Left Behind Act is also highly controversial because its passage signifies the first time that the United States government has intervened in what determines teacher qualifications. Another debate that surrounds the act is that student progress is to be measured through standardized proficiency testing instead of grading and assessment done by the classroom teacher. A fourth controversy in regard to NCLB is the reality that schools will be considered as failing unless 98-99% of their students, regardless of their background or ability to learn, are required to reach
proficiency (United States Department of Education, 2004). This issue greatly affects the others because it mandates that students traditionally regarded as being labeled “at-risk” must perform academically as well as traditional, “mainstreamed students” (Karp, 2004), even though to this point in time they have not.

At-risk, or what the No Child Left Behind Act regards as “sub-group” (United States Department of Education, 2004) students are typically those who are poor and/or come from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds. Students with physical or mental disabilities are also regarded as subgroup members under The No Child Left Behind Act (Yell, Drasgow & Lowrey, 2005). For many years women were also shut out from receiving a quality education, but due to decades of gains made by the Women’s Rights Movement—solidified by the passage of Title IX legislation in the 1970’s—the problem is not as grave today as it was in years past.

The concept of leaving no child behind is intended to benefit all students, but most educators believe that at-risk students will have an extremely difficult time reaching NCLB’s proficiency levels (Freeman, 2005; Furumoto, 2005; Jimerson, 2005; Karp, 2004). Nevertheless, because the No Child Left Behind Act promises that all children will receive a quality education, on the surface the act certainly looks like a positive step toward instilling equality into the public education system. However, many educators believe that bringing all disadvantaged students to proficiency is an insurmountable task because of the limitations many of these students face (Karp, 2004; Wood, 2004). If at-risk students cannot reach proficiency, then a cycle of failure begins because under the surveillance mandates of NCLB—if the students fail, then so do the schools. When failing schools are penalized, this in
turn will make it even more difficult for at-risk students to succeed (Mickelson & Southworth, 2005).

Thanks in large part to educational reform, the face of the American schools has changed dramatically from the early years when students were educated in homes or in one room schoolhouses—or in some cases not at all. According to the United States Department of Education, more than 90% of school-aged children currently attend public schools (with the other 10% attending private or home schools) (Department of Education, 2005). This has not always been the case; only since the 1960’s has the majority of school-aged children in the United States completed a K-12 education (Hlebowitsh, 2001). While these are laudable numbers, supporters of the No Child Left Behind Act claim that graduating a “majority” is far from being enough. Thus, NCLB affects virtually every public school, every schooled-aged child, every parent, every educator, and every school district in the United States.

The No Child Left Behind Act has stirred controversy among educators since its inception, and a survey of recent literature shows that the criticism seems to increase on a daily basis. In order to understand what factors were taken into consideration during the development of the No Child Left Behind Act, it is vital that one take a look at two issues that preceded the passage of NCLB. The first is obvious—free public education has not always been available to all school-aged children because for many years, only privileges classes of people were permitted to have a quality education. NCLB seeks to remedy this.

Despite advances women and other minorities have gained through protests that have led to legislation mandating equality, it is these very minorities that are for
the most part still at the bottom of the rung in regard to receiving a quality education. In addition to them being traditionally shut out from having access to quality schools, Freeman (2005) contends that minority students are at a disadvantage when it comes to passing standardized proficiency tests. Moreover, one must also ask whether it is fair to require physically and developmentally handicapped students to reach the same degree of proficiency as students that do not have special needs.

The second matter of concern is the rhetorical and historical significance of NCLB. The rhetorical meaning of the act’s title is as controversial as the act itself—it allows for no margin of error. Turner (1998) points out that while “[h]istorians might focus on policy making and implementation…[t]he rhetorical perspective affects not only the questions we ask of history, but also what we consider to be ‘evidence’ and how we interrogate the evidence” (p. 5). Many historical artifacts have set public policy in regard to public education, so for the purpose of this dissertation it is important to understand the ways how NCLB is both an extension of and runs in opposition to other education-related documents. Thus, it is imperative to examine other modern education documents and their historical and rhetorical relation to the No Child Left Behind Act in order to see if NCLB is breaking new ground toward success or if it seeks to push its credibility based on its title alone.

Using Rhetorical History as a Theoretical Perspective for Analysis

The communication discipline is one in which the examination of historical documents allows researchers to understand the documents’ place in history, their rhetorical significance, and how they influence future artifacts. Turner (1998) says
that taking a “research approach” (p. 3) to the context of the rhetorical messages found in various rhetorical artifacts is a viable way to conduct a comparative analysis of two or more documents produced at various times in history. What I seek to do in this dissertation is, as Turner (1998) suggests, is “to understand the context through messages that reflect and construct that context” (p. 2; italics in original). The No Child Left Behind Act is the most recent document that has rhetorical significance and political overtures in regard to the ways in which public schools operate, but its passage certainly does not signify the first time that educational artifacts have stirred controversy. Looking at the context of NCLB and other educational documents from a rhetorical and historical approach will allow a greater understanding of the underlying rhetoric in each artifact, along with their individual and collective significance from an historical perspective as well.

The discourse surrounding the No Child Left Behind Act is ripe for critical analysis because the ways in which teaching, learning, and public educational policy are constituted all are rhetorical and historic in nature. Because NCLB is built around a discursive system that defines “normal” learning as well as setting forth a complex system for observing and enforcing normalcy, looking at NCLB from a standpoint of rhetoric and history serves as an effective backdrop for an analysis of the act. As Zarefsky (1998) maintains, “The communication discipline has always embraced pluralism in its approaches, because it is not hard to argue that historical studies yield knowledge and insight” (p. 19) and is significant in the realm of academia (Zarefsky, 1998). In this case, the pluralistic approaches to examining education reform can be
explored from the viewpoints of both history and rhetoric and looking at how the two work together.

Zarefsky (1998) says that history and its criticism through a rhetorical lens are not synonymous, but he argues that they certainly have common characteristics. Studying rhetorical history is made possible by examining this “area of overlap” (p. 21). From a communication perspective, to look at the rhetorical implications of the No Child Left Behind Act is relevant and vital because “the current field of communication derived from the historical study of rhetoric” (Turner, 1998, p. 1).

Rhetoric is often used by politicians in regard to public policy in general, as well as education reform documents and the discourse that surrounds it. From the call for a Fair Deal in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s, equating education with freedom in the latter part of the 1950’s, developing a Great Society in the 1960’s, and warning the public of A Nation at Risk in the 1980’s, there is a long tradition of rhetorical discourse in regard to public educational policy that carries forward with the No Child Left Behind Act.

As Turner (1998) contends, “Historical research provides an understanding of rhetoric as a process rather than simply a product” (p. 2). As such, to look at NCLB and other educational documents from this perspective, especially in comparison to each other, one can analyze the context behind why each product was created (Turner, 1998). Moreover, “historical research creates an appreciation of both commonalities among and the distinctiveness of rhetorical situations and responses” (Turner, 1998, p. 15). In the case of NCLB, it is a bill that seeks to reinforce and extend previous education reform discourse; at the same time it is the first such bill
that guarantees penalties to non-compliant schools. Thus, looking at the No Child Left Behind Act and other education-related artifacts of the last half century allows their rhetorical significance and meaning to be examined in light of changes in socio-political and socio-economical attitudes. Understanding the intended meaning while looking not only at the literal meaning of rhetoric surrounding educational artifacts helps to put their credibility into perspective.

According to Turner (1998), “Historical research tests theories and complements criticism while standing as a distinct and valid approach in and of itself” (p. 15). In order to understand the socio-political contexts of any historic document, to look at its significance through the lens of rhetorical history “constructs reality for the society in which and for which it is produced” (Turner, 1998, p. 8). From a communication perspective, the act of scrutinizing NCLB and discussing how it compares rhetorically to other educational documents serves as its own vehicle to create theory, to foster criticism, and to critique practice—all of which serve to validate the effectiveness of this study. For the purposes of this dissertation, the No Child Left Behind Act will be analyzed in context with a court decision, a technical analysis, a legislative mandate, and a government publication; these artifacts will be discussed more at length as this paper progresses. For now, it will suffice to say that each of these documents were heavily influenced by the socio-political and socio-economic climates in which they were published, and I will examine whether or not the No Child Left Behind Act was constructed under similar circumstances.

The ways in which we socially reconstruct the past “is guided by and contained in the symbols and systems of symbols that give currency to our attitudes,
values, beliefs, and actions” (Turner, 1998, p. 10). To look at the phrase “no child left behind” as simply a grouping of words standing alone and without anything other than a literal meaning attached to it ignores the fact that for many years scores of children were purposely left behind because of their gender, the color of their skin or ethnic background, their socio-economic status, or their ability to learn. Thus, a comparative analysis of the No Child Left Behind Act cannot be done accurately without investigating the reasons why the bill was enacted in the first place—all of which can be discussed by examining other historical artifacts that serve as rhetorical precedents of NCLB—as well as looking at the socio-political climates and socio-economic conditions under which they were produced.

Looking at NCLB in the Historical and Rhetorical Contexts of Previous Educational Artifacts

According to Zarefsky (1998), “[A]ny rhetorical act is an interaction between text and context” (p. 21). Simply put, one could evaluate any text in light of the socio-political and socio-economic circumstances under which it was written, because as Clark and McKerrow (1998) point out, “[H]istory is a gigantic conversation between past and present” (p. 37). In the field of communication studies, to examine the No Child Left Behind Act in regard to prior educational documents is viable because “the development of rhetoric in the context of the eras and societies in which it evolved is of obvious importance to understanding the current state of our knowledge and our discipline” (Zarefsky, 1998, p. 26). Thus, the study of the No
Child Left Behind Act in relation to other historical artifacts is germane when making sense of the past, current, and future implications of education reform acts.

Since the No Child Left Behind Act was enacted in the form of an uncompromising national mandate, to compare it to other documents that have had major impacts on the educational state of the nation is a viable and relevant undertaking. Beginning in the mid 1950’s, the American education system began to take on some significant changes due to the publication of key textual artifacts. One important document was a Supreme Court decision in 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education*. In *Brown*, the high court ruled that students should not be discriminated against based on the grounds of race and ethnicity; ostensibly, this would allow minorities the opportunity to have an equal chance at receiving a quality education (Willie, 2005). However, while the decision was a subject of debate in both a rhetorical and historical context, the mandate itself was not widely enforced immediately because there was no mechanism of accountability or enforcement set in place. Willie (2005) says that this was due to the years of racism that had pervaded the nation, especially in the South. By and large, most states simply ignored the ruling; consequently, most public schools remained segregated. As a result, the *Brown* decision existed mainly on paper, but its passage ensured its place in rhetorical history and paved the way for later educational reform (Nichols, 2005; Willie, 2005).

Clark and McKerrow (1998) argue that “[a]rguments are conditioned by the structures of social practices and not by the actions of persons” (p. 40). Even though all-encompassing results were not immediate, from a rhetorical standpoint the *Brown* decision raised awareness as to how for almost two centuries most of American
Society had ignored the Declaration of Independence by denying equality to certain groups of people. The Fourteenth Constitutional Amendment had also been disregarded because minorities had been suppressed in many ways, including their right to a due process of the basic right to receive an education (Willie, 2005).

Even though *Brown v. Board of Education* was generally ignored at the time of its passage, many people argue that it did serve as a catalyst for setting the Civil Rights Movement into action (Willie, 2005). Nevertheless, major gains in the area of civil rights would have to wait another decade because education reform in the United States was put on hold in the latter part of the 1950’s as a result of the rhetoric that shaped the public’s perception of other world events.

The looming presence of the Cold War and the launch of the Soviet rocket *Sputnik* at about the same time as the *Brown* decision created a “Red Scare” (Horne, 2005, p. 196), which in turn caused many politicians and Society as a whole to shift focus in regard to education away from civil rights issues. Instead, Society was lead to fear that the United States would lose the technological race against the Soviet Union, which would result in the America’s defense system becoming volatile (Mondale, “As American as Public School,” 2001). As a result, blacks and other at-risk students were once again shut out in the name of preserving democracy (Horne, 2005).

One of the dominant rhetorical discourses written during that time was H.G. Rickover’s (1959) book *Education and Freedom*. This text was written in response to the “Cold War/Red Scare” fear that many Americans held during the late 1950’s, and thus is another symbolic artifact concerning education that is worthy of examination.
for its rhetorical implications during that time in history. Because of the need to keep pace in the technological world, Rickover (1959) argued that schools must move toward placing emphasis on science, mathematics, and other subjects that would help students gain a strong background in technology. He believed that those students who had the most talent should be encouraged to pursue college degrees in technological-related areas. The rhetorical significance of Rickover’s (1959) work is that in the interest of protecting democracy public schools must work harder to produce a certain type of student instead of following the mandate of Brown and provide an equal chance for a quality education for school-aged child.

When the fear of being overtaken by Russian technology subsided to some degree due to shifts in political administrations, the Civil Rights Movement finally took hold in the 1960’s and a series of educational reform bills were enacted throughout that decade and into the next. Passed as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s rhetorical dream of the United States becoming a “Great Society” (Frost, 2002), these bills were aimed at providing an equal opportunity for a quality education to all the students who had traditionally been denied an equal opportunity for a free public education (many of these acts will be discussed in fuller detail in the next chapter).

Perhaps the most significant of the bills passed under Johnson’s presidency was the Elementary and Secondary Educational Act (ESEA) of 1965. This bill provided billions of dollars to schools in the name of teacher training and helping disadvantaged students (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988). The bill was criticized by some politicians, though, because it required little accountability on the part of
states and schools that received the money. As a result, the federal government began to regulate the distribution of federal money and demanded accountability as to the ways in which it was used (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988). The passage of ESEA was the first significant instance of the federal government providing massive amounts of funding to schools and attempting to intervene in how schools used educational dollars. The No Child Left Behind Act and its surveillance measures are actually extensions of ESEA, making ESEA another artifact worthy of attention.

Public policy in regard to education reform shifted once again when a government report entitled *A Nation at Risk* was published in 1983. This report negatively criticized education reform efforts of the 1960’s and 1970’s and was written at a time when the United States economy was believed by many people to be unstable; consequently, once again the focus of education reform shifted away from being student-centered to being product-centered because many politicians believed that the United States was falling behind other countries worldwide in regard to how well students were prepared to enter the workforce after leaving school (Guthrie and Springer, 2004). *A Nation at Risk* (1983) asserted that Americans needed to be more competitive in the workforce and that reshaping public school curricula to accommodate at-risk students had caused the United States to produce hundreds of thousands of mediocre students. Under the conservative presidential administration of Ronald Reagan, education efforts aimed toward helping disadvantaged students were primarily put on hold until 1989 when Reagan left office (Cook, 2005).

Whereas the *Brown* court decision and ESEA had rhetorical overtones that seemingly fell along the same lines as the No Child Left Behind Act, the Rickover...
(1959) text and the *A Nation at Risk* (1983) report were geared toward safeguarding the nation as a whole instead of providing a quality education for all students. While there are obvious discrepancies among these rhetorical artifacts in regard to their actual intent, Gronbeck (1998) believes that to look at disparate texts within the framework of time is a viable way to tie rhetoric and history together. Gronbeck (1998) maintains that in order to effectively analyze historical artifacts from a rhetorical perspective, it is vital that communication researchers “search for ways to bridge historical narrative and interpretive arguments” (p. 50). In one way or another, politics have always played a part in the American education system. As such, one could make the argument that historically, shifts in which political party controls the presidency and Congress have a profound effect on which students will receive access to a quality education.

If one looks at the evolution of education reform throughout the Twentieth Century (and earlier), an argument can be made that in general, conservative political administrations tend to favor an education system that privileges the hegemonic white ruling class, while moderate and liberal political regimes tend to be more willing to help at-risk students (Besler, 1995; McDonnell, 2005). At-risk students are the very ones that the No Child Left Behind Act seeks to bring to the same level of proficiency as all other students; however, most educators believe that leaving no child behind cannot be accomplished without making adaptations set to cater to the difficulties at-risk students might face (Freeman, 2005; Furumoto, 2005; Jimerson, 2005).

As such, from a rhetorical history perspective the No Child Left Behind Act serves to both extend to distance itself from the discourses previously mentioned that
have been created during dissimilar socio-political and socio-economic eras beginning in the middle of the last century. On one hand, schools that reach proficiency standards under NCLB have been promised a continued flow of federal education dollars. On the other hand, however, the No Child Left Behind Act breaks new ground when it imposes severe penalties on non-compliant schools.

Whereas the *Brown* decision, Rickover’s (1959) *Education and Freedom*, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and *A Nation at Risk* (1983) highlighted the need for changes in public policy, funding for the No Child Left Behind Act relies solely on a system on rewards and punishments. As far as legislative acts go, whereas the use of funding was loosely monitored by the federal government under ESEA, with NCLB the federal government threatens to punish schools that fail to produce proficient students. Because the positive changes that have come to light as a result of education reform have to this point benefited at-risk students, some might argue that NCLB is simply a natural progression of an ever-advancing public education system. Looking deeper, however, some people believe that the No Child Left Behind Act is a subtle but heavy-handed attempt to push minorities even further back (Freeman, 2005), and this has come under intense criticism from most educators.

From the standpoint of rhetorical history, the socio-political climates of any given era greatly impact their influence on the American public school system; as such, to understand the impact of NCLB it is exigent that the act is looked at in regard to how it compares and contrasts to other modern educational reform artifacts before one can assess the intent and effectiveness of the act itself.
Turner (1998) argues that having the luxury of looking at artifacts from multiple disciplinary perspectives allows rhetorical researchers to gain a better understanding of the rhetorical and historical relevance of those documents. Thus, from a communication standpoint, looking at NCLB and other education-related documents from a “rhetorical perspective can contribute particular insights to an understanding of history” (Turner, 1998, p. 4). In order to better understand the implications of the No Child Left Behind Act from a communication point of view, I propose to conduct an analysis of NCLB within the context of the aforementioned landmark educational documents that helped shaped the nation’s views on education during the past half century. I seek to so do by looking at these documents in regard to their rhetorical intent as well as how historically they reflect the socio-political attitudes and socio-economic conditions of the eras in which they were produced.

This dissertation examines recent education reform and will be analyzed and argued within the context of rhetorical history. In it I will seek answers to five basic research questions, which will be spelled out more clearly at the end of Chapter Two. Basically, in light of what has been said to this point, this dissertation seeks to examine the role political discourse articulated in regard to the preservation of democracy plays in the funding and administration of public schools, and whether or not the No Child Left Behind Act is a reform bill that will survive when the current political administration changes. Furthermore, this dissertation looks at the rhetorical and practical rationale for holding at-risk students to high academic standards if, as research shows, they will have difficulty passing NCLB’s mandatory proficiency testing. Another issue brought to light under NCLB is that of funding and
accountability; as such, I will explore the rhetorical message behind a reward and punishment system based solely on the result of proficiency scores. Lastly, I will look at the rhetorical intent of education reform movements that use systems of rewards and punishments and how these affect students’ ability to learn and the teachers’ abilities to teach. I will also address how educational reform affects students that have traditionally been suppressed by a hegemonic white ruling class. Key terms that will be examined throughout this document will focus on the foundation of the United States itself: freedom, democracy, equality, and attaining excellence in education. The research presented will show that the rhetorical meanings of these terms change as political regimes change, and these changes in rhetorical meanings produce a profound effect on education reform.

In this chapter I have identified a number of contentious issues surrounding the No Child Left Behind Act: the designation of at-risk students, funding concerns, curriculum issues, teacher qualifications, the assessment process, and the reward and punishment system set forth by NCLB—all of these issues will be further explained and expounded upon throughout this dissertation. I have also provided a rationale for why looking at the No Child Left Behind Act from a rhetorical history perspective can be effective in evaluating the pros and cons of the act—not only in and of itself, but how it relates to other modern educational discourses as well.

In the next chapter of this document I will provide a brief overview of NCLB, a look at the historical development of the United States education system, and I also delve into how looking at history from a rhetorical perspective can be effective in exploring how public policy has influenced education reform throughout the history
of the United States public education system. Chapter Two concludes with specific research questions guiding the study. In Chapter Three I examine what leading educators—past and present—say about how schools should be run. In Chapter Four, through comparative analysis I explore in a historical context the rhetorical implications of the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision, H. G. Rickover’s (1959) Education and Freedom, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and the A Nation at Risk (1983) report, and how each compares and contrasts to, as well as to how each extends or goes in opposition to the No Child Left Behind Act. In Chapter Five I look at the differing opinions educators and politicians hold in regard to NCLB, and the effects that the act will have on students, teachers, and schools. Finally, in Chapter Six I address the research questions identified in Chapter Two and discuss the rhetorical implications of the act, as well as how it functions in comparison with other educational discourse. This concluding chapter also predicts what the future holds for the bill and serves as a summary of my findings.
Chapter Two

Contemporary education has its roots in the past; finding a suitable beginning point for that past helps provide an educator with perspective. New insights blend with ideas from past traditions, as the history of early childhood education is truly a history of rediscovery. (Gordon & Browne, 2004, p. 6)

Introduction

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was enacted by the United States Congress in 2002 as a vehicle to ensure that all school-aged children will receive a free, quality, public education. One step legislators have taken in an effort to make certain the NCLB’s success is to target at-risk students and hold them to the same academic standards as all other students. As mentioned in Chapter One, today’s at-risk students are basically those that come from racial and ethnic minorities, live in sub-par socio-economic situations, have trouble speaking English, and/or are mentally or physically handicapped—these students are designated as members of subgroups by NCLB (United States Department of Education, 2004; Yell, Drasgow & Lowrey, 2005). Having any or all of these characteristics places a student into a NCLB at-risk category designation. These students—the very ones categorized as “subgroups” by NCLB—are those who have historically performed poorly in scholastic environments (Karp, 2004).

Even though NCLB was enacted as a means to guarantee that at-risk students would receive the same educational opportunities as all other children, most educators believe the opposite will occur because at-risk students are those most likely to fail
standardized proficiency tests. Rhetorically, even the term *subgroup* has serious implications. To refer to students as being “at-risk” is to admit that they might fall behind others. To classify students into “subgroups” indicates that they are in some ways beneath other students, yet under NCLB they are expected to perform as well as those who are not considered as subgroup members.

At-risk students—especially those in racial and ethnic minorities—who currently fall within NCLB subgroup categories have more often than not failed to finish school due to a combination of being denied access, dropping out, or receiving failing grades (Hargis, 1990). Furthermore, despite the fact that the federal government has taken an active role in supporting and to some degree monitoring student progress in the public schools for more than half a century through funding and educational reform legislation, studies show that students’ achievement levels over the past few decades in core subjects have stagnated “despite massive infusions of federal money” (Yell, Drasgow & Lowrey, 2005, p. 131). Thus, the No Child Left Behind Act seeks to correct these problems by forcing schools to take more concerted measures aimed at increasing retention and students’ proficiency levels in the subjects of reading, math, and science (United States Department of Education, 2004). Even though most schools can offer a more varied curriculum, it is in these three areas that NCLB has chosen to set learning goals that individual states and school districts must meet or exceed on annual proficiency tests or risk the loss of federal funding for their schools (United States Department of Education, 2004).

In a further effort to ensure that all students will reach proficiency, the No Child Left Behind Act dictates that all teachers must be highly qualified in the
subjects they teach and has set measures in place to penalize non-compliant schools (United States Department of Education, 2004). These surveillance measures and their ramifications will be discussed more at length throughout this text.

The No Child Left Behind Act is the latest in a series of significant historical documents published in the name of improving the United States public education system. Public education in the United States certainly has a history, but its history has been influenced greatly by extrinsic factors such as politics and economics. Thus, to complete an illuminating analysis of NCLB, one must look at its rhetorical implications alongside its place in history. This is because, as Turner (1998) says, “[S]ocial construction of the past … is guided by and contained in the symbols and system of symbols that give currency to our attitudes, values, beliefs, and actions. Historical research makes sense within the context of that framework” (p. 10). Turner adds that historical artifacts transform in “shape and significance depending on the context in which they are placed” (p. 11). Therefore, in order to look at NCLB in context with its place in history, it is necessary to examine other historical education-related artifacts in comparison to The No Child Left Behind Act.

To begin to set into context the No Child Left Behind Act and its place in rhetorical history, this chapter provides a brief summary of what the No Child Left Behind Act Seeks to accomplish, a more extensive chronological overview of the United States education system, and how race, class, gender, and disability exclusion has a profound effect even on today’s schools. This chapter also summarizes other noteworthy attempts at education reform and the discourses surrounding these reform movements. In addition, it provides a theoretical perspective for a rhetorical analysis
of the No Child Left Behind Act from an historical standpoint. This chapter closes with the identification and discussion of the rationale behind the research questions this dissertation seeks to answer.

The Socio-Political Objectives of NCLB

In light of the evolution of the American educational system and longstanding problems associated with whom is entitled to a free public education, who funds educational costs, how curricula are shaped and enacted, what dictates teacher qualifications, and how student progress is to be assessed, supporters of the No Child Left Behind Act argue that the bill was passed by Congress under the auspice of rectifying the problems that American public schools face today and to set right the wrongs that disadvantaged students have faced for more than two centuries.

The No Child Left Behind Act promises federal funding for research and programs to ensure that schools will offer curricula that best suit students’ needs and learning styles, to hire and train highly qualified teachers, and to provide state-of-the-art facilities (United States Department of Education, 2004). NCLB also proposes to cut unnecessary administrative costs in order to provide more flexible use of funding to meet the needs of individual districts (United States Department of Education, 2002). Few advocates of a free public school education for all students would argue that these measures—if economically feasible—would be detrimental to the overall public education system.

With this in mind, at the time of its passage, the No Child Left Behind Act was hailed by many as “a sweeping, bipartisan overhaul of federal education policy”
The bill was passed because of “low academic achievement exhibited by…many public school students in the United States” (Yell, Drasgow, and Lowrey, 2005, p. 130). NCLB was enacted in an attempt to increase the levels of academic performance of all students seeking a public school education (Mantel, 2005). However, since NCLB was signed into law it has created a hotbed of controversy in the educational world.

In a nutshell, the bill mandates that 98-99% of all students enrolled in public schools in grades three through eight will reach a proficiency level in reading, math, and science by 2014 (Wood, 2004). To track this, report cards showing the progress of each school in each district in each state will be made public on an annual basis. States are required to determine the perceived academic performance of the lowest subgroup of at-risk students or the lowest performing district in the states and set goals toward raising the lowest groups to the point where they reach proficiency levels (“Examining ESEA,” 2002). It is the results produced by these report cards, which will be discussed more at length later, that have caused many schools and states to protest the validity of the No Child Left Behind’s regulations—not only because all students are required to reach proficiency, but also because the definition of proficiency is ambiguous and varies from state to state (Karp, 2004).

Despite the fact that proficiency levels often vary significantly from one state to another, all non-compliant schools will be subjected to the same degree of penalties, which can range from budget cuts and other sanctions that will reduce their annual funding (Darling-Hammond, 2004). In addition to the controversy generated by the severe penalties schools that fail to comply with federal mandates face, another
point of contention that emerges in regard to NCLB is how student progress is to be assessed—which is through scientifically based standardized proficiency testing, and the fact that 98-99% of all students will reach proficiency levels.

The No Child Left Behind Act is not the first attempt by the federal government to help at-risk students. In fact, over the past half century the federal government has provided nearly $400 billion of financial assistance in some form or another for public schools (Yell, Drasgow & Lowrey, 2005). However, prior to NCLB’s intervention efforts toward providing a free, quality public education for all students, most politicians believed that federal spending was “more of a funding stream than it was a program” (Cook, 2005, p. 25). To remedy this, with NCLB’s strict accountability measures, the federal government is taking a strong stance in dictating how schools will be run.

At least on the surface, providing an accelerated and assertive system of intervention to assist at-risk students—possibly more than any other reason—is the driving force behind why the United States government passed NCLB. Given the fact that it has invested a great amount of funding toward educational reform for more than forty years, it is no surprise that the government expects a positive return on its educational expenditures by sanctioning schools that do not meets its requirements. However, NCLB signifies the first time in when surveillance influences the allocation of education dollars, and many educators believe that the penalties imposed under the No Child Left Behind Act are too severe and will be counterproductive.

Because the No Child Left Behind Act demands that all children will receive a quality education, at least on a superficial level the act looks like a positive step for
at-risk students and proponents of equality in regard to public education. However, many educators believe that bringing all at-risk students to proficiency is an insurmountable task because of the limitations many of these students face (Karp, 2004; Wood, 2004). These limitations are not relegated to students with learning and physical disabilities; students from minority groups and poverty backgrounds are already at a disadvantage due to years of being shut out from receiving quality schooling (Freeman, 2005; Furumoto, 2005).

Because of reasons previously mentioned and the fact that NCLB calls for massive gains in a relatively short amount of time, the bill has many detractors. Furthermore, by placing more emphasis on proficiency testing than on subjective assessment methods, Yell, Drasgow, and Lowrey (2005) maintain that “NCLB is moving education away from philosophy and toward science” (p. 138). In fact, the United States Department of Education (2004) states that the No Child Left Behind Act is based solely on a “scientifically based research” (p. 4) curriculum. The science versus philosophy debate has raged for centuries—and has never been more prominent than it is today. In regard to the No Child Left Behind Act, the battle lines are clearly drawn. Proponents of NCLB—most of whom are politicians—staunchly support a scientific-based education. However, most educators, students, and parents fear that using a scientific-based approach as the sole means of assessment is not an accurate way of evaluating student progress (Stiggins, 2001).

As school systems have developed, so has the demand for teachers with more diversity in teaching styles and increased levels of expertise (Sheets, 2003). These changes have gradually taken place for more than two centuries, as the face of
American schools has changed—albeit sometimes very slowly—in order to meet the needs of an ever-growing and changing population. This brings up another point of debate surrounding the No Child Left Behind Act—even though the act demands that all teachers are highly qualified, throughout the country, teacher qualifications and certification requirements vary—sometimes significantly—from one state to another (Yell, Drasgow, and Lowrey, 2005). As a result, most educators argue that NCLB places many schools—especially those located in rural areas and operating on smaller budgets than do those in urban areas—on an uneven playing field because they are unable to attract highly qualified teachers who will opt to teach in schools that pay the highest salaries and are equipped with state-of-the-art technology (Jimerson, 2005; Wood, 2004). Many at-risk students live in rural areas, so they are further disadvantaged when they do not have access to quality schools and qualified teachers.

The Declaration of Independence sought to establish a democratic nation in which all of its citizens enjoyed freedom and equality (Jefferson, 2006). However, history shows that this has never actually come to fruition. If a society were to exist in which its government and people believed that everyone should enjoy freedom and equal treatment, the term “no child left behind” in and of itself should not carry any negative connotations. Even though the bill itself has been widely criticized, the rhetorical message behind the No Child Left Behind Act is that it was conceived in order to educate all students attending public schools.

Today, according to the United States Department of Education, school-aged children are typically expected to complete thirteen years of schooling (grades K-12) in order to graduate with a diploma (Department of Education, 2005). However, it is
only within the past four decades that the majority of school-aged children in the United States has routinely completed a K-12 education (Hlebowitsh, 2001). Thus, the No Child Left Behind Act has far-reaching effects in regard to the educational progress of most schooled-aged children in the United States.

The burden of funding any form of public schooling was left totally independent of federal government intervention by our Founding Fathers. However, the concept of a system of free public education was first discussed among early American settlers and has at least to some extent been in effect in one form or another in the United States since its pre-Revolutionary War period (Mondale, “The Common School,” 2001). That being said, one might wonder why, more than three hundred years after the first public schools began to emerge in America, the federal government would suddenly chose to propose such blockbuster legislation as the No Child Left Behind Act. In the view of many people, NCLB threatens to disrupt the continuity of the entire public education system because at the heart of NCLB is unprecedented accountability demands in the form of rewards and punishment (United States Department of Education, 2004). The rhetorical significance of the act is that it is the first educational reform bill in which receiving or losing education dollars hinges on how well students perform on standardized tests and not on assessments made by teachers.

To analyze the No Child Left Behind Act as both a rhetorical and historical document is a worthy undertaking because it comes at a time when five decades of education reform documents have influenced the day-to-day activities of American schools. Gronbeck (1998) avers that accurately looking at the rhetorical significance
of texts requires the researcher to place documents in an historical and rhetorical context. To accomplish this, it is important to look at the evolution of the United States education system from both perspectives in order to determine why and how students have been “left behind” in each era of the country’s history. After doing this, one can determine if it is reasonable to expect that schools can be brought to the point where they are confidant that no child will be left behind within a relatively short and non-negotiable time constraint.

Gronbeck (1998) maintains that for a comparative analysis of historical events to be rhetorically valid, then “segments of time and space” (p. 51) need to be “bracketed” (p. 51) so that texts that exist within each era can be examined. Even though the focus of this dissertation will look primarily at documents produced during the latter half of the Twentieth Century, it is important to first look at the ways in which United States public education has developed historically in order to place—or to bracket—the discursive relics of the past half century and analyze them within a rhetorical context.

From pre-Revolutionary War times to the middle of the Twentieth Century, male children of wealthy white parents were traditionally given preferential treatment for getting an education, followed by female children of wealthy parents, then other white children. Racial and ethnic minorities, especially blacks, have often been left behind in the educational world (Nichols, 2005). Also, school-aged children with physical and mental disabilities were generally ignored as far as getting an education goes until relatively recent times (Wood, 2004). It would appear that the developers of the No Child Left Behind Act were very much aware of these inequalities when
they drafted the language of the bill, for the very group of at-risk students who are now categorized as subgroup members are those students that were deprived of an education during the formative years—and well beyond—of the United States’ education system. If the most disadvantaged students will truly receive a quality education, then it can be argued that fewer children will be left behind. However, many educators believe that achieving 100% proficiency based on standardized test scores is “a mission impossible” to complete (Haas, Wilson, Cobb, & Rallis, 2005, p. 180).

Education advocates argue that reform is necessary because having the opportunity to receive a free public education has not always been available to all school-aged children living in America, due to the discrimination against minority groups by the predominately wealthy white class of males that have run the country (Willie, 2005). In order to understand the significance and the urgency of the No Child Left Behind Act, one must take a look at the inequities that have plagued the United States educational system from colonial times to the present, and how a free public education system in the United States has evolved over time in regard to funding, teacher qualification requirements, teaching styles, curriculum development, and assessment procedures. Moreover, it is also important to look at the reasons why at-risk students have been discriminated against throughout the history of the United States.

While a body of legislation aimed at equalizing the playing field for all students enrolled in the United States’ public education system has been enacted over the past fifty years, many children today are still not receiving a quality education for
a variety of reasons (Yell, Drasgow, & Lowrey, 2005). Shifts in political agendas driven by technology and concerns about the economy have affected the direction of education reform. How these issues led to the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002 will be discussed throughout this dissertation from both a rhetorical and historical standpoint. The next section examines the evolution of the public education system of the United States from pre-Revolutionary days to the present in order to place the No Child Left Behind Act’s ratification into a historical and rhetorical context.

An Overview of the Historical and Rhetorical Development of American Schools

Just as the United States has historically evolved in different ways according to the development of individual regions and tenuous political climates, so has this country’s education system. Moreover, local, state, and federal political edicts generally have not always been fair to minorities, and this is very evident when one looks at the development of the public education system in the United States. In this section I examine how students, teachers, schools, and assessment procedures were characterized during six distinct phases of American education reform. In addition, this section establishes the rhetorical and historical context of several significant educational artifacts leading to the enactment of the NCLB.

Although significant education reform did not take place on a nationwide basis until the 1950’s, it is still important to look at the overall development of the United States and its educational system in order to better understand the rhetoric of NCLB and other educational reform discourses that began to take effect during the
latter half of the Twentieth Century. Schools of varying degrees of quality and resources have existed in this country since colonial times and the criteria that determined who attended each school hinged upon a student’s place in society during any given period of time. The No Child Left Behind Act seeks to eradicate these displacements. What follows is an overview of the development of the United States public education system, a review of modern educational reform acts, a preview of modern education documents that preceded the No Child Left Behind Act, and the research questions this dissertation seeks to answer.

**Phase One: Education From Pre-colonial Times to the End of the Revolutionary War—Equality, Freedom and Democracy for the Socially and Politically Elite**

*Education in the Northern Colonies*

The concept of a free American public education system began to develop prior to the Revolutionary War in New England by its colonists and in the South by wealthy plantation owners (Hlebowitsh, 2001). However, these schools fell far short of being truly open to the public, and they were by no means free of costs. Nevertheless, the early emphasis of all American schools centered on ensuring that students learned how to read. Roots of NCLB’s goals can be seen in these schools’ curricula and in their educational goals. Even today, reading is an important part of the curriculum and is one of the areas in which NCLB demands proficiency on the part of the student.
The Massachusetts Law of 1642 was drafted with the goal of ensuring that all school-aged children would attend school in order to learn to read and write (Hlebowitsh, 2001). In order to facilitate this, the Massachusetts Law required any town of at least fifty households to establish a school and hire a teacher of writing and reading. However, the law was not effective for a number of reasons. For one, despite the fact that it operated on the premise that all children would receive an education, the underlying objective of the bill was to provide an education for the male children of the wealthy (Mondale, “The Common School,” 2001).

In pre-Revolutionary War America, the male offspring of the wealthy were given preferential treatment toward receiving an education because early church leaders and politicians believed that it was more urgent for men to be able to read the Bible and political documents than it was for women because most church leaders and politicians at that time were males (Morrison, 2003). However, only the large and prosperous towns had a sufficient tax base to provide funding for the teachers’ salaries, facilities, and other school supplies—so many children did not have access to public schools.

In communities where funding was not available, the burden for providing financial support for children’s education rested with the parents (Hlebowitsh, 2001). In poorer communities many families did not have enough money to pay the supplemental fees that would allow their children to attend school, so these children were left out (Mondale, “The Common School,” 2001). The No Child Left Behind Act seeks to provide all students with an education, regardless of their race, gender,
or economic status; but even in today’s schools, low income areas receive the least amount of educational funding (Jimerson, 2005).

As a result of the Massachusetts Law of 1642, early education systems in New England established America’s first schools, but they were loosely organized and varied greatly in size and quality from one community to the next (Gordon & Browne, 2004; Morrison, 2003). Adequate facilities did not exist in most cases and teachers were in rare supply in many poorer communities. When school buildings and teachers were not available (which was often the case), some school-aged children were taught only how to read the Bible in their homes by their parents, while other students received no form of education at all (Mondale, “The Common School,” 2001). Providing quality facilities and qualified teachers is a goal of NCLB.

Standards for teacher qualifications generally did not exist during the colonial period, and often the teacher was simply a literate person who could not find a better paying job (Mondale, “The Common School,” 2001). The main criteria for teachers during pre-Revolutionary times were that they could teach children to read; no formal teacher training was required. Thus, due to a lack of funding and qualified teachers “only the children of the wealthy got a good education in early America” (Kirshenbaum, Simon, & Napier, 1971, p. 49). Thus, during colonial times children living in affluent communities possessed a far greater chance of receiving an education than those who were not white, male, and wealthy (Grieder & Romine, 1955).

At least in theory, however, educational opportunities also were available on a limited basis to white females and any black or other minority children living in
colonial New England towns because even though Puritan Society believed that white females and racial minorities were inferior to white males, the Puritans believed that it was vital that they learned to read and write in order to learn Christianity (Hlebowitsh, 2001). Nevertheless, the discriminatory nature of The Massachusetts Law of 1642 came to light when it called for the establishment of the first high schools in America. The law required that if a town had a population of more than 100 households, a secondary school must also be established. While white females and black children were not necessarily excluded from the primary schools by law, the secondary schools were legally reserved exclusively for males from elite families (Hlebowitsh, 2001). On the surface at least, the No Child Left Behind Act looks beyond color, race, and wealth—and the students’ ability to learn.

**Education in the Early South**

The strong religious creed that New England colonists adhered to was not as prevalent in the southern colonies. Thus, in some ways the face of education in the South during pre-Revolutionary War times was starkly different than that of the one seen by early settlers who lived in the northeast colonies. Nevertheless, the well-to-do plantation owners living in the South took the initiative toward having a hand in their children’s education. Many southerners “imported tutors from England or opened small private schools to teach their sons to read and write” (Gordon & Browne, 2004, p. 14). Southern aristocrats indeed wanted their children to be able to read and write, but the reason was not necessarily religious in nature—affluent southerners promoted the teaching of literacy only because they envisioned their male
children growing up and being political leaders of the United States (Gordon & Browne, 2004).

In America’s infancy most residents of the South did not necessarily oppose educating blacks based solely on their race. Blacks, (along with Native American Indians and other minorities) simply fell in the same social castes as women and poor or disabled whites—their educational needs were largely ignored by the wealthy males (Hlebowitsh, 2001). In fact, in some cases slave owners allowed their black wards to learn basic communication skills because they believed that if the slaves received a limited form of education they would more readily accept their “place in society” (Hlebowitsh, 2001, p. 194). Obviously, society at that time ignored the equality references of the Declaration of Independence.

Even after publicly-funded schools began to emerge in the Post-Revolutionary South, its more elite residents were generally concerned only with educating their own children, and made few provisions for educating the white poor and blacks living in the area because they “were considered too lowly to deserve publicly supported education” (Hlebowitsh, 2001, pp. 187-188). Some schools for blacks and other poor students had been established through private donations, but they were generally understaffed and few in number (Hlebowitsh, 2001). Thus, in the North and in the poorer regions of the South, a need for qualified teachers was evident during America’s infancy even though most children did not regularly attend school.

By the time of the American Revolution the average child in Colonial America received a total of 82 days schooling during his or her lifetime (Mondale, “The Common School,” 2001). This was a positive move toward providing a basis
for modern education mandates, but was a far cry from what the No Child Left Behind Act envisions. Just as had been the case in the North, for many decades into the United States’ existence there were simply not enough public funds available in the southern states to subsidize such a system. Changes began to occur after the United States became an independent country, but for many years they were slow and inconsistent. Even with the next phase of the United States public education history, blacks, women, the poor, and the disabled remained in obscurity in regard to having a chance at a free, quality public education—but a fight was on.

Phase Two: From the End of the War to the Mid-Nineteenth Century—The Muting of the Oppressed, and Their Ongoing Struggle for Freedom and Equality

Once the Revolutionary War ended, the founders of the new nation began to discuss the possibility of establishing a national public education system. In fact, since the newly founded United States of America consisted to a large extent of people whose ancestors had come to this country in order to flee oppression and to establish a government based on freedom and democracy, some believed that the United States would develop “a system of free, common, public school systems, the first the world had seen” (Gordon & Browne, 2004, p. 14). This concept was staunchly supported in the early 1800’s by President Thomas Jefferson, who envisioned a free public education system in which students would learn reading, writing, mathematics, and science (Wood, 2004). Jefferson believed that in order to preserve a democratic government, United States’ citizens needed to be well educated (Mondale, “The Common School,” 2001; Rickover, 1959). This sense of civic
responsibility would be a reoccurring theme among politicians as the United States developed as a nation.

Unfortunately, Jefferson’s ideals were not supported by Congress, which cited that federal funding for schools would place an unfair burden on taxpayers (Morrison, 2003). Thus, Jefferson’s dream was stymied because the framers of the Constitution had made no provisions for a government-sponsored education system, and as a result the federal government largely let states run public schools on their own until well into the Twentieth Century. Consequently, the burden of funding a free public schooling system remained with the states and individual communities (Morrison, 2003). An issue concerning the funding of public schools is at the heart of the No Child Left Behind debate—states expect federal funding to continue but at the same time they want to retain control of their schools, while NCLB demands accountability and proposes penalties for schools that do not produce proficient students.

Despite the fact that a nationwide establishment of public schools did not immediately become widespread even after the United States became an independent country, in the absence of federal support, a curriculum model developed by Benjamin Franklin in the early 1800’s began to gain popularity in many existing and developing schools. Expanding upon the model set forth by Jefferson, the difference in Franklin’s curriculum model and many other early models was that in addition to being taught reading and writing, Franklin believed that students should receive a more rounded education that also included academic subjects such as mathematics, science, philosophy, social sciences, and art. He also believed that students should learn social and vocational skills (Hlebowitsh, 2001). In addition, Franklin’s model
strayed to some extent from early educational practices in that he wanted to make the church and state separate as far as public schooling was concerned (except when religious theory was taught in regard to philosophy).

Much like the supporters of the No Child Left Behind Act, Franklin wanted all children, regardless of gender or race, to have access to a public education (Hlebowitsh, 2001). Although Franklin’s curriculum model was generally well-received among scholars of the day, the rich and powerful white leaders of his time still believed that an education was reserved primarily for their own children. Nevertheless, many of today’s schools’ curricula have been traditionally based on Franklin’s model—but NCLB strays from it with its emphasis solely on math, science, and reading.

Positive breakthroughs in the early part of the Nineteenth Century led America a few steps closer to establishing public schools. During the late 1830’s, “common schools” began to emerge (Morrison, 2003). These schools, developed by Horace Mann, were designed to unify the public education system in the United States by developing a standardized curriculum that would ideally be taught in all schools. Although it did not fully come to fruition, Mann envisioned that his common schools would educate all students, regardless of their race, gender, or socio-economic background (Morrison, 2003).

While racial discrimination kept blacks from attending common schools, these schools did prove to be beneficial to female school-aged children, for according to Morrison (2003) this was the first instance of public school systems welcoming students of each gender with open arms and subjecting them to the same academic
Common schools also served as catalysts to integrating some degree of diversity into the classroom, as they typically accepted the children of the many immigrants from varied ethnic backgrounds that had immigrated to America (Morrison, 2003).

Unfortunately, even though Mann’s schools provided more educational opportunities for a greater number of children, the United States government still refused to provide educational funding for schools (Mondale, “The Common School,” 2001), while states and local governments simply did not have enough tax-paying citizens to fund enough public schools to serve each school-aged student (Mondale, “The Common School,” 2001). Even today, public schools would have difficulty functioning without the supplemental aid that the federal government provides. The fear among poor schools that perform poorly under NCLB guidelines is that if their funding is cut, they will fall even further behind other districts (Jimerson, 2005).

As Mann’s common schools became increasingly popular, the face of teaching began to change during that time period as well. Whereas most teachers in the early years of America were males who had little or no formal training, this trend began to change by the late 1830’s, when women began to enter the teaching profession en masse. In the early years of the United States education system most teachers were males, because they usually symbolized the disciplinary figures that many people believed children needed (Morrison, 2003). However, as the Nineteenth Century progressed, educational experts such as Horace Mann argued that young children needed the nurturing environment that female teachers typically encouraged and facilitated (Morrison, 2003). Regardless as to whom was teaching in the
classroom, it was not until the mid 1830’s that formal teacher education programs were instituted into colleges and universities, beginning with the what came to be known as “normal schools” (Morrison, 2003, p. 333).

Horace Mann, the driving force behind the “common school” system, was instrumental in developing teacher education programs for prospective teachers. Massachusetts took the first step in this process, opening various versions of normal schools geared toward educating prospective teachers (Morrison, 2003). Most students in these schools were females, so not surprisingly, more and more female teachers began to enter the teaching profession than did men throughout the century (Morrison, 2003). However, even with the emergence of Mann’s normal schools for teacher education, the criteria that determined entrance and graduation requirements for students seeking a teaching certificate varied greatly from school to school. For instance, in some normal schools all one needed in order to be admitted as a teaching candidate was an eighth grade education; others required that entering students must hold a high school diploma (Morrison, 2003). At the heart of the controversy surrounding NCLB are the issues of teacher training and qualifications.

Mann’s normal schools required only two years of training for would-be teachers, the equivalent of today’s associates degree (Morrison, 2003). In effect, this meant that a child could enter a public common school at age six, complete the eighth grade by the age of thirteen, complete normal school teachers' training by the age of fifteen, and be certified to teach the next year. In theory, a high school teacher could be as much as two years younger than his or her students. While this scenario might have not been the norm, it does serve as a clear indicator that there was no clear sense
of consistency in determining teacher qualifications. In fact, there is no historic
definition for determining teacher qualifications, for they have varied considerably
from state to state and from region to region since pre-Revolutionary times (Stormer,
1998). The ambiguous definition of teaching requirements causes controversy even
today under NCLB, which demands that teachers are highly qualified in their area of
teaching specialization (Department of Education, 2004) without providing a clear
definition as to what “qualified” means.

Even though individual states and many communities continued to develop
school systems as the United States expanded westward beyond the colonies, another
reason that most school-aged children throughout the first half of the Nineteenth
Century did not receive a free public education was, despite the fact that “public
schools were accepted in principle, in reality no tax basis was established to support
them” (Gordon & Browne, 2004, p. 14) during that phase of America’s history.

However, another reason many children did not attend school during this era
was because their parents required them to stay at home and work in order to help
support the family. The fledgling United States’ education system was supported in
principle by most citizens, but most Nineteenth Century families generally ignored
the importance of their children going to school, because children were typically
required to tend to household and farm chores as a first priority, and were sent to
schools when and only if time permitted (Gordon & Browne, 2004). Despite the
advances brought forth by the common schools, even in the long established school
systems in Massachusetts children attended school for an average of only four months
a year by 1837. Attendance figures were lower in other areas (Mondale, “The Common School,” 2001).

Even while in general more and more students began attending schools and white females were gradually allowed more opportunities to attend public schools as the Nineteenth Century advanced, black children were still ostracized and forbidden to attend the same schools as white children (Mondale, “The Common School,” 2001). Racial discrimination was still in full effect throughout the Nineteenth Century. In fact, most blacks were suppressed even more throughout the 1800’s than they had been in colonial times. Since groups of suppressed people fled Europe in order to begin a new life in America, it is perhaps ironic that blacks and women in general were the two groups that for more than a century suffered the most due to the ratification of the United States Constitution. Whereas white females and black school-aged children had not been necessarily denied the right to an education in pre-Revolutionary times, this scenario changed drastically for the worse as the United States began to develop as a self-governing nation. In fact, these marginalized groups actually held more rights in colonial times than they did after the United States was established as a nation (Kugler, 1987).

As the Industrial Revolution began to eliminate the need for slave labor on plantations, northern politicians began to be more supportive of abolitionists. At the same time, as rumors of a possible Civil War begin to emerge, Southern plantation owners quickly put a halt to any form of education for black children. This was because slave owners feared that allowing slaves to learn to read and write would give them “a sense of empowerment and understanding that would lead to a longing
for freedom and eventual insurrection” (Hlebowitsh, 2001, p. 194). Thus, in the years leading up to and during the Civil War, blacks in the South were denied legal access to any kind of formal education. Slave owners feared that if blacks were taught to read and received training in other academic fields, then they would become educated on political issues and would likely rebel against the plantation owners (Gordon & Browne, 2004). Consequently, plantation owners lobbied politicians to pass “laws prohibiting the teaching of slaves” (Gordon & Browne, 2004, p. 15). Even today, schools in the South have a higher rate of failure by minorities than students from other regions (Mickelson & Southworth; 2005; Palmaffy, 1998).

As the Industrial Revolution made work simpler and boosted the economy in industrial states, black students in the North had more of a degree of freedom than did those living in the South in that they were allowed to attend public schools, albeit that those schools were segregated. In addition, the schools blacks attended were understaffed, under funded, and greatly in need of repair (Mondale, “The Common School,” 2001). In an attempt to rectify this, in 1849 Benjamin Roberts filed suit against the city of Boston, demanding that his daughter—who was black—could enroll in a school closer to their home than the one she attended. In 1850, the courts ruled against Roberts, deciding that the schools indeed had the right to set educational policy; thus, segregation was upheld (Mondale, “The Common School,” 2001). This prejudicial treatment would remain in full force for more than one hundred years. This problem concerning blacks would surface in the next century as well—when the Brown v. Board Supreme Court decision outlawed segregation, many northern states complied with the edict while most southern states simply ignored it (Willie, 2005).
Phase Three: The Latter Half of the Nineteenth Century—One Step Forward and Two Steps Back

Some positive changes in the overall realm of education began to take place during the second half of the Nineteenth Century, but it still mainly benefited white students. While most community leaders wanted the school-aged children of their white taxpaying citizens to attend school in order to become more educated and well-rounded individuals, by 1850 only 13% of school-aged children in the United States actually attended a public school (Hargis, 1990). However, the major influence that the Industrial Revolution had on the increase in public school attendance was that modern machinery made many jobs easier to complete than before. With less manpower needed on the job, the need for child labor dissipated to a large extent around the mid point of the Nineteenth Century (Kugler, 1987). As a result, many parents began allowing their children to attend school for the first time. Moreover, the Industrial Revolution also provided more spending money for families and as a result, a stronger tax base was formed and more tax dollars became available to fund educational costs (Grieder & Romine, 1955).

More overall positive changes began to take place during the latter part of the Nineteenth Century as additional tax money on the state and local level became available to provide educational assistance (Neill, 2004). This was due in large part to the number of European immigrants who had entered the country and had become tax-paying citizens (Mondale, “The Common School,” 2001).
However, increases in educational expenditures did little to help a race of people who had lived in the United States since it became a nation—the blacks. Most immigrants who entered the country were automatically allowed into public schools, but black students were still segregated because of their skin color (Mondale, “The Common School,” 2001). Gilman (2000) explains that “[r]ace is a constructed category of social organization as much as it is a reflection of some aspects of biological reality” (p. 230). Obviously, blacks were categorized as being at the bottom of the social strata despite the fact that they had been born in the United States and immigrants were not. Even though blacks had attained freedom from slavery, they still did not share the same sense of equality as groups of people that had just entered the country.

In addition to the increased tax base, another reason that public school attendance improved was that in light of improving economic conditions, around the middle of the Nineteenth Century most states began passing compulsory school attendance laws (Grieder & Romine, 1955). However, significant increases in the number of students who attended school did not occur immediately. By 1850, the average student was attending school seven months out of the year and students remained in school at least eight years (Mondale, “The Common School,” 2001).

Changes began to become evident over the next twenty years, and by 1870 one out of five children from ages six through fourteen were attending public schools. At this point elementary schools began to expand not only in number of students but by the grade designations of one through eight. In many public schools, children six years of age (or in some cases, older students who started late) began attending first
grade and were promoted to the next grade the following year (Hargis, 1990). Again, these moves toward a modern education system for the most part still favored the wealthy, but seeds for a more integrated education system had been planted.

Even though the tax base increased due to western expansion and a general population increase that resulted in more children attending schools than ever before, another problem remained—there was still a shortage of teachers. The number of qualified teachers simply could not match the growing population of children who attended schools (Mondale, “The Common School,” 2001). With the exception of those operating in larger metropolitan areas, many schools during the late 1800’s and on into the Twentieth Century consisted of having one adult teaching students of all age groups and learning levels together in a single room (Hargis, 1990). This obviously made it difficult for teachers to ensure that students were being taught at their appropriate age and ability levels, and this created a poor educational environment for students and teachers alike (Stephens, 1990). The issue of not having enough qualified teachers is still an issue today, and NCLB attempts to address this. However, teaching all children in the same classroom has drawn a great deal of criticism.

Another change in the classroom population during that era also foreshadowed the modern day classroom—for the first time coeducation began to appear in some communities. Prior to the introduction of common schools, girls and boys were usually educated separately. Morrison (2003) credits the acceptance of a coeducation system due in large part to the fact that many parents wanted their children to feel like they were in a homelike environment, one where males and females interacted.
Another reason that coeducation began to take root was because more and more teachers were females, and parents and students alike were receptive to the fact that the presence of a female teacher provided a nurturing environment in the classroom (Morrison, 2003).

Nevertheless, it took many years for larger urban areas to accept the concept of coeducation because they had traditionally relied solely on male teachers and gender-segregated classrooms. Nevertheless, by the end of the Nineteenth Century, the common school—with its move toward a coeducation system for students along with a large percentage of female classroom teachers—had become the norm throughout most of the country (Morrison, 2003). However, blacks as well as students with disabilities were still kept from attending the same public schools as white students. For disabled students, this exclusion was a matter of inaccessibility; for blacks it was a matter of prejudice. In a democracy that supports freedom and equality, purposeful exclusion of any marginalized group is wrong.

Another significant event that helped shape today’s education system took place a half century after the first appearance of common schools, when during the early 1880’s many kindergartens began to appear across the country. This is noteworthy because a kindergarten is designed for children aged four or five (Gordon & Browne, 2004). This chance for young children to receive an early childhood education was a far cry from the educational depravation many lower-class children just a few decades earlier had suffered when they had been forced to enter the workforce as early as the age of seven (Gordon & Browne, 2004). The establishment of kindergartens, along with the increase in secondary schools as the Twentieth
Century progressed, set the stage for the makeup of today’s public schools. Nevertheless, these advances in education were still reserved primarily for the privileged classes.

Another noteworthy educational event that occurred during the late Nineteenth Century was the emergence of assessment practices, which to that point in history had not been a major point of concern in regard to determining promotion. As far as measuring students’ progress, formal grading did not exist in American schools until around 1850 (Hargis, 1990). As Hargis (1990) points out, grades were not seen as being important because the primary purpose for schools had been to ensure that students would learn how to read and write. Once the student accomplished these basic skills, his or her formal education often came to an end.

While during the first two hundred years of America’s existence students were not given formal grades, two factors spurred the need for a grading system to be developed in United States’ schools, and one was the extension of the other. The first factor was that by late 1800’s, students were routinely moved on to another level of education with each successive school year (Hargis, 1990). Beginning around 1850, however, instead of being socially promoted students were assigned grades to determine whether or not they were ready to move on to the next level (Hargis, 1990). The other issue that brought on a need for the assignment of grades was that more and more students had begun to apply for college after finishing their secondary education; as such, colleges began to demand some form of evidence that students were academically prepared to enroll in college courses (Hargis, 1990).
Thus, by the mid 1850’s most students were assigned grades in one form or another (Hargis, 1990). Since that time the grading process has become a complex, questionable, and ever-evolving assessment procedure (Kohn, 2002; Randinelli, 2003)—and is one of the controversial issues in the No Child Left Behind debate. Charles Hargis (1990), an educational researcher at the University of Tennessee, argues that “[g]rades are an institutional part of American education. Grades are used to divide the curriculum, and a grade is a stage in the curriculum” (p. 3). The grading system established in the mid-Nineteenth Century still exists in most schools today. On this scale “A” means excellent, “B” means good, “C” means average or adequate, “D” means poor, and an “F” signifies failure (Hargis, 1990). The No Child Left Behind Act moves schools away from this traditional form of assessment, as it gauges students’ progress by their standardized proficiency test scores—and many teachers feel like their hands are tied as a result of this (Jehlen, 2006).

Despite the fact that educational opportunities increased throughout the Nineteenth Century for women, the poor, and the scores of European immigrants that came to the United States, equality on the educational front for blacks did not improve significantly even after the Civil War ended. When most school-aged children began to attend schools more frequently during the latter part of the 1800’s and the early part of the 1900’s, blacks were by and large shut out from receiving the same quality education as did white children because black children were for the most part not allowed to attend the more richly funded public schools that many whites attended.
Being deprived of a quality education was just a small part of the continued suppression of blacks after the Civil War ended. Flocks of European immigrants continued to enter the United States on a regular basis, and were for the most part welcomed into American Society (Mondale, “The Common School,” 2001). Thus, it is obvious that the abolition of slavery at the end of the war did not bring an end to white hegemony over blacks in America, especially in the South, where in general blacks living in former slave states continued to be suppressed under what noted black educator W.E.B. DuBois referred to as “The Veil” (62)—an ever present but nearly invisible set of discriminatory rules that kept blacks from standing on an equal footing with whites of all ethnic backgrounds.

Clearly, segregation of schools by race was a staple of the early stages of the United States’ education system, with white children receiving a much higher quality of education because white schools received state funding, which allowed them to hire college-educated teachers. As Bittle (2003) points out, racism “accords power and privilege to ‘whiteness’” (p. 30), and this has been a problem with the United States education system since the country’s beginning. Freeman (2005) says that the No Child Left Behind Act keeps the veil in place by taking an ostensibly colorblind approach to assessing all students—regardless of their backgrounds—solely on the basis of racially-biased standardized test scores.

For many decades the primary form of education post-Civil War black children received came at schools established by former slaves (Gordon & Browne, 2004). Ironically, it was black schools that were among the first to train their own graduates to be teachers, using the logic that graduating students knew and
understood the curriculum and academic needs of incoming students (Gordon & Browne, 2004). The quality of teaching was not the issue in black schools—many black teachers were more qualified to teach than whites. The problem was that these schools received little or no support from state or local governments, so the quality of the school buildings and teaching resources was not up to par with the schools that received funding (Mondale, “The Common School,” 2001).

A further blow was struck against blacks through the *Plessy v. Ferguson* court case when in 1896 the Supreme Court ruled on what came to be known as the “separate but equal doctrine” (Morrison, 2003, p. 281). This decision mandated that blacks and whites were to be treated as equals, but that they would be seen as separate entities in Society. As for school segregation, the “separate but equal doctrine” ruled that students would be segregated as long as all students had the same opportunity for an education. Even though this was not the case, White Society turned a blind eye toward the educational needs of black children (Mondale, “The Common School,” 2001). Separation remained but equality did not happen.

Consequently, in spite of the progress that the nation as a whole made in the area of education, the Nineteenth Century indeed ended on a sour note for minorities. The 1896 *Plessy* decision would push blacks even further away from receiving a chance at a quality education, and this would not begin to change for more than half a century. More than one hundred years after the Declaration of Independence established a democratic government, women and blacks still did not have the freedom to vote, and blacks did not have equal access to quality schools. Freeman (2005) says that “[r]ace is the social expression of power and privilege, and its
mutable nature makes it possible to trace how racial meanings and attitudes undergo successful periods of rearticulation” (p. 190). Further, maintains Freeman (2005), “[W]ithin these twisting currents, it is possible to discern how new configurations take shape in conjunction with alternations of the political economy of American society” (p. 290). To look at the development of the United States education system throughout the Nineteenth Century, it can be seen that some gains were made by all white women and poor white males from low economic backgrounds, but a quality education for blacks was denied by the ruling white class. Even though many changes took place in the United States public education system in the first half of the Twentieth Century, none of them came as a result of federal intervention.

Phase Four: The First Half of the Twentieth Century—Progress for Some; Many Still Left Behind

By the time the Twentieth Century arrived, 50% of school-aged children attended public schools, and the average duration of their attendance was five years (Mondale, “As American as Public School,” 2001). The trend of more and more students attending school and remaining at least through grade eight continued into the Twentieth Century (Kirshenbaum, Simon & Napier, 1971). By 1918, all existing states had passed laws that required students to attend school at least through the eighth grade (Grieder & Romine, 1955). The passage of these compulsory attendance laws seemed to galvanize the development of growth for elementary schools and increased the number of schools and the percentage of children that attended those schools (Hargis, 1990). Population growth and demographic changes in the first part
of the Twentieth Century had a lasting effect on the face of American schools. From the last decade of the Nineteenth Century through the 1930’s, three million immigrant children began to attend American schools, and a lack of space to educate these students became a problem (Mondale, “As American as Public School,” 2001).

Another change that occurred by the second decade of the Twentieth Century was that many students began to continue their education past the eighth grade; by 1910 more than 10,000 public high schools existed within the United States (Hargis, 1990). This was at least in part due to the fact that colleges and universities were beginning to emerge throughout the country and instead of simply preparing to enter the labor force after completing their formal education, many students routinely completed a twelfth grade education in order to meet the rigid admission standards that many colleges and universities required (Hargis, 1990). As these changes slowly came to be, so did the influence of more highly-educated advocates of a free public education who believed that all students should learn from rich curriculum models similar to those developed decades earlier by Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin.

As the Twentieth Century began, John Dewey emerged as America’s first educational reform advocate. His “Progressive Movement” sought in part to create a learning environment that was conducive to helping children learn various academic and social skills that extended beyond reading and writing (Gordon & Browne, 2004). However, Dewey also took the physical and psychological well-being of school-aged children into consideration because he believed that young children should not be forced into the workforce. Instead, Dewey advocated an education system that
allowed students to develop cognitively during their childhood and adolescent years (Gordon & Browne, 2004). This is significant because even as late as 1920, two million school-aged children left the home to work instead of attending school (Mondale, “As American as Public School,” 2001).

Dewey (2004) believed that an effective educational system was one where schools would “focus on the nature of the child” (p. 15). In a document entitled My Pedagogic Creed, written in 1897, Dewey (2004) argued that effective schools must allow children to work together and to form friendships. He also believed that a child-centered curriculum appropriate for the child’s skill and interest level must be put in place so that children could learn through everyday interactions with others. Moreover, Dewey (2004) maintained that families should support their children’s education and form strong relationships with their children’s teachers, and that teachers must teach students social skills as well as academics.

Under Dewey’s system, students were grouped with children of their same age group or learning levels. In addition to learning academics, children were also allowed to interact during class and recess periods in order to develop interpersonal skills (Gordon & Browne, 2004). The teacher’s role in the Dewey system was that of “ongoing support, involvement, and encouragement” (p. 16).

Dewey’s influence on the Progressive Movement was notable because it signified that for the first time in the history of the budding American education system, emphasis was shifted to some extent from what was being taught and what students were expected to learn to looking at how students responded to different learning environments and how this would affect them in the future. This curriculum
model created an educational structure never before experienced by school children in the United States, and it is still present in many schools today (Gordon & Browne, 2004). Moreover, because of the popularity of Dewey’s education theory, states began to allocate more money to build larger school buildings with more classrooms in order to promote a better learning environment for children (Gordon & Browne, 2004). The Progressive Movement was lauded by many educators for bringing forth positive changes in the United States’ public school system at the onset of the Twentieth Century, but this is not the model endorsed by the No Child Left Behind Act.

Once the notion of a free public education became more viable for a greater number of school-aged children by the early 1900’s, many educators began to weigh in with their ideas on curriculum reform. Educational leaders worked toward unifying a curriculum for all public schools, but because not everyone agreed with Dewey’s teaching philosophy, a heated pedagogical debate began in the 1920’s and continues today as part of the rhetoric concerning the No Child Left Behind Act.

Because school-aged children were often expected to enter the workforce immediately after leaving school, Dewey’s theories were not embraced by all parents and educators. Franklin Bobbitt was one of the leaders of the conservative forces that opposed the Progressive Movement. Bobbitt (2004) and others believed that a curriculum should focus on how well children were prepared to meet the demands of life after school. Under NCLB, most of Dewey’s pedagogical creed is bypassed in the name of implementing the form of instruction supported by Bobbitt.
While a majority of educators and parents supported the Dewey system of education and its attention to academic and social skills, Bobbitt and others believed that early childhood education should take a more “scientific approach” (Gordon & Browne, 2004, p. 17), one that focused primarily on academics while leaving the responsibility of the parents to ensure that children developed social skills (Gordon & Browne, 2004). Because of the increasing amount of immigrants entering the country, Bobbitt and his supporters of a conservative approach to education favored a system of education that emphasized teaching the English language and requiring students to embrace patriotism. In effect, many conservative educators in the early Twentieth Centuries used these teaching strategies as a way to “Americanize” immigrants (Mondale, “As American as Public School,” 2001). A similar issue emerges under NCLB, because it requires non-English speaking students to learn the language and many of them fail proficiency tests because they do not have a mastery of English (Finn & Hess, 2004).

The scientific approach to education supported by Bobbitt and others required teachers to look beyond subjective grading procedures, and the concept of intelligence testing was introduced in the early 1900’s. Based on the results of these intelligence tests, students were tracked in college prep, business, and vocational programs (Mondale, “As American as Public Schools,” 2001). This became controversial because many educational experts believed that intelligence testing was biased toward white students who were well-versed in the English language and biased against many of the immigrants who had come to the United States (Mondale,
“As American as Public School,” 2001). The No Child Left Behind has faced criticism for the same reasons (Gutierrez et al, 2002).

Not all educators believed in only one means of teaching and assessment. Patty Smith Hill, a contemporary of Dewey and Bobbitt, led a movement that theorized that educators could use portions of both Dewey’s and Bobbitt’s educational creeds in the classroom (Gordon & Browne, 2004). Hill argued that schools should provide curricula that best suited each student, according to their career goals and their levels of learning ability. This is significant in that modifying a curriculum to suit a student’s needs was the first instance of schools recognizing a need for special education programs in the United States.

Intelligence testing continued into the latter part of the Twentieth Century, despite criticisms that this form of assessment was culturally biased. During the 1940’s, many immigrants attending American public schools were slotted into vocational tracks because they did not fare well on the language sections of intelligence tests (Mondale, “As American as Public School,” 2001). The same can be said for many at-risk students who do not reach proficiency under NCLB’s guidelines (Furumoto, 2005).

Curriculum issues were not the only aspects of public education that saw changes in the first half of the Twentieth Century; teacher qualifications became more rigid as higher salaries and better working conditions led many people into the teaching profession (Grieder & Romine, 1955). Although teachers have served students in the United States since pre-Revolutionary times, historically, the requirements for what qualifies one as a teacher greatly varied during the early years
of America’s history. However, a more unified collegiate system of teacher education began to take shape at the onset of the Twentieth Century. Most teachers were required to hold bachelors degrees, and it was not uncommon for some teachers to hold a Masters degree (Grieder & Romine, 1955). This trend continues today.

Despite all the educational gains the United States experienced during the first half of the century, many of the same inequalities that plagued the early years of American history still existed. Nevertheless, it is true to say that the concept of supporting a free public education system finally began to gain the support of educators, parents, and state governments as the Twentieth Century advanced. By the 1920’s, 17% of all school-aged children graduated from high school (Mondale, “As American as Public School,” 2001). However, being guaranteed the opportunity to receive a free quality public education was still primarily reserved only for white children. Just as had been the case in the early years of United States history, the hegemonic ruling group of wealthy white males and biased politicians continued to deny blacks and other repressed people the right to attain a quality education out of fear that allowing them to be informed on social and political issues would result in these people challenging the established system (Gordon & Browne, 2004).

As the Twentieth Century progressed, it is true that white females routinely attended public schools. However, because the equality provision of the separate but equal doctrine in 1896 was never enforced, black students were still attending under-staffed and under-funded segregated schools as the century reached its midpoint.

Even though black children were permitted to attend schools that received state assistance shortly after the Civil War ended, they were nonetheless forced to
attend poorly funded schools that were segregated from the public schools traditionally attended by whites (Mondale, “As American as Public School,” 2001).

Blacks had achieved a sense of freedom in that they were no longer slaves, and during the second decade of the Twentieth Century they received the right to vote. However, they were far from being equal as far as having access to a quality public education. Slow changes began to take place during the second half of the Twentieth Century, as modern education reform saw its roots take hold.

Phase Five: Contemporary Education Reform—The Federal Government Steps In

The 1950’s was the first decade in what would be a very pivotal half-century of change in the American education system, and it kicked off an era of discourse that can be looked at in its rhetorical and historical relationship to The No Child Left Behind Act. The United States was founded on democracy, freedom, and equality—and these terms began to take on different meanings as various waves of education reform began to cycle through the next few decades.

Public schooling had slowly become the norm for most school-aged children and by the time the 1950’s arrived, teaching had become a very popular profession. By 1951 there were nearly one million teachers in the United States, with women outnumbering men by a seven to two margin (Grieder & Romine, 1955). By that time sixty percent of school-aged children graduated high school, and 30% went on to college (Mondale, “A Struggle for Educational Equality,” 2001). Still, schools remained segregated and black children in particular were not given the same chance at a quality education as children of other races and ethnic backgrounds.
Educational reform was another issue that began to take on more importance during this time period. One very significant event that helped to set the stage for educational reform in the latter part of the Twentieth Century was not done through a piece of enacted legislation but was instead mandated through a Supreme Court decision, which was the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. This court decision outlawed segregation of students based on race and ethnicity, and opened up the door for minorities to begin receiving a higher quality of education (Willie, 2005). It is perhaps ironic that *Brown v. Board of Education* in effect overturned the half-century old 1896 “separate but equal doctrine,” in which the Supreme Court had ruled that blacks were equal to whites from a humanistic standpoint, but not in the eyes of American Society and were thus forced to attend segregated schools (Morrison, 2003, p. 281).

Despite the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, integration was still hampered because many white parents—especially those in the South—contended that they did not want their children attending school with children of other races, and as a result they staged rallies in protest of the decision. Southern politicians listened to them. The issue was that the decision lacked teeth—educational funding still came solely from the states, not the federal government—thus the South generally ignored the Supreme Court ruling and most southern schools remained segregated (Willie, 2005).

Nevertheless, the *Brown* decision held rhetorical significance because, as Willie (2005) maintains, the most important result of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was that it raised awareness of how the hegemonic ruling class of
America had for almost two centuries violated the Declaration of Independence and the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution by denying minorities their civil rights, which included the right to a free quality public education. Willie (2005) argues that while the Declaration proclaimed equality for all, this did not apply to blacks. Many people believe *Brown v. Board of Education* is one of the main events that set the Civil Rights Movement into motion (Willie, 2005). An immediate effect of *Brown v. Board of Education* was that it legally demanded that minorities received a chance to attend schools previously attended only by whites, but enforcing the *Brown* decision was more easily said than done.

In addition to the act of non-compliance by many states toward *Brown*, worldwide events during this era had another significant impact on the United States education system. The rhetoric surrounding educational discourse displayed a marked shift as well. With the onset of the Cold War and the launching of the Soviet rocket *Sputnik*, many politicians feared that the United States was in danger of being overtaken by the Soviet Union in the technological field, which in turn might make the United States susceptible to a Soviet attack (Mondale, “As American as Public School,” 2001). In his book *Education and Freedom*, H. G. Rickover (1959) argued that because of the need to keep up in the technological field, schools must move away from placing an emphasis on a liberal arts education. He contended that "the 'verbal' men are on the way out; the men who can handle the intricate mysteries of complex scientific and engineering projects are on the way in" (p. 19). As a result, the focus of United States schools shifted to a more basic approach to education, one with less emphasis on reading and writing. The rhetorical significance of Rickover’s
(1959) book was that it sent the message that in order to protect democracy and freedom, the only way the United States could keep pace with the Soviets would be if the primary focus of public school curricula shifted to that of math and science and away from the humanities (Mondale, “As American as Public School,” 2001). Thus, gains made toward equality by blacks and other at-risk students were pushed aside in the name of protecting the nation as a whole.

The Brown decision, followed by the publication of Rickover’s (1959) Education and Freedom, seemed to begin a cycle of diametrically opposed changes in education reform that exists even today. The previous half century has seen a series of artifacts that support equality for all students, followed by documents that argue that guaranteeing an education only for the most talented students must take precedence over other issues in order for the United States to preserve freedom. A discussion of these cycles of change will be addressed in more detail as this paper progresses. The ways in which they emerge and disappear in discourse surrounding modern education reform provide the basis for a rhetorical analysis of the No Child Left Behind Act and its contextual home in history.

The looming presence of the Cold War/Red Scare was still on the mind of many Americans as the decade of the 1960’s began. That, coupled with the fact that the Brown court decision had been enacted but not enforced, left the educational status of most black students in no better shape than it had been in the 1800’s. For example, despite the legal weight the Brown decision carried, by 1964 only two percent of schools in southern states were integrated (Mondale, “A Struggle for Educational Equality,” 2001). Nevertheless, changes were on the horizon.
Despite the setbacks black students continued to face as the decade of the 1960’s began, the residual effects of the Brown decision brought on a new era in American schools, one that would focus heavily on education reform funded by the federal government. In fact, the 1960’s brought about rousing changes to all aspects of American Society. The Civil Rights Movement was galvanized and led to more rights for blacks, and the Feminist Movement saw advances never seen before as well. Likewise, significant changes affecting schools came about as a result of federal legislation aimed toward spurring education reform that would provide assistance to at-risk students (Morrison, 2003). This is an important point because historically the responsibility of providing school-aged children with a free public education had been the sole responsibility of state and local governments.

The Civil Rights Movement empowered blacks in many ways—especially at the polls—and politicians finally began to take notice. Thanks in large part to President Lyndon Johnson, who envisioned the United States as becoming a “Great Society” (Frost, 2002), a series of federal educational reform bills were passed beginning at the middle of the decade and continued until the early 1980’s.

Federal education reform under Johnson and his successors Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter was aimed toward helping the disadvantaged. Arguably, it worked—at least to an extent. While only fourteen percent of black students graduated high school in 1950, the number had climbed to more than fifty percent by 1980 (Mondale, “A Struggle for Educational Equality,” 2001). These figures showed progress but still were not up to par with the graduation rates of white students, which was more than eighty percent by the beginning of the 1980’s
(Mondale, “A Struggle for Educational Equality,” 2001). Nevertheless, the educational reform acts of the latter half of the Twentieth Century continued to provide more and more at-risk students (women, blacks and other minorities, the poor, and students with disabilities) with access to a quality education.

To put these reform acts into a better context, what follows is an overview of significant federally mandated educational reform bills that began in the 1960’s and eventually led to the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act.

*Federal Education Reform*

Two significant federal laws were passed during the 1960’s that have come to provide states educational assistance from federal sources. In 1964, the Economic Opportunity Act was enacted to support programs such as Head Start for pre-school-aged children, specifically including those from a low socio-economic status (Morrison, 2003). More significantly, in 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed and provided billions of dollars in an effort to support educational programs for all school-aged children that came from low-income backgrounds (Morrison, 2003). The passage of these bills was significant in that it marked the first time that educational rights for underprivileged children were addressed to a major degree by any government entity.

Another significant aspect of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was that “[f]or the first time as a nation we acknowledged that access alone was not enough. Rather, some children, given the condition of their childhood, would require more help if *access* to schooling was to be translated into *success* at school” (Wood,
It is especially noteworthy to mention that the No Child Left Behind Act was intended to be an extension of Elementary and Secondary Education Act when NCLB was passed in 2002 (Wood, 2004). A cursory look at the primary differences in the two acts are that ESEA provided funding that was to a large degree earmarked to be used at the states’ discretion (Elmore & McLaughlin), while funding under NCLB hinges on high rates of performance by students and schools (United States Department of Education, 2004).

Obviously, the legislators who drafted the No Child Left Behind Act must have believed that ESEA lacked sufficient accountability measures. Most people will agree that simply providing access to an education certainly does not guarantee that students, especially those that have come to be known as subgroup members, will succeed. The ESEA was enacted in order to provide more than just access—the bill was passed in order to assist disadvantaged students and school districts (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988). Therefore, since NCLB is an extension of ESEA, the historical context and the rhetoric surrounding ESEA is worthy of studying when comparing it to NCLB, as well as other educational reform artifacts.

During the 1970’s, more federal acts were passed with the disadvantaged student in mind. The Title IX Act was passed in 1972 in order to provide female students with equal access to all forms of education. When many people think of Title IX, they think of it in relation to equality in sports. However, Title IX was also designed to eliminate gender discrimination in the classroom, which has ultimately come to benefit all female students. For one, this act also sought to eliminate gender-biased textbooks (Mondale, “A Struggle for Educational Equality,” 2001).
In 1975, the Education of Handicapped Bill was approved; this mandated that schools would provide all handicapped children with a free education appropriate “to meet their unique needs” (Morrison, 2003, p. 245). This bill was bolstered in 1979 with the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act, which prohibited any type of discrimination toward a person with a disability, and this applied to children attending public schools (Morrison, 2003). For the first time, students who needed special accommodations for learning were given access to a public education, and 3.7 million children with physical handicaps were enrolled in public schools by 1976 (Mondale, “A Struggle for Educational Equality,” 2001).

In slightly more than two decades, sweeping changes in the American public education system had come about as the result of federal mandates. These changes provided assistance for the poor, people with disabilities, and for minorities. For the first time, a free public education was more readily available for children from backgrounds other than those from the upper and middle class. The No Child Left Behind Act seeks to reinforce and expand upon these acts.

To cap off more than a decade of positive changes in public schools, the United States Department of Education was established in 1979 (Morrison, 2003). Now, for the first time a federal agency existed to govern the United States’ educational system. However, shifts in political administrations beginning in the early 1980’s resulted in no significant educational bills being passed for more than a decade after the establishment of the USDOE (Morrison, 2003). Ronald Reagan was the President of the United States from 1981 to 1989. Lewis (2000) says that Reagan took over the country at a time when “[e]conomic troubles, a series of foreign policy
failures, and corruption in its government had created a national malaise” (p. 312). Thus, Reagan set out with a back to basics approach to setting the country on the right path. Under Reagan and his ultra-conservative administration, education reform geared toward helping the disadvantaged basically came to a halt.

Reagan’s rhetorical stance toward education held that reform bills passed prior to his presidency had hurt the overall education process as a whole (Mondale, “The Bottom Line,” 2001). Reagan asserted that federal expenditures to help victims of “racial segregation, sex discrimination, lack of opportunities for the handicapped…was too much to do in too little time (Mondale, “The Bottom Line,” 2001). Reagan maintained that United States schools had fallen behind those of the rest of the world, and that the United States’ economy had suffered as a result. Lewis (2000) argues that Reagan’s rhetoric was “dangerous because its assertion of permanence assumes both insularity from material conditions and isolation from social commentary” (p. 328). Guthrie and Springer (2004) say that in retrospect, the United States was not subject to the type of peril that Reagan reported; instead, they maintain that the fear tactics used by the Reagan administration were done as a rhetorical device to push his conservative political agenda.

Nevertheless, Reagan’s views were supported by a 1983 report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education entitled A Nation at Risk, which negatively criticized education reform that aided at-risk students. The report cited that lowering standards in order to accommodate at-risk students had caused the public education system to accept mediocrity as an acceptable standard, which in effect had allowed the nation’s economy to go into a state of decay. Reagan argued
that instead of assisting at-risk students, schools should instead increase the degree of competition among students (Mondale, “The Bottom Line,” 2001). In effect, this survival of the fittest mindset would set back at-risk students. Like the Rickover’s (1959) text nearly a quarter of a century earlier, the rhetorical implications of the *A Nation at Risk* (1983) report focused on preserving the stability of the country as a democracy in the name of freedom, instead of considering the well-being and equal treatment of individual students.

Because it was written in response to the socio-political and socio-economical shifts that came about during the 1980’s and influenced school reform, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) is another document, along with *Brown v. Board*, Rickover’s (1959) *Education and Freedom*, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that can be analyzed along with the No Child Child Behind Act in order to show how rhetoric and history work together in interpreting textual commentaries in regard to the state of public education.

After Reagan’s political reign ended, the federal government seemed to take a renewed interest in helping at-risk students (Guthrie, 2003). With the onset of the 1990’s came a new spate of educational reform acts aimed at providing more assistance to the disadvantaged. These acts started under the presidency of George H. Bush and continued during Bill Clinton’s terms.

The first significant reform bill enacted after Reagan left office was the School Dropout and Basic Skills Improvement Act, passed in 1990. The act was designed primarily to motivate inner-city youth—a traditionally at-risk group—to stay in school and learn the basic skills needed to be successful in everyday life. To
facilitate this, federal funding was set aside to establish community centers that provided tutoring help for eligible students. These centers also provided students with vocational guidance in an effort to prepare them for life beyond high school (Morrison, 2003).

In light of the more than 60 million Americans who could not read as the century neared its end (Kozol, 2003), the National Literacy Act was passed in 1991 in an attempt to ensure that all Americans would have the ability to read and speak English by the time they reached adulthood in order to be prepared for the rigors of the workforce (Morrison, 2003). Again, this act was set into place to help minorities and students with learning disabilities to have an opportunity for success after leaving school. The Ready to Learn Act was passed the next year; it was intended to help students who entered schools but were under-prepared to learn the basics (Morrison, 2003). This innovative act used a medium that most school-aged children are familiar with—the television—as a learning tool. Since most school-aged children are accustomed to watching television several hours a day, the Ready to Learn Act set aside funds that provided schools with access to educational programs that could be broadcast in the classroom (Morrison, 2003). The Reading Deficit Elimination Act was also enacted as a means to help students overcome illiteracy (Brabham & Villaume, 2003; Morrison, 2003).

In a further effort to help students from poor socio-economic backgrounds, the Healthy Meals for Children Act was passed in 1996. This act mandated that schools prepared and made available nutritious meals for disadvantaged children who might not receive adequate meals at home (Morrison, 2003). The Healthy Kids Act was
then passed in order to provide health care for children whose parents could not afford it for them (Romund, Farmer, & Tilford, 1997). Most of the education reform bills passed during the 1990’s focused on helping students from poor families. These bills were no doubt enacted with the goal of providing at-risk students the best opportunities possible for achieving the highest levels of academic achievement.

While most educational reform bills were passed primarily to help students from poor economic backgrounds or students from ethnic or racial minority groups, another group of school-aged children have also benefited from federal reform legislation—the physically and mentally disabled. One such educational reform act is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), first ratified in 1990. The original intent of the act was to allow students with disabilities not only to have access to public schools, but to be placed in a classroom for at least part of the school day and being subjected to a “general education curriculum” with a “general education teacher” (Yell, Drasgow & Lowrey, 2005, p. 134). The act was updated in 1997 and then revamped again in 2004 in order to reflect the goals of the No Child Left Behind Act. The most significant change in the 2004 version of IDEA is that for the first time, special education teachers—those who will have a primary responsibility of teaching students designated into subgroups—are required to be certified as being highly qualified specifically to teach within their discipline (Yell, Drasgow & Lowrey, 2005). This fell in line with NCLB in that instead of at-risk students being taught in a special education classroom, the special education student remains in the regular classroom while a special education teacher assists the regular classroom teacher (United States Department of Education, 2004). This creates
controversy because most teachers—special education teachers or otherwise—want their classrooms to themselves (Friere & Macedo, 1999).

Over roughly the past fifty years, and continuing with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002, the federal government has begun to actively get involved in the day-to-day activities of the state run public schools. Beginning with ESEA and continuing with NCLB, the federal government has monitored the progress of school-aged children. Never before, however, has surveillance been used to the extent of the scrutinizing mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Controversy over funding is not new, however. As I will show in more detail in Chapter Four, the states and federal government were at odds over how money from ESEA was to be utilized. However, the educational reform bills passed by the federal government were generally welcomed by all states because it meant that they would receive federal aid toward education, money that would help fund their schools and provide teacher training (Mondale, “The Bottom Line,” 2001). ESEA funding caused a great deal of controversy because the government wanted more accountability as to how the money was spent (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988). Not only does the No Child Left Behind Act require answerability, a reward/punishment system is the driving force behind the act. Thus, this signifies the first instance of schools actually facing penalties if certain benchmarks are not met.

Many changes have taken place since the federal government began supporting education reform. Judging by the graduation rates of today’s students, federal aid has overall seemed to benefits students: in 1950, the average student
attended school nine years, by 1980 that figure rose to 12.5 years and remains constant today (Mondale, “The Bottom Line,” 2001).

Phase Six: From No Child Left Behind and Beyond—Where’s it Going?

By 2002, when the No Child Left Behind Act was passed, an estimated 48 million children attended public schools in the United States (Brunner, 2005). However, the federal government was concerned that access alone was not enough because many students were still not receiving a quality education. In general, students who fared most poorly consisted of the poor, racial and ethnic minorities, and the disabled (Yell, Drasgow, & Lowrey, 2005). Thus, the No Child Left Behind Act was passed in an attempt to make marginalized groups of people reach never before seen proficiency levels.

Obviously, at least in recent times the federal government has given a great deal of thought to providing all of America’s children with a quality education, but not to this point in history has such a controversial bill as the No Child Left Behind Act been enacted. NCLB might well be an extension of some or all of previous reform bills, but despite its good intentions many educators, parents, students, and a growing number of politicians believe it will bring forth negative consequences that will have lasting negative effects on the entire American education process. While most of NCLB’s predecessors were simply enacted to supply federal support aimed at providing minorities and other at-risk groups with a fair chance to receive a free public education, the No Child Left Behind Act is rooted in accountability, and will
ultimately determine the status of the schools in regard to federal funding (Yell, Drasgow & Lowrey, 2005).

The No Child Left Behind Act focuses its commitment on four tenets of responsibility: “stronger accountability for results, increased flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work” (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). States, districts, and schools that show improved achievement will be rewarded with high ratings that will result in increased funding for those systems. States, districts, and schools that do not meet the standards of the NCLB Act will face consequences ranging from loss of funding to fines and other penalties (Darling-Hammond, 2004). The No Child Left Behind Act does not overtly dictate to schools which subjects must be taught, but its emphasis on reading, math, and science has no doubt caused many schools to drastically revamp their curriculum requirements.

Determining how to assess student progress is and has always been a contentious issue. Assessment is indeed at the heart of the No Child Left Behind Act—all children must reach proficiency levels in math, reading, and science or the schools will be penalized and failing students will not be allowed to move on to the next level.

Using standardized proficiency tests as a means of measuring student achievement is not solely a product of the No Child Left Behind Act. Proficiency testing began to become the norm in the 1980’s under Ronald Reagan as an extension of Intelligence Quotient testing made popular during the earlier part of the century. During his presidency, Bill Clinton also believed that standardized proficiency tests
should be used as one means to measure student success (Mondale, “The Bottom Line,” 2001). However, under the No Child Left Behind Act, the scores students receive on standardized proficiency tests are the sole determinants that show not only whether or not the students have succeeded, but whether or not the teachers, school districts, and states have been successful in educating the students. Even though the A through F grading system remains the most common form of assessment even in today’s schools, under NCLB, students’ classroom grades are not a factor in determining whether or not they have achieved success.

A grading system is a way in which teachers can communicate expectations to their students—if the student does not earn a satisfactory grade, then the student fails. While looking at students’ grades does not necessarily reflect their ability to learn, one lasting impact that grading on an A through F scale has had in the realm of education is that students who consistently receive D’s and F’s are classified as needing remedial education. Furthermore, students that have traditionally received low grades have usually been marked for failure by their schools and by Society (Hargis, 1990). The No Child Left Behind Act seeks to remedy this by ranking schools, not students, from highest to lowest. Under NCLB guidelines, according to Morrison (2003), it is the teacher who has failed if the student does not pass proficiency exams.

Summary
The roots of federally sanctioned education reform started in the United States in the 1950’s, and the No Child Left Behind Act was passed in 2002 because Congress believed that not enough was being done to make sure that all students reached acceptable levels of proficiency. However, since then many problems have emerged in regard to how NCLB addresses funding, curriculum issues, methods of teaching, teacher qualifications, as and setting proficiency goals. Literally, the bill’s purpose is to leave no child behind in a world where having a quality education is vital. The bottom line is that NCLB requires nearly all students to reach 100% proficiency levels in math, reading, and science. Despite, or perhaps because of this, the No Child Left Behind Act is arguably the most controversial legislative reform act that educators, parents, students, and politicians have ever faced.

Many people believe that it is unrealistic to expect that all students, regardless of their economic backgrounds and cognitive or physical abilities, can reach a one hundred percent proficiency level in reading, math, and science by the 2013-2014 school year (Yell, Drasgow & Lowrey, 2005). Another point of contention is that the No Child Left Behind is concerned with only one form of assessment measurement. This causes dissonance among teachers, parents, and educators when the traditional subjective form of measurement is replaced altogether by the scientific model. Other reform bills have placed expectations on school districts in regard to how funding is utilized, but none have approached the magnitude of the No Child Left Behind Act.

As early as 1642, with the passage of the Massachusetts Law, at least on paper the educational needs of all school-aged children were taken into consideration and that all children should be granted the opportunity to attend quality schools. The
United States has expanded and developed from an industrial and technological perspective as the years have passed, but the public education system has not followed the same logical progression.

Until the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, individual states, districts, and communities collectively dictated how schools were to be run, and the ways in which schools are run has been greatly influenced not by an historical progression, but by a flux in socio-political climates, economics, and power shifts. This trend is reified through the passage and enactment of the NCLB. Defining what constitutes “normalcy” and using power in the form of federal funding to surveil and enforce standards of normalcy is a primary objective of the NCLB. As such, the discourse preceding and surrounding the NCLB is ripe for critical analysis that explores the ways in which teaching, learning, and public educational policy is constituted.

Because the NCLB is built around a discursive system defining “normal” learning as well as a complex system for observing and enforcing normalcy, the perspective of a rhetorical and historical analysis as the primary theoretical backdrop for this project.

Theoretical Perspectives for Rhetorical Analysis

Eliminating ineffective education systems and looking for a rational way of finding knowledge and truth all lie within the debate concerning the No Child Left Behind Act. According to C. G. Prado (2000), knowledge comes forth as the result of “social and discursive relations and practices” (p. 10). The rhetoric surrounding the debate over best educational practices has certainly evolved and changed during the last three hundred years, and especially in the last half century.
The history of the United States education system shows a constant debate concerning the relationship between those in power and those seeking to attain knowledge through education. While previous reform bills sought to provide educational assistance to at-risk students, the No Child Left Behind Act seeks to restructure the United States education system by requiring all students to reach levels of proficiency at levels never before seen.

According to Prado (2000), exploring historicism “subordinates truth and knowledge to history. It makes truth, knowledge, and rationality itself what our time and culture deem them to be” (p. 18). The American educational system can be seen through this lens as well. Prado (2000) maintains that historical events are defined by “social, disciplinary, and political groups” (p. 18). To look at discursive documents in regard to education in this light can help us to understand the rhetoric behind each text, and it allows texts to be compared. Gronbeck (1998) says that “events of the past, once positioned in a narrative, can be used to argue outside the narrative as evidence for some social or moral lesson” (p. 53). From a communication standpoint, this is where combining history and rhetoric come into play. Turner (1998) maintains that a rhetorical analysis of artifacts allows us to look at not only the products, but the processes as well. Thus, to look rhetorically at previous key historical documents in regard to education can help us understand their influence on NCLB.

Prado (2000) argues that “[t]he contrast is one between those who conceive of themselves as employing a methodology governed by objective standards, and someone who considers appeals to objective standards to be constitutive moves in the production of norm-setting practices” (p. 19). Gronbeck (1998) says that we must
frame specific periods of time for comparative analyses of events, or in this case, of historical documents. The reason I have selected documents from the last half of the Twentieth Century is because it is within this timeframe when educational reform began in earnest. However, at the same time world events, economics, and shifts in political administrations have resulted in the publication of documents that both argued in favor for and against educational reform to help at-risk students. Thus, these documents must also be looked at critically. It is the struggle between facilitating equality through reform and preserving democracy and freedom by putting reform to help at-risk students on hold that has enmeshed its way through the last fifty years of American history.

To look at educational documents from both a rhetorical perspective is viable because to do so is to analyze an “accumulation of factors with no inherent interrelatedness” (Prado, 2000, p. 37). Michel Foucault (1998) maintains that in a democracy the government will always hold some degree of power over its populace, but that the degree of power a government wields depends on how much the government needs to assert power in order to survive. This is a key point in regard to United States education reform, for H.G. Rickover’s (1959) Education and Freedom and the A Nation at Risk (1983) report are two key documents that were published in order to convince the population that equality in education must take a back seat to survival and preservation of democracy and freedom.

Foucault (2000) believes that in order to get an accurate picture of the relationship between the government and its citizens, one must first look at the reason for a government’s existence, which he says is due to three factors: that the
government must make the people conform to a set of rules; that the government
lessens or increases its degree of hegemony over the population as situations warrant;
and that individuals are only useful to the government insofar as they are used “for
the reinforcement of the state’s strength” (p. 409). This is relevant not only to an
analysis of NCLB, but also when looking at the Brown v. Board decision, Rickover’s
(1959) Education and Freedom, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and
the A Nation at Risk (1983) report. The degree to which the government exerted or
withheld power has differed depending on the socio-economic and socio-political
climates in which each artifact was created.

Until the latter half of the Twentieth Century the American education system
was developed both by those in power and by those struggling to gain equality. From
the 1950’s on the federal government began using its power to shape the face of
education, but the political climate of each era since then has affected which students
were to be assisted and to what degree. For example, pressure from the NAACP
brought forth the Brown decision in 1954. Then, Rickover’s (1959) Education and
Freedom was published later in the decade at a time when the United States was in a
technological race with the Soviet Union. The focus of education shifted from the
government helping schools to the schools helping the government by producing
students with a strong math and science background.

Political parties hold to strong traditions that are rooted in historical concepts
of power and knowledge (Besler, 1995; McDonnell, 2005). One could make the
argument that shifts in political agendas in regard to the presidency and Congress has
a profound effect on which students will receive access to a quality education. ESEA
came about as part of Democrat Lyndon Johnson’s vision of a Great Society, where all people would reach prosperity (Frost, 2002). Conservative Republican Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, and despite two previous decades of educational reform bills aimed to help the oppressed, Reagan argued that because the United States had fallen behind other worldwide education systems that perhaps too much educational reform had been enacted to help minorities (Mondale, “The Bottom Line,” 2001). The *At Nation at Risk* (1983) report surfaced during Reagan’s presidency, and once again the focus of education shifted away from the at-risk student to a survival-of-the-fittest scenario. When Reagan left office he was followed by the more moderate George H. Bush, and the government once again began to support education bills primarily enacted to help at-risk students, which under NCLB are known as subgroup members.

While the term *subgroup* is a relatively new one, at-risk students who are now classified into subgroups have existed in America since pre-Revolutionary times. What has benefited those in power has traditionally not benefited those without power. Foucault (1998) asserts that people who for various reasons suffer from having a lack of power exist in what he calls heterotopias. Generally speaking, *heterotopia* is the opposite of *utopia*. For Foucault (1998), the heterotopia is mirror image of utopia—whenever a group of people exist in an ideal situation, there is concurrently a group or groups of people who languish in poverty, deprivation, and obscurity. Foucault (1998) equates living in a heterotopia to looking into a mirror. When one looks into a mirror, she or he sees an image, but cannot touch that image or enter into the area that the image depicts. Once one touches the mirror—or the
barrier between the person and the image the person sees in the mirror—the obstacle becomes evident. This aptly describes the plight of those students—especially blacks—who have been historically denied a quality education; they knew that quality schools existed, but they were not allowed to enter them.

George Morrison (2003), an education professor at the University of North Texas, states that providing a free public education for all children “is a powerful theme in American educational history” (p. 324). However, this has still not become a total reality. As I have discussed throughout this chapter, the makeup of America’s schools has changed dramatically since the times of early settlers. Thus, just as it is not fair to say that there is an accurate history of the United States itself—or any other country for that matter—it is also impossible to say that there is one definitive “history” of the United States’ education system. Therefore, it is important to examine the relationship between the changes in education practices and changes in American Society.

In its relatively brief history, the United States has been a country where hegemony has been primarily relegated solely to affluent white males, while women, the poor, and members of other racial and ethnic groups have had to fight over time to gain civil liberties. These struggles were not easily accomplished, nor did they happen overnight or over a matter of decades, for that matter. This is because heterotopias change and evolve over time. To understand the relationship between heterotopias and public schooling, it is necessary for one to take a look at various histories of the United States’ education system from colonial times to the present.
According to Foucault (1998), “The problem of place or emplacement is posed in terms of demography” (p. 176). In an educational context, until reform movements began in the 1950’s, suppressed classes of people had little or no access to a public education. The difference between getting a quality education and not getting one has traditionally been divided along demographic lines—the wealthy have usually received at least access to a good education; all others have not. The plight of the black student exemplifies Foucault’s (1998) notion of heterotopia. Blacks have lived in the United States nearly as long as whites; however, they were either not allowed access to schools, or were forced to attend poorly funded schools until relatively recent times. This also applies to other minorities as well, along with disabled students. Blacks and other students that are currently classified as subgroups members were relegated to heterotopias until educational reform bills slowly opened the door for them to attend better-funded schools. This is because the hegemonic privileges whites held since colonial times were not successfully challenged until the 1950’s.

In regard to public education, an ideal situation for a school-aged child is to have the opportunity to attain a high quality of learning by attending a well-funded public school staffed with qualified teachers. However, this has by tradition not been the case in American schools. Speaking on the roles of societies in general, Foucault (1998) states, “We are in an age when space is presented to us in the form of relations of emplacement” (p. 177). Foucault (1998) asserts that those who live simultaneously with those in power are relegated to “forbidden places” (p. 179), places reserved for the suppressed—places where those in power could go but had no reason to. These
are heterotopias. The can be said of the suppressed prior to educational reform—most at-risk students wanted to attend quality schools but were forbidden to do so.

Prado (2000) believes that “[h]istorians record sequences of occurrences that power relations determine to be significant” (p. 21). Clark and McKerrow (1998) make the point that to look at historical events from a revisionist’s standpoint “is proof of history’s socially constructed meaning and its fluidity” (p. 33). One could look at the evolution of the United States education system and see that historically many groups have been marginalized and suppressed due to the hierarchal powers that have governed the process.

When history is retold to show that from a humanistic standpoint that marginalized groups did indeed deserve the same chance for an education that those in power did, then the rationale behind educational reform emerges. For instance, in retrospect it would be difficult to make the argument that in a nation whose Declaration of Independence is based on equality that only a select group of children would have been allowed access to a quality education for almost two centuries into that nation’s existence. Along the same lines, it is evident that extrinsic factors have greatly influenced educational reform. Thus, even though on the surface the No Child Left Behind Act is a natural extension of previous reform acts, the issue is in fact much more complex. The issue of “why?” or “why now?” must be addressed when making a rhetorical analysis of the act.

When one looks at the evolution of America’s schools, it is often done in regard to the gains these schools have made in providing an education for all students. To evaluate the impact of these gains, one must at the same time realize that from
colonial times to well into the Twentieth Century, children from wealthy backgrounds gained the most in the educational sphere. Since the 1950’s, suppressed groups are those have come to benefit from some educational gains. However, groups of at-risk students certainly did not suddenly emerge in the mainstream of American education—prior to being provided with a chance for a quality education, they languished in obscurity as the result of being shunned by hegemonic classes.

Socio-political climates have always shaped the passage and enforcement of educational reform laws. This is very evident in the way the No Child Left Behind Act is viewed by the public, by educators, and by politicians; however, it cannot be contextualized unless it is discussed in comparison with other educational discourse. Clark and McKerrow argue that “[t]he purpose of history is to connect with the past” (p. 35) because “history is inescapably a rhetorical re-presentation” of past events (p. 35). Similarly, looking at how discursive educational artifacts from the past have influenced the passage of NCLB is vital to contextualizing the No Child Left Behind Act itself.

Another issue in regard to the No Child Left Behind Act, as well as other documents that have historically dictated public policy in regard to education, is that the ways in which politicians want schools to function do not always equate with how educators want to run their schools. Most people would argue—and be correct in doing so—that the public school system in general has come a long way since colonial times; however, Society and politics also determine which students will be given access to a quality education. By mandating that at-risk students reach proficiency, NCLB proponents will argue that with its passage educational equity will
finally become reality as the result of sustained efforts at a educational reform bill enacted as an all-encompassing fix to the country’s education problems. It is a prime objective of this dissertation to determine whether or not this is a justifiable claim.

Gronbeck (1998) makes the argument that while historical events must be placed in a logical timeframe in order for worthwhile rhetorical analysis to be conducted, there must also be a causal connection between events in order to make this analysis justifiable. From a rhetorical perspective the No Child Left Behind Act is both an extension of and a break from various discourses produced during different socio-political eras since federal educational reform began, but even with the dissimilarities there is still a significant connection among the acts, which makes a rhetorical study such as this one worthwhile.

The *Brown v. Board Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954 came about primarily as the result of blacks gaining political clout (Willie, 2005), while H. G. Rickover’s (1959) *Education and Freedom* was written at a time when many government officials believed that the United States education system needed to be revamped in order to keep with the technological advances of the Soviet Union. These documents were published within five years of each other but carried diametric rhetorical implications because the socio-political climate of the nation was in a state of flux at the time each was written. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act can be seen in relation to the *Brown* decision, in that it was passed at a time when the Civil Rights Movement was in full force and President Lyndon Johnson was preaching the rhetoric of America becoming a Great Society (Foster, 2002). The *A Nation at Risk* (1983) report was somewhat similar to the Rickover (1959) text; *A
*Nation at Risk* (1983) was written at a time when the United States economy was feared to be in decline; consequently, the report argued that the focus of education should be geared toward keeping American’s competitive in the workforce, and not to mandating that every student received a quality education.

Shifts in political power have a profound effect on how Society views the roles of public schools (Besler, 1995; McDonnell, 2005). The No Child Left Behind Act was passed under a Republican presidency and Congress, but its potential ramifications are more far-reaching than any other discursive artifacts published to date in regard to education reform. Whereas the *Brown* decision, Rickover’s (1959) *Education and Freedom*, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and *A Nation at Risk* (1983) mandated the need for changes in public policy, NCLB is predicated on government spending and centers on a system of rewards and punishments. An examination of these issues in a rhetorical and historical context will be examined herein.

Because of all the positive changes that have come to light as a result of education reform, some might argue that NCLB is simply a natural progression of an ever-advancing public education system. However, from a standpoint of looking at history through a rhetorical lens, the socio-political climates of any given era greatly impact their influence on the American public school system; as such, to understand the impact of NCLB it is exigent that the act is looked at in regard to how it compares and contrasts to other significant modern educational reform artifacts I have discussed briefly to this point.
In order to better understand the implications of the No Child Left Behind Act, this study conducts a rhetorical analysis of NCLB in context with key educational documents that helped shaped the nation’s views on education during the past half century by looking at these documents from a rhetorical and historical perspective.

Federally mandated educational reform has been an issue for nearly a half century, yet the extent to which the federal government assists at-risk students is determined by extrinsic factors based on the economy and world events. Despite the influx of federal dollars into the educational system, the ways in which federal funding has been utilized in public schools has historically been determined by politics through written and spoken discourse. The rhetoric surrounding these educational artifacts has clearly shaped public opinion as to how educational dollars should be spent.

NCLB opponents argue that the act is actually detrimental to at-risk students, maintaining that it will be difficult for them to succeed in regular classrooms not only because of physical and mental limitations they face, but because many of them come from poverty, live in poor school districts, or do not have a mastery of the English language. Moreover, most education experts argue that the targeted subjects (reading, math, and science) are not the only ones that should receive emphasis when determining student success rates. Furthermore, many educators believe that proficiency testing is not the best way to measure student success.

NCLB is rooted in a reward and punishment system monitored by the federal government, while individual states are left with the responsibility of determining the
best ways to bring students to proficiency according to government mandated testing measures. Recurring themes that emerge in educational discourse center on words such as _freedom, democracy, and equality_—words that are at the core of the Declaration of Independence. An examination of educational artifacts will show that these words have taken on different rhetorical meanings to reflect changes in the economy, world events, and political attitudes. As Foucault (1998) points out, in any historic era there is an ongoing struggle between hegemonic and subaltern classes, and the roles of these classes also undergo modifications that are shaped by the aforementioned extrinsic factors. Foucault (1998) states that “[i]n a course of its history a society can make a heterotopia that exists and has not ceased to exist operate in a very different way; in fact, each heterotopia has a precise and specific operation within the society” (p. 180).

Political rhetoric shapes how a society views various classes of people. At times, a society seeks to aid the opposed, while at other times a society turns its back on the oppressed in the name of preserving freedom and democracy. In all cases at-risk students remain in heterotopias, regardless as to whether they have access to public education. This is because simply allowing at-risk students to have access to schools does not remove them from a non-utopian state. Even when education reform is slated to benefit at-risk students, they remain decades behind more privileged students and have difficulty catching up. The act of allowing at-risk students to attend public schools and placing them in the same classrooms with all other students does not automatically elevate them to the same level for attaining academic success.
as the students who have traditionally been eligible to receive a high quality of education.

To understand the significance of socio-political changes and how they influence the United States public education system in light of how freedom, democracy, and equality is defined in a given era, it is important to look at the rhetorical implications of an act that vows to leave no child behind while ignoring all the extrinsic roadblocks that at-risk students face.

In light of the issues and problems identified to this point, the research and analysis found in the following chapters addresses the five research questions below.

Research Questions

RQ1: In light of shifts in the economy, world events, and changing political regimes how has discourse surrounding the No Child Left Behind Act attempted to change public policy?

RQ2: In regard to a reward and punishment system, how effective is the No Child Left Behind Act’s and other education reformation movements’ use of surveillance affecting the students’ abilities to learn and the teachers’ abilities to teach? What are the ramifications of students failing to live up to the surveillance culture? What is the rhetorical message the government is sending by taking control of public schools but placing the burden on reaching NCLB’s goals on individual states and districts?

RQ3: What rhetorical, socio-political, and historical meanings are attributed to the relationship between education and democracy by discourses surrounding the No Child Left Behind Act?
RQ4: What rhetorical, socio-political, and historical meanings are attributed to the relationship between education and freedom by discourses surrounding the No Child Left Behind Act?

RQ5: What rhetorical, socio-political, and historical meanings are attributed to the relationship between education and equality by discourses surrounding the No Child Left Behind Act?

This chapter has identified a number of contentious issues surrounding the No Child Left Behind Act: subgroup designations, funding concerns, curriculum issues and teacher qualifications, the assessment process, and rewards and punishments. It has also provided an historic overview of how American schools have evolved in regard to student demographics, reform legislation, curriculum development, teacher education, and assessment. This chapter also shows how rhetoric and history can be looked at as interrelated mechanisms for interpreting discursive acts—this will be the theoretical approach this dissertation will follow.

Chapter Three presents various viewpoints on what educational experts hold in regard to public education, Chapter Four looks at how Brown v. Board Board of Education, Rickover’s (1959) Education and Freedom, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and A Nation at Risk (1983) lead up to the No Child Left Behind Act and its rhetorical and historical context. Chapter Five examines NCLB from a political and educational standpoint showing why politicians and educators are at odds in regard to the act. Chapter Six presents an in-depth analysis of what the No Child Left Behind Act has done and what its future holds as it addresses the research questions. The chapter concludes with a summary and analysis of my research.
Chapter Three

Whose school is it? The answer is obvious: the school belongs to society. Yet society is not a single, simple entity. The social order is a product of history, of man’s adaptations to changing situations, and of the interaction of different civilizations and cultures. Parents, teachers, and children are all products of their period. The school is intimately bound up with the course of national history. Revolutions are never born in the schoolroom, but the schoolroom inevitably reflects revolutions, but often too late and with too little awareness of the forces at work. (Grambs, 1965, p. 12)

Introduction

The United States was instituted as a democracy that promised freedom and equality for all. However, this concept of freedom and equality has not come to be and in truth for almost two centuries only middle to upper classes of whites have been guaranteed the type of freedom and democracy that the Declaration of Independence assured everyone. Women, blacks and other racial minorities, the poor, and the disabled were relegated by American Society to what Foucault (1998) called heterotopias. Heterotopias come to be when powerful groups exert hegemony over others (Foucault, 1998). As for wealthy white males, this sense of superiority did not come about solely as a result of the American Revolution, but since the United States became a sovereign nation white American males have nonetheless traditionally taken “their own whiteness and maleness, together with American authenticity, as unmarked, neutral positions of superior reason” (Clark, 2000, p. 4). Although
education reform has helped repressed groups to see more equality in the educational world, white hegemony remains very much intact today (Freeman, 2005).

Despite the fact that American Society has traditionally allowed discrimination against certain groups of people, most educators from as far back as Thomas Jefferson have argued that all children deserve the right to a free public education. Educators are members of a society, but they do not always have a profound influence on how a society views education. Politics, on the other hand, is the driving force behind how a society views the world, and politics plays a large role in how a society views the public education system (Besler, 1995; McDonnell, 2005). Despite the shifts in political regimes that cause American Society to vacillate on what it believes the roles of public schools should be, most educators approach the role of the school as being one that provides the best education possible for its children.

While the states welcome federal dollars, they do not welcome federal intervention in regard to how the states run schools (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988). The issue remains today as the federal government does intend to intervene with the day-to-day functions of local school districts in the name of ensuring that at-risk students are being served. Even before the federal government infused massive amounts of money into state and local schools, educators were concerned whether or not the government could “grant aid without exercising control” (Grieder & Romine, 1955). While surveillance measures took root with ESEA Title I funds, prior to the passage of NCLB no federal bill has carried such severe levels of punishment for non-compliance as schools today see under the No Child Left Behind Act.
Despite the pressure to live up to NCLB guidelines, modern educators hold firm to their opinions as to how schools should be run in the best interest of the students, even if their hands are tied in regard to reaching these goals. This purpose of this chapter is to look beyond politics and hegemony and examine what modern educators say in regard to the role of the teachers, students, and schools in the public school system. It also examines issues of curriculum, assessment, and learning styles—especially in regard to how at-risk students should be educated.

Children and Education

The right to receive an education has an historic precedent rooted in exclusivity. In Ancient Greece and Rome for example, philosophers such as Plato (Flinders and Thornton, 2004), Aristotle, and Isocrates provided a select group of young people—mostly males—with an education (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990). As the United States was in its formative years, this same sense of privilege for the elite existed within America’s schools, even though the country’s foundation was based on freedom, democracy, and equality. Nevertheless, blacks, other racial and ethnic minorities, women, the poor, and disabled school-aged children were for the most part relegated to heterotopias in regard to their roles in most aspects of American Society, including the right to attend public schools. This was the case until recent years when educational reform opened the door for most of America’s children to at least have access to a free public education.

In regard to the societal roles of disadvantaged people, Foucault (1998) contends that “[h]eterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that
isolates them and makes them penetrable at the same time” (p. 183). Blacks and economically disadvantaged students are joined by other students from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds who have difficulty speaking the English language and/or adapting to American Culture in being classified as NCLB subgroup members. These students have penetrated the public school system but in many ways they remain isolated if they cannot learn to speak the language or acclimatize to American Society. Despite potential roadblocks that these students—as well as developmentally and physically handicapped students—face, under NCLB these students must reach proficiency in math, reading, and science; as such, it is a duty of each state, district, and teacher to ensure that all this happens.

Given that an across the board free public education has not historically been available for all school-aged children in the United States, the adage “better late than never” might aptly apply to the federal government’s most recent attempt—the No Child Left Behind Act—to presumably rectify inequalities that have arisen throughout the slow and uneven development of the United States’ public school system. However, in order to help all students receive a quality education many experts in the field believe that the students’ individual needs must first be addressed.

How Do Schools Reach At-Risk Students?

As previously mentioned, at-risk students, or students NCLB classifies as “subgroups,” are primarily those who have been suppressed either because of their race, ethnicity, gender, lack of wealth, or ability to learn. These students have been traditionally relegated to heterotopias and left behind in the world of education.
According to Foucault (1998), people can escape heterotopias in a number of ways. Sometimes people escape through protest; sometimes power shifts make the weak stronger. It was only after women and blacks worked together for more than a century that they achieved the right to vote and began to turn the heads of those in political power (Kugler, 1987; Wertheimer, 1984). Women increasingly gained rights through the efforts of the Women’s Movement (Kugler, 1987), while the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was established by the 1930’s in effort to promote civil rights for blacks (Hall, 2005). As a result of their clout at the polls, blacks were finally able to lobby states for school reform.

However, on occasion people can falsely believe that they have escaped a suppressed state, only to learn that they have not. Foucault (1998) says that sometimes when people think that they have escaped a heterotopia, they find themselves to be the victims of “curious exclusions” (p. 185). This happens when people think they have been given free access to a place, but “by the very fact of entering, one is excluded” (p. 185). The No Child Left Behind Act, in some ways, does this to at-risk students by making them responsible for reaching the same level of proficiency other students, even though at-risk students are those whom have typically had difficulty in learning (Freeman, 2005).

Most educators believe that instead of expecting all students to fit into a cookie cutter mold, students’ backgrounds and learning styles should be taken into consideration (Jehlen, 2006). Well-known and respected educator Henri Giroux’s (1988) pedagogical approach is one where teachers look deep into a student’s cultural...
background in order to determine if the student understands what is being taught. He says that miscommunication is often misinterpreted as a student not grasping concepts or not having a desire to learn.

Obviously, all students have varying degrees of academic potential, and students may have problems adapting to a new culture—especially in mastering the English language, while others feel suppressed because of the socio-economic backgrounds from which they come. In other cases, students with mental disorders have problems processing information, while students with physical disabilities face limitations on a number of levels (Yell, Drasgow, and Lowrey, 2005). When these things happen, even though the students are physically in the classroom, they still face setbacks in regard to learning.

Foucault (1998) states that in some instances people can be physically in the same proximity as others but because of cultural or social disparities one group of people will have a much different experience than others. Today, under NCLB at-risk students are delegated into subgroups based on their social backgrounds for the purpose of evaluating their educational progress, yet they are held to the same standards as all other students. Therefore, the subgroup itself is a heterotopia. Foucault (1998) argues that because the oppressed exist in heterotopias, by doing so they have to “submit to rituals and purifications” (p. 183). In a sense, educational reform has been a catalyst toward doing just this, in that it has allowed marginalized students access to a public education. The No Child Left Behind Act seeks to expand on this by bringing all students together in a shared learning environment. However, many parents, teachers, and students resent lumping all students together and feel that
this act is actually a vehicle “to control the lives of persons with (and without)
disabilities” (Bejoian & Reid, 2005, p. 220, parentheses in original).

Many educators oppose holding those students designated as being at-risk to
the same standards as all other students. Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) argue that the
American education system should serve as a medium that enables people from
marginalized cultures and poor economic backgrounds to earn diplomas and enter the
workforce or go on to college and get degrees as professionals so they can have better
lives than their forefathers did. By doing this, these students could finally escape
poverty. Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) maintain that ensuring that students achieve
success should be the backbone of American educational ideology. They cite that
many students—especially minorities—are deficient in various academics skills;
therefore, they believe that curricula should be geared toward helping these students
gain the necessary knowledge in order to succeed. This goes in opposition to the
rigid curriculum demands of NCLB.

Foucault (1998) maintains that a problem arises when people do not take into
account the nature “of identification, of classification of human elements [that] are
preferably retained in this or that situation to obtain this or that result” (p. 177). This
problem is exacerbated if schools do not take into account students’ special needs.
While NCLB proponents believe that bringing all students into common classrooms
will help them learn, most educators disagree (Bejoian & Reed, 2005).

Even though America’s culture is becoming hybridized (Besley, 2003),
Steven Best, a philosophy professor at the University of Texas and Douglas Kellner
(2003), an education professor at UCLA, believe that school systems still allow
students who come from diverse backgrounds to be negatively stereotyped. Best and Kellner (2003) argue that in general, today’s youth collectively are falsely labeled as a generation of lazy people, regardless as to how they perform as individuals. At-risk students generally fare poorer academically than all other students (Freeman, 2005; Furumoto, 2005; Hargis, 1990; Jimerson, 2005), so his is a further example of how marginalized students are stereotyped, regardless as to how wrong the stereotype is. On the surface at least, a mandate called the No Child Left Behind Act should certainly be geared toward eliminating these negative attitudes. However, Giroux (2002) states that most schools treat students more like commodities than learners, and he suggests that parents and educators should demand that schools are allowed to educate students instead of making them feel as if they are incarcerated.

Many believe that NCLB regulations place an additional amount of pressure on students and teachers alike. In order to serve all students, it is incumbent on teachers and schools that they understand the needs and capabilities of their students. However, as at-risk students enter regular classrooms, many educators fear that students who come from diverse backgrounds will not do well on proficiency testing because this assessment mode lumps at-risk students into a “one size fits all” category. For the purpose of analyzing results, and teachers’ hands are effectively tied in regard to what they teach and how they measure student success (Neill, 2004, p. 117). In the next section I look at the shifting roles of educators in modern society.
The Educator in Modern Society

Regardless as to which educational models schools follow, it is ultimately the responsibility of the teacher to ensure that students receive a quality education. Most people will agree that teachers should be qualified in the subjects they teach, and NCLB supports this as well. However, simply knowing the content of the subject does not prepare teachers to meet the needs of all students—especially those whom are designated into subgroups. The standards by which teachers are defined have changed drastically in the history of the United States.

As for the role of the classroom teacher, Progressive Movement leader John Dewey (2004) believed that the “teacher is not in the school to impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child, but is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him [sic] in properly responding to these influences” (p. 20). While Dewey’s methods of teaching were and still are embraced by many educators, he was speaking at a time when little diversity was shared in the classroom. Teaching today’s diverse demographic of students is even more a daunting task, and finding the correct methods to utilize is even more difficult.

The pedagogic debate that emerged from progressive versus conservative curricula is still relevant in today’s society and is at the heart of the No Child Left Behind Act. Scientific assessment and intelligence testing are the forerunners of the proficiency tests mandated by NCLB. The No Child Left Behind Act, by placing so much emphasis on mathematics, reading, and science—and the degree of importance it places on proficiency testing—forces public school teachers to steer away from the
Dewey model and switch to scientific-based instruction. While most teachers prefer to teach according to their own style, many must modify their pedagogical doctrines in order to fall in line with NCLB’s requirements.

Bartolome’ (1999) has conducted research in the areas of multicultural and bilingual education and concludes that no single “method” exists that can best be used to teach students. She believes that teachers do need to be aware of the cultural diversity among students, but that teachers should first look at themselves in their relationship to their own cultural, racial, or economic status when trying to bring forth an element of understanding into the classroom. Bartholome’ (1999) argues that control should be shared in the classroom; she maintains that the teacher should serve in the capacity of facilitator, but that teachers and students alike learn best when allowed to explore and discuss the cultural differences of others. Bartholome’ (1999) maintains that teachers must realize that no two students learn the same way. Under the rigid rules of NCLB, teachers might support this realization but be unable to cater to individual needs because of the urgency to prepare students for passing standardized tests.

Courtney Cazden, a Professor Emeritus of Linguistics and Literacy at Harvard University, and Sarah Beck, an education professor at New York University (2003), argue that as American Society becomes increasingly more diverse, it is in the schools where the teaching of cultural understanding seems to be most logical. This falls in line with John Dewey’s teachings, in that by its very nature the school should be a place where teachers can foster and encourage learning. Cazden and Beck (2003) say that teachers should look for ways in which students can learn about
students from other cultures. They also believe that teachers need to facilitate discussions that compare and contrast the similarities and differences among students. Cazden and Beck (2003) maintain that teaching through understanding promotes learning. Under NCLB’s guidelines, being able to do so becomes quite tenuous.

Giroux (1999b) states that the United States education system is one of the first professional fields in this country to recognize the importance of cultural studies, but that not enough is being done to teach and understand diversity. Giroux (1999b) argues that educating students from diverse cultural backgrounds requires teachers to have an understanding of people from diverse cultures, and he calls for educators to work with experts on diversity in an effort to provide curricula that teach and support all students.

Villegas and Lucas (2002) point out that prospective teachers must be educated to recognize cultural diversity while in college in order to have an understanding of non-white, economically and educationally challenged students. However, because American Society tends to privilege the white upper and middle class population, some argue that classifying students into subgroups strengthens white hegemony (Furamoto, 2005). Giroux and McLaren (1999) maintain that American educators have fallen into a trap of complacency by following bureaucratically-developed curricula that adhere to teaching to the masses, not the individual. It is this very problem that opponents of NCLB accuse the act of promoting.

Sheets (2003) argues that today’s schools encourage racial inequality because the majority of educators is white, and that many teachers either consciously or
subconsciously believe that blacks and other minorities are not as capable of learning as are white students. Sheets (2003) points the finger of blame at the education system in general, and says that the reasons for racial inequity are: 1) because teacher education programs do not properly prepare teachers to teach cultural diversity, and 2) because most schools do not promote cultural diversity in the classroom. Sheets (2003) argues that as a result of these oversights, students and teachers alike view both the education process and American Society as a whole as being filtered through a “White” lens. Giroux (1983) believes that instructors must make students understand that the ways in which all suppressed groups have been treated historically is directly correlated to the current status of how cultural groups are treated, and how they are perceived by themselves and by others. Only when this is done can marginalized students escape the heterotopias to which they have become accustomed.

In order to set right the problems with racism that still exist in today’s schools, educational researcher Darlene York (1997) argues that teachers must be trained in recognizing and understanding diversity in students. She believes that while no specific model for training teachers to effectively teach students of diverse backgrounds is necessarily the best, teachers who are not trained to recognize diversity are not effective teachers and will alienate students. York (1997) believes that teachers should be taught how to identify culturally-related prejudices and be prepared to find a common ground in which they can place their prejudices aside.

York (1997) emphasizes that although the goal of teachers should be to educate students regarding cultural issues, they must first ensure that teachers are
informed and sensitive to other cultures themselves. This perhaps becomes a sticky issue under NCLB, when the term “highly qualified” refers to how well teachers know the subject matter, and not necessarily how well they can teach or adapt to the educational needs of students. If the students are not taught in a way that best advances their style of learning, then they likely will not receive the best education possible.

Infed Encyclopaedia describes Paulo Freire as “the most influential thinker about education in the late twentieth century,” especially because of “his concern for the oppressed.” Freire (1985) argues that most textbook authors are members of privileged cultural, social, or economic groups and that the group identity is what inspires a person’s writing. Freire (1985) claims that teachers must encourage students to critically analyze the societal factors that influence what authors write and to challenge texts that have cultural biases. He further argues that teachers should teach critical reading of texts to students, regardless of any political backlash they receive from the administration. Despite the fact that one of the main arguments against proficiency testing is that it is slanted toward the privileged classes, under NCLB it is the federal government, not their respective administrators, to whom the teachers ultimately must answer.

Giroux and McLaren (1999) point out that teachers are often taught conformity in college, but that they need to realize students do not fall into one generic category. These authors maintain that in order to serve students of diverse backgrounds, it becomes necessary for teachers to fight against established norms and teach to the needs of the students. To help facilitate this, Giroux (1999a) believes that
teachers must set aside class time to teach diversity and ask students to analyze why negative stereotypes on marginalized people exist. Giroux (1999a) thinks that teachers should encourage students to look beyond the society’s portrayal of diverse groups and to seek solutions for the problems posed by the media. Moreover, Villegas and Lucas (2002) maintain that all teachers should teach multicultural views and that schools should actively seek and hire teachers from diverse backgrounds and ensure that the curriculum is flexible enough to allow cultural diversity to be taught and tolerated in every classroom.

Giroux and Simon (1983) contend that understanding students’ individual needs is vital to providing them with a quality education. They argue that most teachers have a desire to provide a quality education for all their students, but many teachers have not received sufficient training in dealing with students from diverse backgrounds. The authors say that teachers should approach their classes and teach about the relationship of power and language and how these elements have come to shape what is socially accepted to be “esteemed, approved, and proper” (131) social behavior. Giroux and Simon (1983) believe that the best way to teach students is for teachers to discuss how students’ lived experiences and attitudes about school, home, and society are all related. They maintain that instructors and school districts should promote curricula that prepare students for life after school from a social as well as academic standpoint. When schools gauge student success on the results of standardized tests only and not on assessments made by instructors, this social aspect of education is ignored.
Currently, two primary schools of thought define what it takes to be a good teacher. One is teacher effectiveness, which follows John Dewey’s (2004) model. Stiggins (2001) argues that effective and affective teachers must seek to measure students’ success in reaching the targets of mastery knowledge, reasoning aptitude skills, demonstrated creativity, and developing dispositions. When teachers construct reliable and valid evaluation procedures that meet these goals and subsequently communicate the results to the students in an effective manner, then the assessment process is a successful one (Stiggins, 2001). Morrison (2003) says that effective teachers:

- accept responsibility for teaching students, allocate most of their time to instruction, organize their classrooms for effective instruction, move through the curriculum as quickly as possible without frustrating students, actively instruct and maintain a pleasant learning environment in which they focus on students’ needs and interests, and provide opportunity for practice and feedback on performance. (p. 11)

The other tenet of quality teaching is placed on teacher accountability (Morrison, 2003), which is supported by the No Child Left Behind Act. Those who believe that teacher accountability is the basis for determining a teacher’s effectiveness argue that “teachers are responsible for their students’ achievements or lack of them” (p. 11). Morrison says that this movement is controversial because it relies on students’ test scores to determine whether or not the students have learned; another danger is that it “poses ethical challenges and may motivate teachers to ‘teach to the test’” (p. 11).
Despite the fact that NCLB dictates that all teachers must be highly qualified in their fields, Rapp (2002) says that there is a sense of apathy toward leadership training among many of today’s educators. Rapp (2002) argues that the traditional hegemonic power whites—especially that of white males—have held on the American education system has historically allowed and forced minorities of any culture, race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual preference to be systematically shut out of leadership roles in the educational sphere.

Cynthia B. Dillard (1997), a professor of education at Ohio State University, believes in taking a feminist approach to reform in today’s schools, arguing that schools should hire more women and other minority faculty, as well as fostering critical thinking by teaching students about cultural and feminist issues. When students from culturally diverse backgrounds are members of the Student Body, unless the teachers understand students’ individual needs it is unlikely that these traditionally suppressed students will be able to adapt to what is being taught.

Feminists have historically supported members of all suppressed groups, and Rapp (2002) is one of many who believe that today’s schools support a system that seeks to keep males in dominant positions while attempting to apply bandages to major problems brought forth by the hegemonic advantages that white males have traditionally held. She argues that most high level administrators are males who care little about how much training they or their peers have toward reaching at-risk students.
Defining Curriculum and Assessment

*What and How to Teach Today’s Students*

The discussion of educational theories is nothing new and is certainly not an invention of American educators. However, issues that were raised more than two thousand years ago are still part of the debate concerning what subjects should be taught in today’s schools. Ancient philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and others actually set the stage for many of the subjects taught in today’s schools (Gordon & Browne, 2004), for Greek and Roman schools taught subjects such as linguistics, philosophy, math, and physics (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990). The debate of a philosophical versus a scientific-based instruction method took root in Ancient times. Plato sought to find absolute truth, while Isocrates argued that absolute truth did not exist (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990). Quintillian believed that a balance should be struck between a scientific based and a philosophical education (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990). The latter is a belief held by many modern educators as well, but is ignored by NCLB.

A major issue of contention surrounding the No Child Left Behind Act is that it measures student success solely on the basis of proficiency test scores. French philosopher Rene Descartes was a supporter of a scientific-based education, and argued that mathematics and science should be the only subjects taught in schools (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990). Descartes believed that all measurement of knowledge must be done objectively; thus, only that material that could be conclusively proven or disproved should be part of an educational curriculum—in short, what Descartes sought was “absolute truth” (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990, p. 11). Descartes’ views
came to be known as Cartesian Theory, and according to Bizzell and Herzberg (1990), “As a teaching approach, Cartesian method fails to encourage independent discovery, proceeding instead on a plodding course from axiom to proof. Students are oppressed rather than inspired by such a method” (p. 712). Nevertheless, Cartesian Theory is the concept behind the types of proficiency tests mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act. Where Descartes saw everything from a right or wrong/true or false perspective, many educators do not believe that true objectivity can be attained (Prado, 2000). Consequently, most educators today do not believe that proficiency testing is an accurate measurement of student achievement.

Despite the fact that the aforementioned educational philosophies were developed two thousand years ago, the models that early schools set forth still heavily influence pedagogical debates today, and shifts in what influences pedagogy are cyclical in nature. For instance, when the economy is strong a liberal arts education is favored and when the economy is in peril the government argues for a return to basics (McDonnell, 2005). Despite this, Flinders and Thornton (2004) believe that a diverse curriculum allows all students to be educated on “cultural, political, and economic trends…philosophical concerns; and …social issues” (p. x). The issue of pedagogical shifts will be discussed more at length in the next chapter as I analyze the rhetoric surrounding various education artifacts.

Theodore Sizer (2004), an educational expert and Professor Emeritus at Brown University, agrees that students should be able to adapt to changes in Society but he says that schools must also keep the changing face of the American demographic in mind. Sizer (2004) believes that as the makeup of the student
population “changes, the shape of ‘public education’ should change with it, but in a way that keeps the public in ‘public education’ secure” (p. xviii; italics in original). Sizer (2004) argues that poor communities suffer when all students are required to be taught in the same way and held to the same standards because “access to public education is limited by one’s neighborhood” (p. xix). Sizer (2004) believes that rich neighborhoods will prosper and poor neighborhoods will fall behind because the wealthy neighborhoods have the resources to fund public schools and the poor neighborhoods lack adequate funds. Since the majority of at-risk students come from poor socio-economic backgrounds, their social status alone will cause them to remain in heterotopias when they are measured against all other students.

Many minority students seek to succeed in the classroom so that they can go on to college in order to escape the poverty-ridden backgrounds they are accustomed to (Quantz, 2003). Despite the fact that many underprivileged groups of students have been suppressed for many years, the notion of trying to reach a varied range of students is not a new one. Theodore Brameld (1957), one of the leading educational philosophers of the Twentieth Century and a contemporary of H.G. Rickover, said that the focus of education must shift in light of cultural, not political and economic changes in a modern society. He argued that too much emphasis is placed on a scientific education and not enough is devoted to the humanities. Brameld (1957), a follower of John Dewey, called his own work a “theory of democratic education” (p. xix), because he feels that in a true democracy, everyone—regardless of his or her background—would be treated fairly.
In retrospect, Brameld’s (1957) writing underlies the assumptions many of today’s political figures hold toward education and calls for scholars to critically shape a pedagogy that meets all students’ needs. Brameld (1957) had the foresight, even prior to when major educational reform bills came into existence, to realize and argue that effective educational institutions need to develop programs that allow diversity in the classroom, while making educators aware that they must engage in culturally sensitive educational theory and practice based on “order, process, and goals” meant to serve all students (pp. xix).

While the Brown decision brought the issue of diversity to the surface of educational debate in the 1950’s, many changes have taken place in the past half century on the education front. Eric J. Weiner (2003), an education professor at Montclair State University, states that the issue of diversity is usually addressed in two separate contexts—in theory and in pedagogy. He believes that diversity and critical pedagogy are rarely addressed under the same framework, but argues that they should be. From a theoretical perspective, claims Weiner (2003), the public sphere typically views the study of diversity in relation to “power and knowledge” and “representations of difference” (p. 56). From his standpoint, Weiner (2003) argues that in order for students to have an accurate understanding of diversity, educators must require students to critically assess the relationship between power and societal norms in regard to various cultures. Hence, Weiner (2003) believes that understanding diversity must be taught across the curriculum. Again, under NCLB guidelines do so is nearly impossible. In any case, in order to carry out NCLB
mandates, schools must assess all students under the same rigid set of rules, regardless of their backgrounds.

Assessment Issues in Today’s Schools

Under NCLB, students are required to pass proficiency tests in reading, math, and science as the only means of measuring success; this has sparked an ongoing debate among American politicians and educators. Until the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, teachers have historically assigned grades based on student performance; this assessment benchmark has been used to measure the degree to which students meet the goals and objectives of the subject matter being taught since the 1800’s (Hargis, 1990; Panitz, 1999; Richmond & Gorman, 1992; Walker, 1996).

Most educational experts today believe that assessment should measure students at two levels, formative and summative. Formative assessment occurs throughout the course of the school term when students receive grades on individual assignments (Richmond & Gorman, 1992). Summative assessment occurs at the end of the grading term, when students receive grades that indicate whether they have passed or failed their courses (Richmond & Gorman, 1992); however, the quality of a student’s work is not the only determinant as to whether or not he or she moves on to the next level—until the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, teachers traditionally have the latitude to allow students to move to the next level based on whether or not the teacher believes that the student has made sufficient progress to justify being promoted. This is one of the elements of controversy that surrounds traditional grading—the issue of social promotion. Eliminating social promotion is
one of the arguments that supporters of proficiency testing use to sustain their argument (Finn & Hess, 2004). However, to many educators, the use of proficiency testing as the sole determinant of how much a student has learned is not an accurate means of assessment and is especially unfair to minority students.

E. Donald Hirsch (1988), Professor Emeritus of Education and Humanities at the University of Virginia, discusses the results of standardized reading and writing test scores among white and non-white American students, pointing out that non-whites on the whole score much lower than do whites on these tests. He claims that standardized tests are developed for white students; consequently, minority students will have lower scores. Hirsch (1988) suggests that schools teach students reading and writing by relating assignments to lived experiences. While allowing students to complete assignments related to their lived experience might indeed help all students become more literate, if the tests are slanted in favor of white students, many minority students will continue to come up short of proficiency and will in effect be left behind. Research shows that students learn in different ways and at different paces, but the No Child Left Behind Act fails to take these issues into account. The next section addresses student learning.

How Students Learn

The child’s own instincts and powers furnish the material and give the starting point for all education. Save as the efforts of the educator connect with some activity which the child is carrying on of his own initiative independent of the
educator, education becomes reduced to a pressure from without. It may, indeed, give certain external results, but cannot truly be called educative. (Dewey, 2004, pp. 17-18)

This statement made by John Dewey in the late 1800’s might very well identify many of the problems the No Child Left Behind Act seeks to remedy, but at the same time fails to fully take into account. This declaration by Dewey stresses the need for students and teachers to have a positive connection in the classroom, and concludes by showing the problems that can arise when external factors such as politics, the economy, or world events manipulate the learning experience.

Progressive vs. Conservative Education Styles

From a rhetorical standpoint, it is more important to look at Dewey’s overall contribution to education theory than it is to analyze his work purely in an historical context, because what Dewey said about education more than 100 years ago is still in many ways at the heart of today’s debate in regard to how students learn. Dewey (2004) argued that the “educational process has two sides, one psychological and one sociological, and that one cannot be subordinated to the other, or neglected, without evil results following” (p. 17). Dewey (2004) believed that students learn best when they are allowed to explore and discover the inner workings of their social environments on local and global levels. This includes them learning not only about the social situations in which the students are raised, but also learning about the lives of other students. On this issue, Dewey (2004) maintained that students must be taught to explore and understand “a social past and see them as the inheritance of
previous race activities” (p. 18). As far as at-risk students are concerned, for American Society to acknowledge that at-risk students have been historically repressed and to approach educating them from the standpoint that they generally lag behind other students would seemingly be the best way to help them catch up. However, NCLB expects elevated test scores from at-risk students simply because they have been placed in regular classrooms.

Dewey (2004) further asserted that a public school education “is a process of living and not a preparation for future living” (p. 19). In addition to the sociological aspects of education, Dewey (2004) also believed that the child’s mental state must be taken into account. Failure to do this, stated Dewey (2004), “gives us only the idea of a development of all the mental powers without giving us any idea of the use to which these powers are put” (p. 18). However, Dewey (2004) acknowledged the problems that existed during his era, stating that to some people the educational process is “a forced and external process, and results in subordinating the freedom of the individual to a preconceived social and political status” (p. 18). History shows that society and politics have indeed shaped the face of the United States education system, and hegemonic classes have traditionally keep others out of the mainstream of public education.

Simply having access to schools does not remove students from being in a suppressed state. For example, beginning with the *Plessy* decision and continuing after the passage of *Brown*, the fact that state funding allowed black students to attend poorly funded schools did not mean that these students were given the same opportunities for a quality education that students who attended white schools were
given (Willie, 2005). Even though some black students began attending public schools in the late 1800’s and on into the 1900’s, these schools were legally segregated thanks to *Plessy*. Moreover, even after integration was achieved, blacks and other minorities still found themselves slotted in certain vocational tracks along stereotypical lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and their predetermined ability to learn and work (Mondale, “As American As Public Schools,” 2001).

Because of the difference in students’ learning styles, Dewey (2004) believed that the burden for assessing students’ progress lay solely in the hands of the teacher, and that a student’s promotion to the next level should be based on the teachers’ perception of how well the student had learned the material. To Dewey (2004), testing and grading were not conducive to providing the student with a quality education; he believed that tests “are only of use so far as they test the child’s fitness for social life and reveal the place in which he [sic] can be of the most service and where he can reveal the most help” (p. 20). Again, this lends credence to the argument that measuring student achievement through proficiency testing does nothing other than to prepare at-risk students for entering the workforce with fewer skills than their more privileged peers.

While Dewey (2004) contended that students should be aware of civic responsibility, he did not believe that schools should simply prepare students for finding a job upon leaving school. However, those who oppose what Dewey would call a progressive approach to education believe that allowing students to have knowledge of past events and how they relate to the present and future is not as important as preparing them to enter the workforce. This trend of slotting students in
vocational categories continues today (Furumoto, 2005) and is part of the cyclical nature of education reform.

Franklin Bobbitt (2004), one of John Dewey’s contemporaries, favored a more scientific method to curriculum development, one not unlike what has come to be under the No Child Left Behind Act. Bobbitt (2004) argued that new teaching methods must be developed as Society advances and that “[e]ducation must take a pace set, not by itself, but by social progress” (p. 9). He believed that providing students with a curriculum laden with history was passé; Bobbitt (2004) argued that the school’s main purpose is to prepare students for their role in society after leaving school. This would be echoed a half century later by H.G. Rickover (1959) in *Education and Freedom*.

Not all educators believed that choosing a curriculum model was a cut and dried issue. Patty Smith Hill, a contemporary of both Dewey and Bobbitt, theorized that a best of both worlds could be achieved in regard to developing curriculum models. Hill believed that some classrooms could primarily serve as academic institutions while others could teach children both academic and social skills, depending on the needs of the students (Gordon & Browne, 2004). Hill believed that schools could accommodate both scientific and liberal arts/philosophical curriculum models. This is important because many schools today believe that due to NCLB mandates, there is only one way to educate students—through preparation for standardized tests while sacrificing a more subjective liberal arts approach to education.
Educational expert Howard Gardner (1999) argued that students learn from the use of multiple forms of intelligence, and that not all children learn in the same ways. Gardner believed that most students can learn through a variety of methods, such as music, kinesis, logic and mathematics, reading and linguistics, spatial observation, interpersonal and intrapersonal interaction, and observing the natural world (Gardner, 1999).

Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences is not the only popular educational theory that is snubbed when teaching to the test in the primary instructional mode in the classroom. Benjamin Bloom (1956) is credited with developing a taxonomy of educational objectives, which make the distinction between higher and lower order thinking skills. For Bloom, cognitive development must “progress from the simple to the complex and from factual to conceptual” (Morrison, 2003, p. 427). As students make this progression, they can make real life applications with the concepts they learn, while proficiency testing makes no provisions for real-life functioning (Mathis, 2003, p. 6). In addition, if reaching a proficient test score in selected subjects does not adequately prepare students for life after their public education ends, then proficiency testing does not satisfy the goals of a scientific-based curriculum, either.

Giroux (1988) emphasizes the importance of following a pedagogy that allows students and teachers alike to approach the education process. However, he believes this should not be done through the lens of a rigid set of curriculum rules, but by a mechanism that permits teaching and learning through examining shared experiences as well as looking at the social impact culture and power have on these experiences.
Freire and Macedo (1999) argue that teachers should not simply facilitate classroom activities; instead, they believe that educators should “teach to facilitate” (p. 200). They contend that even though teachers may allow students the freedom to discuss issues, the teacher should always be the authority figure in the classroom and has the right to take control of the classroom in any capacity whenever he or she deems this to be necessary. The authors claim that teachers must bring cultural politics into the classroom without painting a rose-colored picture of cultural problems. Like many others, they believe that issues on race and culture must be raised in the classroom. Where the No Child Left Behind Act was passed to help assist at-risk students succeed, it does nothing to take into account the difference in students’ learning styles.

Students may very well experience dissonance when the focus of the class shifts away from learning new material to learning what is expected on a test. Performance-oriented learners strive to do better than others and want to receive recognition for their accomplishments (Ames, 1992). Under NCLB, all students are expected to reach the same level of proficiency and thus the only students that receive any form of recognition are those whose test scores fail to reach proficiency. While most highly-motivated students can survive and prosper in any type of learning situation, students with low levels of motivation are reluctant to respond and often withdraw both mentally and physically from an environment in which they are not comfortable (Ames, 1992). At-risk students are among those whom have low levels of motivation due to past failures (Hargis, 1990); not surprisingly, students who fall into NCLB subgroup categories are among the students that are most at-risk for
A Recent Trend Toward Cooperative Learning

In any learning environment a teacher’s communication style will have a large impact on whether or not students are receptive to learning, and “evaluation of cooperative approaches has confirmed that communication among students and between students and the teacher promotes questioning and attentiveness and enhances student motivation” (Walker, 1996, p. 334). The concept of cooperative learning has emerged in recent years and is advocated by many educators as a very useful alternative to the traditional lecture method that has been used in many schools (Strom & Strom, 2002). However, because of the proficiency testing demands of NCLB, cooperative learning may be dropped from many schools, despite its effectiveness in improving overall student achievement.

Panitz (1996a) says that “cooperative learning is defined by a set of principles which help people interact together in order to accomplish a goal or develop a product which is content specific” (n. p.). The burden of ensuring the mastery of cooperative learning stills lies with the teacher, and several studies support the benefits of cooperative learning over traditional lecture learning (see Carlsmith & Cooper, 2002; Kantrowitz & Monserrate, 1993; Kassner, 2002; Orange, 1999; Panitz, 1996a; Panitz, 1996b; Panitz 1999; Shibley Jr. & Zimmaro, 2002; Strom & Strom, 2002; Taylor, 2002; Walker, 1996; Weitzel, 1991). An additional benefit of cooperative learning is that it allows students to become more competent learners through skill-building because “when students work together, the learning process becomes interesting and
fun” (Panitz, 1999).

Furthermore, by working in groups, students are able to exchange ideas and look critically at what is being learned (Kantrowitz & Monserrate, 2002; Kassner, 2002; Panitz, 1999; Strom & Strom, 2002; Walker, 1996). In doing so, they are typically more focused on what they learn than how they will be graded on how much data they can recall from a lecture (Panitz, 1999). Moreover, students with low levels of motivation tend to feel more comfortable working in small groups as opposed to whole group instruction (Richmond & Gorman, 1992). For this reason, cooperative learning should provide most students with a better chance to succeed by increasing their levels of motivation and confidence.

Despite the current trend toward cooperative learning that many of today’s educators favor, teachers must now revert to the lecture method of “teaching to the test” since the federal government demands that all students will reach proficiency levels on the standardized tests required by the No Child Left Behind Act. The lecture method of teaching is the way that many teachers set out to disseminate large amounts of information to large groups of students (Richmond and Gorman, 1992; Sorensen & Christophel, 1992), but it is problematic because studies have shown that even the best lecturers can hold the attention span of the audience for no more 25 than minutes at a time (Richmond & Gorman, 1992). In addition, teachers who rely solely on lecturing place emphasis on “content memorization and individual student performance though competition” (Panitz, 1996b, n.p.), which is what NCLB’s proficiency testing requires.
Dillard (1997) argues that successful schools should not only change the ways in which students think about themselves, but that they should also change the way they think about others. She points out that many schools take a conservative approach to education, one that is geared solely toward preparing students for the workforce instead of providing them with a well-rounded education. Dillard (1997) says that doing so limits students in reaching their academic potential. Shor and Friere (1987) believe that teachers who exclusively lecture from standard textbooks are depriving students of the opportunities to discuss course material in ways to which they can relate lived experiences. However, in order for students to pass proficiency tests, teachers are given little choice but to teach straight from the text. Shor and Freire (1987) argue that teachers and students alike can learn when they discuss issues relative to world politics and diversity issues. This can be accomplished through cooperative learning, but in general it is not an easy task to accomplish under NCLB guidelines.

Despite the popularity that cooperative learning has gained over the past two decades, under NCLB the lecture method of instruction seems to be the only way for instructors to employ the “teaching to the test” method of learning that proficiency exams require. Studies show that many students simply find lectures to be boring, and this causes them to become disinterested in the class and in school in general (Panitz, 1996b; Wilcoxson, 1998). In many ways, when students hear lectures, take notes, and then take tests, they simply “regurgitate” the information the instructor has “fed” them (Wilcoxson, 1998). This is another disadvantage of proficiency testing because while students study the material to be learned for tests, they do not retain the
knowledge after leaving the classroom (Panitz, 1996b; Richmond & McCroskey, 1992). Moreover, many at-risk students feel alienated when they feel like they are competing with others in regard to achieving high exam scores (Panitz, 1996b; Wilcoxson, 1998). Furthermore, when they are required to compete with other students, many at-risk students feel uncomfortable and out of place (Bejoian & Reid, 2005).

Affective and effective communication is a key to attaining success in the classroom. Richmond and Gorman (1992) argue that instructors must clearly communicate to students the goals and objectives of the courses. Once this is done, one of the teachers’ main jobs is to motivate students to reach at least the minimum goals set forth for the class (Richmond & Gorman, 1992, Walker, 1996). However, teaching to the test requires that teachers significantly modify the goals and objectives of their classes. Research shows that motivated students typically strive to reach two levels of achievement: mastery learning and performance learning (Ames, 1992; Richmond & Gorman, 1992). Students seek a mastery level of learning when they “are oriented toward learning new skills, trying to understand their work, improving their level of competence, or achieving a sense of mastery based on self-referenced standards” (Ames, 1992, p. 262). However, not all students possess high levels of motivation and learn better when being taught by alternative means.

A strong affective and effective communicative relationship between teacher and student is vital to fostering a positive learning environment (Richmond & Gorman, 1992). The more motivation and self-confidence a student possesses, the more likely he or she will be receptive to learning (Renchler, 1992; Strom & Strom,
2002). Conversely, when students have grown up in learning environments in which they become accustomed to faring poorly, their self-confidence and motivation levels drop and they see themselves as being doomed to failure (Renchler, 1992).

Many at-risk students designated into subgroups under NCLB come from backgrounds in which they are either familiar with failure and/or under-prepared to learn. When subjected to the lecture method and taking tests that require rote memory, these students are losing out on having a positive one-on-one hands on relationship with the teacher as well as not having the opportunity to learn as part of a team. Orange (1999) finds that students who work cooperatively strive to do well because they do not want to disappoint their peers. That level of motivation does not exist when the student knows he or she is expected to pass a proficiency test based on the knowledge the student retained during a lecture. Moreover, students who do not pass standardized proficiency tests view themselves as failures (Furumoto, 2005). All the factors discussed thus far in this section address specific issues and problems that are present in public schools and have been addressed in various ways by the reform movements of the past half century.

Why Reform Education in the First Place?

During the evolution of the United States’ education system, it has experienced “recurring cycles of reform” (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988, p.1). Some experts believe that reform is necessitated by the growth and expansion of schools, while others believe that reform is politically and economically driven (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988). A goal of this dissertation is to analyze the No Child Left
Behind Act in order to see how it is driven by intrinsic and extrinsic factors that facilitate cycles of change in the socio-political sphere.

In a democracy that promotes freedom and equality, it should be apparent that educational reform bills should benefit students. However, evidence suggests that there might be reasons for mandating reform that lie outside the educational sphere. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Rickover (1959) believed that while allowing integration was acceptable, schools should at the same time promote competition among students. Twenty years later, in the wake of the *A Nation at Risk* (1983) report Ronald Reagan maintained that competition, not integration, should be at the heart of the education system. Both Rickover (1959) and *A Nation at Risk* (1983) contained rhetoric that basically ignored equality in the name of preserving democracy and freedom.

On the issue of competition among students, Aronowitz and Giroux (1990) argue that it is not fair to make at-risk students compete if they are already academically and socially behind other students. Consequently, they believe that educators need to rethink the ways in which the needs of culturally diverse student populations can be met. They argue that the money earmarked as a result of education reform bills should not be spent specifically to benefit underprivileged children. Instead, Aronowitz and Giroux (1990) believe that educational funding provided by the federal government should be spent primarily in an effort to provide better schools and more qualified teachers in order to best serve all students. This would support the rhetoric behind the *Brown* decision—meaning that equality comes in the form of having equal access to good schools.
Aronowitz and Giroux (1990) believe that in the long run, educational reform bills have hurt students, especially those from marginalized racial or cultural backgrounds, because in many cases educational reform bills have caused schools to limit their pedagogical philosophies solely to “technique and procedure” (p. 117)—a scientific-based pedagogy based on a tradition of white hegemony. If this is the case, by relying on proficiency testing the No Child Left Behind Act does little to help the very demographic of students it seeks to bring up to par—at-risk students. To date, only the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) has provided assistance geared specifically for at-risk students.

Elmore and McLaughlin (1988) maintain that “[e]ducational reform operates on three loosely connected levels: policy, administration, and practice” (p. 5). While the federal government allowed states and local governments to run public schools until the latter part of the Twentieth Century, Giroux and Simon (1989) argue that changes in the United States’ economy and workforce have had a significant impact on education reform bills and how curricula have been shaped the past few decades.

Giroux and Simon (1989) state that the failed industrial economy during the 1970’s and 1980’s caused big businesses to put pressure on schools to produce specialized laborers. This was illustrated in the *A Nation at Risk* (1983) report, and was a driving force behind why Ronald Reagan did not support educational reform geared toward assisting at-risk students during his presidency. Quantz (2003) concurs, citing that large corporations have come to dictate how American schools are run by putting pressure on them to develop a class of highly educated individuals to compete in today’s workforce.
On a similar note, technological advances have created the need for the development of programs geared toward preparing students to enter the technological field. This trend began with the 1959 publication of Rickover’s *Education and Freedom*, and was echoed in *A Nation at Risk* (1983). In each case, this move toward exclusiveness was destined to eradicate any progress previous eras had seen in the area of catering to at-risk students because those students are the ones who traditionally either drop out of school or fail to receive a diploma (Hargis, 1990). Nevertheless, Giroux and Simon (1989) argue that instead of being forced by the economy to determine what is taught in schools, educators should instead be allowed to integrate subject matter geared to prepare students for entering an ever diversifying society.

Politics has had a large hand in modern education reform and has been a recurring theme throughout history. Pepi Leistyna, a professor and educational researcher at the University of Massachusetts-Boston, and Arlie Woodrum (1999), a professor of Education Studies at Ohio University, assert that despite the problems faced by at-risk students in today’s society, educators have a limited amount of political clout to use as a means to solve these problems by addressing the needs of individual students. They argue that politicians want schools to prepare at-risk students for entry level into the workforce while culturally privileged students are those can have the luxury of entering the workforce or going on to college. This mindset echoes the rhetoric of Rickover’s (1959) *Education and Freedom* and *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and works in opposition to the *Brown* decision and ESEA.
Keeping in pace with the cycle of educational reform, the No Child Left Behind Act requires that students learn only the basic skills of reading, writing, and science; this supports Leitystna and Woodrums’s (1999) claims. The authors go on to say that in order to give all students an equal opportunity for a quality education, educators must take a critical pedagogy approach to teaching by recognizing the diversity in students and teaching in a way that promotes critical thinking instead of turning public schools into institutions geared toward slotting students into career tracks after graduation.

Giroux (1983) provides background on how political and economic forces have traditionally dictated which societal groups are to be suppressed and which ones are given an ability to rise to power. Giroux (1983) claims that although many schools claim that their curricula are geared for all students, most school curricula are shaped under “narrow principles of control, prediction, and measurement” (p. 43) because of budget constraints. Nevertheless, Giroux (1983) argues that as the student population becomes more diverse, integrating the concept of culture into the curriculum is vital to reaching all students.

Expanding on the argument of Foucault (1972) that history is written from the perspective of hegemonic classes, Arif Dirlik (2002), a professor of history at Duke University, points out that what many minority authors publish as works of fiction are in fact historical accounts of what actually happened, yet are not reported in the history books. He suggests that requiring these narratives to be read in the classroom can open up students’ minds to recognizing historical suppression of marginalized groups. However, the works of culturally marginalized but well-published authors
such as Sherman Alexie, Amy Tan, Richard Rodriguez, Sandra Cisneros, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.—authors with whom many of today’s at-risk students can identify—are generally ignored in the classroom unless their works fall within the material students are taught in order to reach standardized proficiency levels.

Concluding Thoughts

Although many people negatively criticize the No Child Left Behind Act and other educational reform bills passed to help disadvantaged students, reform in many areas is necessary due to the changing face of the United States’ population. In this chapter I have provided an overview of what leading educational experts have to say in regard to curriculum development, dealing with students from diverse backgrounds, teacher qualifications, and assessment procedures. In general, it appears that the assessment measures that the No Child Left Behind Act demands for determining student proficiency—through standardized testing—runs to a large degree in opposition to what most education experts believe is the best way to educate students.

Minorities have been traditionally discriminated against throughout the history of the United States, and their struggles have been well documented. These struggles have been fought along many lines, and education is one of them. The rights that women and other minorities have gained in the area of education mirrors the struggles and gains they have encountered throughout the history of the United States. Many people believe that the No Child Left Behind Act actually sets minorities back instead of moving them ahead.
The issues at hand in regard to the No Child Left Behind Act center on pedagogy, assessment, teacher qualifications, and funding—all in the name of serving at-risk students. A classic pedagogical debate pits a teaching curriculum in which students learn about the past and present versus one that prepares students for the future. Under the No Child Left Behind Act, the latter—a scientific-based curriculum—is the one that schools are forced to use in order to prepare students for standardized proficiency tests. Although this type of curriculum has supporters, it is one that many educators prefer not to use because they believe that it severely limits the breadth of the material that students are taught. The assessment issue is another point of controversy surrounding NCLB. While many educators have a disdain for traditional grading methods, probably just as many believe that proficiency scores are not a true indicator of how much a student has learned. Teaching qualifications is another point of contention under NCLB.

While many educators believe that teachers should incorporate innovative teaching methods that cater to all students’ learning styles into the classroom, NCLB’s guidelines allow for an ambiguous definition of what deems a teacher worthy of teaching. Funding, which I discussed in Chapters One and Two, is also an issue under NCLB.

Using Foucault’s (1998) definition of heterotopias for defining the privileged and unprivileged in today’s students, those classified as being subgroup members can be also seen as being relegated to heterotopias because heterotopias have “the ability to juxtapose in a single real place several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves” (p. 181). The utopian state of public education would be one in which
no child is left behind. However, many educators argue that while at-risk students should attend public schools, they are likely to fail if they are required to meet the same academic standards of all other students.

In order to better understand the No Child Left Behind Act’s place in the cycle of education reform, in Chapter Four I will analyze and discuss the rhetoric surrounding four previous education-related artifacts that in one way or another led to the passage of NCLB: the Brown v. Board Supreme Court decision of 1954, H. G. Rickover’s 1959 technical analysis called Education and Freedom, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and the 1983 A Nation at Risk report. In Chapter Five, I will look at what educators and politicians have to say in regard to the mandates of NCLB in an effort to determine the bill’s usefulness and why it has sparked so much controversy. I will also examine the effect the bill has and will have on students, teachers, and schools, especially in regard to the effects NCLB will have on students who are at risk of being left behind. In Chapter Six I address the research questions posed in Chapter Two and conclude with a summary of my findings.
Chapter Four

Before a movement for social justice can succeed, a critical collective of individuals must open their eyes to inequities and recognize that a problem exists. (Blanchett, Brantlinger, & Shealey, 2004, p. 66)

High level policy making, carried out over a long period of time, is a rhetorical activity. Thus, rhetorical activity occurs not only in the public address of presidents and other spokespersons but also in the more private communication of policy making groups. As in public address such communication is intentional; the decision makers take sides, and rhetorical strategies begin to garner support; the communication has past as well as future implications; it is problem solving; and identifiable patterns can be discovered in the language used. (Ball, 1998, p. 64)

Introduction

This dissertation explores the rhetorical significance of the discourse surrounding the No Child Left Behind Act, as well as significant modern artifacts that led up to NCLB’s passage in order to show how the socio-political climates of each era intertextually contributes meaning to the discourse surrounding the documents. Since this dissertation is being written as the capstone to a doctoral degree in Communication Studies, the goal of this research is to contribute not only to the discourse surrounding these acts, but also to the body of communication discourse.

The purpose of this chapter is to look at the rhetorical strategies within and surrounding four documents that have preceded the No Child Left Behind Act: the
1954 *Brown v. Board Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, H.G. Rickover’s (1959) technical analysis entitled *Education and Freedom*, the Educational and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and the 1983 report on the state of the United States public educations system entitled *A Nation at Risk*. All of these documents in one way or another led to or influenced the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act.

In addition to looking at these artifacts from a historical perspective, taking a rhetorical approach to this project is viable because, as Turner (1998) argues, “[T]he current field of communication derived from the historic study of rhetoric” (p.1). Ball (1998) points out that “[a] rhetorical perspective brings back the human focus on historical research, and the historical record places rhetorical discourse in context” (p. 62). Discourse surrounding policy, according to Ball (1998) contains language that is based on the “values, attitudes, and beliefs” (p. 64) of those developing policy. Policy makers often use language that is “poetic, metaphorical, and filled with narratives, myths, and fantasy themes that requiring an art of deciphering. Rhetoric is that art” (Ball, 1998, p. 64). Thus, looking at the discourse of educational documents and the discourse written in response to these documents in a rhetorical manner is an effective way of looking at what goes into policy making.

Rhetorical scholars have long been interested in how rhetoric sets the stage for shaping future discourse. The terms found in educational discourse function to rhetorically set the groundwork for what a future education system *should* hold. Burgchardt (2000) says that “rhetorical visions can embrace multiple facets of shared consciousness from every part of society” (p. 247). Groups of people interpret the
rhetorical meanings of language in different ways. Key terms in the discourse
surrounding public education are *excellence, equality, freedom, and democracy*.

Bormann (2000) contextualizes rhetorical language by saying that when an
event or discursive act takes place, people look at how it affects them and what future
implications this might hold. He says that a society’s viewpoint on political issues
causes people to formulate what he calls “rhetorical visions” (p. 250) that develop
from the contextual usage of language. Burgchardt (2000) points out that this occurs
when a group of people “constructs social reality” (p. 247) after being subjected to
public discourse.

Shortly after the United States became a sovereign nation, Thomas Jefferson
stated, “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects
what never was and never will be” (qtd. in Rickover, 1959, p. 11). In a perfect
democracy, all children would be educated in the best schools with the most qualified
staffs. However, in reality a number of economic and socio-political factors
determine how schools function.

When it comes to reading historical artifacts concerning policy making in
regard to public education reform, the terms *excellence, equality, democracy*, and
*freedom* are linguistic symbols (Burke, 1945); however, depending on which
document is being examined, the terms often take on different connotations not only
because of the socio-political climates at the times each document was published, but
also because of the degree of power each faction of Society holds at any given time.
Elmore and McLaughlin (1998) argue that:
What we call “education reform” is, in fact, a single but significant part of a much larger communication among education policy, administration, and practice that must occur for the educational system to function effectively. But the rhetoric of reform is often at odds with reality. The rhetoric describes “reforms” as discrete changes in policy that are either “there” or “not there.” (p. 13)

Elmore and McLaughlin (1988) maintain that reforming education is actually more about reforming language and that this is “initiated by shifts in policy, administration, or practice and in no necessary order” (p. 14). The rhetorical terms I mention earlier in this paragraph—as well as the rhetorical meaning of “no child left behind”—are part of the language of reform and change because of the shifts in policy, administration, and practice that Elmore and McLaughlin (1988) mention.

Ball (1998) maintains:

[Public address such as communication is intentional; the decision-makers take sides, and rhetorical strategies are used to garner support; the communication has past as well as future implications; it is problem solving; and identifiable patterns can be discovered in the language used. (p. 64)

Therefore, to look at the rhetoric surrounding other discursive documents helps set the meaning behind the No Child Left Behind Act into context.

Reform Movements Prior to the Mid-1950’s: The Separate but Equal Fallacy

As was shown in Chapter One, numerous inequities have plagued the United States public education system since its early days. Blanchett, Brantlinger, & Shealey
Espouse that it is a “human universal...for people to value a social reciprocity morality that maintains that all citizens should be treated equally and respectfully” (p. 66). For more than a century into the United States’ existence women, blacks, and other suppressed groups were not treated with equality or respect. However, as women and blacks worked hand in hand for more than a century to attain those rights that the Constitution promised but the government failed to deliver, American Society as a whole slowly became aware of the unfair treatment of women, racial minorities, the disabled, and the poor as the Twentieth Century advanced. Nevertheless, enjoying equal treatment was still far from being a reality for these groups of people.

On the educational front, the federal government basically took a distanced stance toward public education until the 1950’s and did little or nothing before that time to help at-risk students. In fact, the most significant federal directive in regard to public education prior to the 1950’s, the 1896 Supreme Court ruling, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, actually was a setback for black students in more ways than one. In a nutshell the court decision held that segregation was acceptable as long as whites and blacks had equal access to quality schools (Willie, 2005). Prior to that time, as was discussed in previous chapters, black students either received no education at all or were forced to receive their education in substandard schools, so despite its discriminatory overtones, the *Plessy* decision—like the Declaration of Independence—did at least promise equality. The problem with these edicts was that they did not deliver on their promises.

Nevertheless, while the *Plessy* decision served to solidify the separation of races, the equality aspect of the decision carried little or no weight as far as
enforcement went. In fact, as a result of *Plessy*, in many cases black children were taken out of at least somewhat functional schools and reassigned to school buildings that were no longer deemed to be acceptable for educating white students. At the same time, the tax dollars paid by black citizens were being spent to erect new educational facilities for white students (Willie, 2005). Therefore, a direct result of *Plessy* was that many black children were in a worse situation from an educational standpoint than they had been prior to the “separate but equal” ruling. Separation continued, but equality did not happen.

From a rhetorical and historical standpoint, *Plessy* sent a strong message that fell in line with the Declaration of Independence—that while in theory blacks (and other minorities) were equal to whites, to the hegemonic ruling class of American Society they were not. Thus, in the eyes of the government democracy was still a vehicle to promote white hegemony. In theory, even though it supported separation of the races the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision was a rudimentary effort by the court system to leave no child left behind in the area of education in that it promised equality in the form of equal access for all children to a quality education. However, this unfulfilled promise of equity through a separate but high quality education was never achieved because the latter part of the mandate was never fully enforced.

**The Beginnings of Reform: Moving Forward in Small Steps**

Black children remained relegated to attending substandard schools even after women and other ethnic and racial minorities were allowed equal access to public schools. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
began to gain strength during the early part of the Twentieth Century and its lobbying efforts began to have a positive effect on national politics in regard to the rights of minorities (Guthrie & Springer, 2004). Willie (2005) credits the NAACP with bringing forth a significant court decision that forced the courts to overturn the *Plessy* decision. NAACP attorneys began building a legal case during the 1940’s and worked on it for more than a decade. Finally, as a result of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* court case, the Supreme Court ruled that it is through integration, not separation, that public schools must function (Willie, 2005). However, the main problem with the *Plessy* decision, according to Willie (2005), was not only in its affirmation of separation, but that the equal opportunities *Plessy* promised were simply never made available to black students.

The *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision came about as the result of blacks gaining the right to vote and the pressure the NCAAP placed on politicians. The point must be made that political decisions are generally made by groups of people, but in general they are attributed to the United States president who happens to be in office at the time. That being said, references to specific presidents in this dissertation refer to the overall attitude of that presidential administration.

The NCAAP also found a sympathetic ear with President Harry Truman, who in the late 1940’s stated that all children deserved a right to a quality education regardless of their race (Brameld, 1957). Even though Truman left office in 1953, his support of what he referred to as a “Fair Deal” for all Americans in regard to all Americans having a chance to better themselves set the stage for the *Brown* decision of 1954 (Besler, 1995).
The Brown decision was the first modern artifact enacted in the name of attempting to leave no child behind in the area of education, effectively overturning the separation component of the Plessy decision while retaining the equality element. Even though its mandates would not be widely enforced for another decade, Willie (2005) argues that before Brown, “the continued existence of the United States as a democratic nation [was] in jeopardy” (p. 13). Democracy, to the point that Brown was enacted, applied only to the privileged classes. To Willie (2005), a true democracy meant that all people were treated equally. Blanchett, Brantlinger, and Shealey (2005) call Brown a “landmark case” (p. 67), even though it failed to accomplish all it sought to do, because it brought the problem of inequality to light through the clout of a legal decision, not as part of a document produced by an individual or group of people. Obviously, democracy and equality were issues addressed by Brown.

Blanchett, Brantlinger, and Shealey (2005) argue that it is a basic human right in a democracy that “all citizens should be treated equally and respectfully” (p. 66). While this was not the case in a country whose Declaration of Independence promised but did not back this very premise, various women’s movements and other civil rights movements had finally begun to have their voices heard by the second half of the Twentieth Century.

With the Brown decision at least legally erasing the discriminatory edicts set forth by Plessy in regard to public education, a good starting point for looking at the rhetorical ramifications of educational reform is with a rhetorical analysis of key educational artifacts published from that point to the present because the most
significant rhetorical documents in regard to the relationship between the government and public education have been produced since that time.

Although on the surface the two might not appear to be related, Nichols (2005) argues that Brown v. Board Board of Education Supreme Court decision and NCLB “share a common goal: to provide every child with a quality education” (p. 151). The rhetorical proposition here is that equality means that students of any background would not only be granted access to a quality education, but that minorities and whites would be educated in the same schools and be allowed admittance to the same classrooms. However, Nichols (2005) asserts that the rhetorical implications behind each of the federal mandates are actually in stark contrast. To Nichols (2005), Brown was more an issue of integration but it never brought forth equality, while NCLB relies on “high stakes accountability and a market-driven approach (p. 152) to what on the surface guarantees a quality education for all students regardless of where they go to school (Nichols, 2005). The rhetorical possibilities made possible by Brown center on allowing all students the opportunity to strive for equality through access, while NCLB focuses on pedagogical issues that supposedly lead to excellence through reaching proficiency (Nichols, 2005).

Despite the fact that it ultimately led to desegregation, Willie (2005) believes that the Brown lawsuit was not filed by the NAACP solely as a tool to empower the black race. He contends that the outcome of Brown ultimately benefited everyone—individuals of any color, gender, or economic status, as well as all communities—because prior to Brown only the privileged were guaranteed access to a quality public education. To Willie, it was having access to schools and not the degree of success
students achieve that defines equity. Moreover, Willie (2005) maintains that the Brown decision ultimately kept the United States “from splitting apart because it represented an overlapping consensus regarding excellence, commonly found among dominant people of power, with an overlapping consensus of equity, frequently advocated by subdominant people of power in this nation” (p. 13; italics in original). This overlap, according to Willie (2005), is a good thing because “equity and excellence complement each other” (p. 13); it serves as a system of checks and balances between the haves—economically privileged white males—and the have-nots—women, non-white racial groups, the poor, and the disabled. Willie (2005) sees the Brown ruling as facilitating both equity and excellence.

To Willie (2005), excellence is achieved not by individuals, but by Society as a whole. Therefore, even though most people see the Brown decision primarily as a court decision aimed at ending racial inequality, Willie (2005) argues that the rhetorical implications of Brown also served to promote excellence. To Willie (2005), achievement and excellence are not synonymous; however, to NCLB supporters, the terms are intertwined.

Even though it did not immediately bring forth total equity by providing a quality education for all suppressed students, the Brown decision did at least ostensibly plant the seeds for future reform that would benefit black students, as well as other minorities. Willie (2005) points out that prior to the Brown decision, it took black students on the whole 40% more in-class time to learn the same amount of material as did white students; today, this learning curve is nearly identical. Also, prior to Brown only 33% of blacks were graduating high school, while today’s figures
show that 84% of blacks graduate. Moreover, a residual effect of the *Brown* decision that has benefited all students is the fact that the percentage of adults over 25 years old who have completed at least a bachelors degree in college has risen from 6% to 26% (Willie, 2005). This affirms Willie’s (2005) argument is that in a democratic society there is common ground between excellence and equity as long everyone has an opportunity to seek excellence.

To emphasize his position, Willie (2005) points out that the equity gap has been greatly narrowed in the last half century in that the increase in black students who today complete a high school education is three times more than the increase seen by white students during the same time span. In the realm of higher education, the number of blacks that have completed bachelors’ degrees has increased eight times the amount of the increase seen in white students obtaining bachelor’s degrees during the same time span. This certainly indicates a move toward equality. Without *Brown*, these changes would have never occurred (Willie, 2005).

While there is no evidence that concretely links the *Brown* decision to all the advances that black students have made during the past half century, it would be difficult to deny that *Brown* was a catalyst that bolstered both the Civil Rights Movement and educational reform bills that have been enacted since that time. It was not the content of the decision itself, but the failure of publicly elected figures to enforce it, that initially thwarted *Brown’s* overall effectiveness (Guthrie & Springer, 2004; Willie, 2005). In fact, a second *Brown* decision was handed down in 1956 because the courts believed that states were not doing enough to enforce the original decision (Nichols, 2005). Even in light of the second *Brown* decision, segregation did
not end immediately. However, if it were not for *Brown*, it is very unlikely that the education reform bills of the past forty years would have been enacted, given that segregation had been legal prior to the court decision.

Without legal edicts that supported desegregation, the Civil Rights Bill of 1964 would not have been passed, nor would the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act a year later, which ultimately led to the No Child Left Behind Act. Thus, *Brown* struck a blow toward creating a true democratic education system—one where all students had equal access to quality schools—and it helped lay the groundwork for federal education reform; thus, the influence of that decision exists today.

Wraga (2006) makes the point that just because the *Brown* decision was handed down more than a half century ago, it holds significance nonetheless because it was a decision made by the highest judicial branch in the country. Therefore, Wraga (2006) argues that its impact is still relevant today when it comes to the issue of education reform since prior to *Brown* the courts ruled in favor of segregation. Wraga (2006) states that “social norms… [dictate] the extent of social unification that…[is] acceptable and therefore feasible in educational settings (p. 426). This was clearly evident as the United States public education evolved in the Eighteenth, Nineteenth, and into the Twentieth Century. However, through the *Brown* decision, the high court of the nation mandated that all school-aged children would be allowed access to a free, integrated, public education.

As Nichols (2005) contends, there is a link between the intended end results of *Brown* and those of the No Child Left Behind Act; however, an analysis of the two
federal decisions shows that they send forth distinctly different rhetorical messages.

Consequently, Wraga (2006) believes that the No Child Left Behind Act is problematic because he says it violates the spirit of the Brown decision. While Brown sought to provide all students with access to public schools with no stipulations as to how much children were required to learn, Wraga (2006) maintains that NCLB’s strict guidelines “discredit the public schools, …erode public confidence in the institution, and ultimately…pave the way for privatization of our public education system” (p. 428). Brown demanded that children attend school in the name of equality; NCLB demands that equality is achieved by students demonstrating high levels of proficiency.

Elmore and McLaughlin (1988) believe that “[t]he history of American education is, in large part, the history of recurring cycles of change” (p. v). Wraga (2006) and many others believe that the cycle should shift back to keep in line with the Brown decision. A change in the socio-political climate during the late 1950’s brought forth a wave of literature that would signal a shift in the ways in which American Society would look at public education—this was a shift away from the spirit of the Brown decision.

When Society as a whole became more globalized, many United States politicians began using scare tactic rhetoric to convince Americans that there was a real chance that the United States would fall behind the rest of the world. As was the case with the Brown decision, politics once again became a factor in controlling the American education system. However, this time instead of seeking to provide all students with a quality education, the rhetoric of the late 1950’s became that of
survival of the fittest, thus changing the connotations of excellence and equity and their relationship to freedom and democracy.

Reform in the Late 1950’s: Reacting to the “Red Scare”

The socio-political climate changed in the United States in the latter half of the 1950’s when what was then the Soviet Union began making major strides in the world of technology—most notably its space program—when it launched the rocket Sputnik in 1957. The political rhetoric of the day warned Americans of the rise of communism and hence, the “Red Scare” (Horne, 2005, p. 196) blanketed the nation and began to influence the lives of most citizens in the United States. Business leaders, politicians, and the public in general began to fear the takeover of the United States by the Soviet Union (Schrecker, 2004). As a result of this general fear that freedom and democracy were in peril, the message communicated by politicians and business leaders was that instead of assisting minorities in achieving equality, preserving the United States as a nation was the task that would take on most importance for the country as a whole (Horne, 2005).

Hyman G. Rickover was a vice admiral in the United States Navy during this era, and he had a hand in developing nuclear fission. As a result of his research and his vocation, he published Education and Freedom, a volume of speeches he had delivered to various groups of politicians and business leaders. The purpose of Rickover’s (1959) work was to convince America that its children should be educated to learn about new technology because of “the inadequacy of the American education system in this dynamic twentieth century” (p. 16).
A close look at Rickover’s (1959) work sends mixed messages as to what his take on public education should be. On one hand he argued that all school-aged children are important, stating that “we must have schools that develop in all children—talented, average, and below average—the highest level of intellectual competence of which they are capable; schools that help young people to understand the complex world of today and how it came to be what it is” (pp. 17-18). In order to do this, Rickover (1959) maintained that “schools must return to the traditional task of formal education” (p. 18). While Rickover (1959) did not define the word *traditional*, it becomes immediately clear that he was not referring to a nurturing type of education, nor did he espouse the pedagogical theories of John Dewey and his Progressive Education Movement.

While he said that all children deserve the chance to get an education, Rickover (1959) believed that learning technological skills—not social skills—was most vital to attaining a quality education. In fact, Rickover went as far as to assert that a liberal arts education is “nonsense” (p.24) and therefore “out of place in a democracy” (p. 24). According to Rickover (1959), Dewey’s educational theories had failed because of “heroic resistance and good judgment of our teachers” (p. 137). He said that as a result of progressive education curricula, the standard for success had been lowered because in progressive classroom, children were allowed to learn at their own pace instead of being required to master subject matter.

Rickover (1959) said that the reason liberal arts curricula had been tolerated in the early years of the United States history was because the nation did not have to
compete economically and technologically with other nations. This all changed with the onset of the Cold War and the Red Scare.

Rickover (1959) argued that Americans lived under the false impression and sense of security that the United States was a world leader in education, utilization of natural resources, and technology. In reality, according to Rickover (1959), other countries had passed the United States in all three areas. Rickover (1959) averred that the issue was not that the United States was lacking in natural resources and shapeable minds; instead, he said that over time the public education system had misused and wasted them. It was the responsibility of the schools, in Rickover’s (1959) view, to educate students on ways how to use technology and preserve the environment and economy in order to protect the nation’s freedom and stabilize a democratic government.

Where Brown sought to bring integration to the school system, Rickover (1959) seemed to favor educating the privileged class. Rickover (1959) stated that “[o]ur schools have done a fine job making Americans out of the motley groups of foreigners from all corners of the globe and doing it in record time. That job is finished” (p. 31). Obviously, what Rickover meant was that the time had come to stop assisting at-risk students in the name of the overall good of the country.

This does not necessarily mean that Rickover (1959) demanded that a free education should be limited to the elite; he said that every child should have access to an education. However, he clearly drew the line in regard to what equality meant. Rickover (1959) argued that college-bound students should be identified and given more advanced training than students who were simply slotted to enter the workforce.
after leaving high school. Despite his apparent disdain for the liberal arts, Rickover (1959) maintained that liberal arts courses should remain part of elementary and secondary curricula. His argument was that once students learned the basics of grammar and philosophy, among other subjects, the better students should be placed in to college preparatory tracks in order to go on to college and earn degrees based in math, science, or technology.

Rickover’s (1959) *Education and Freedom* is certainly rhetorically driven. He spoke about the relationship between democracy/freedom and equality/access and explained that they change context often. While the United States was born in the name of democracy and equality, Rickover (1959) argued that the meaning behind those terms were ever-shifting in light of changes in economics and technology. In order to have a true democracy, according to Rickover (1959), each student must contribute to the survival of the collective society either by entering the job market after high school and becoming a productive member of the labor force, or by going on to college and gaining further technical skills that would help to preserve the United States’ economical and technological prowess. Those who refused to do so, in Rickover’s (1959) view, were not worthy of enjoying a democratic lifestyle. In regard to equality, Rickover (1959) asserted that anyone who had the ability to learn and thus help society should have access to an advanced education. However, to Rickover (1959), having entitlement to equality in education was determined by the individual’s learned or natural ability and self-motivation to excel in terms of mathematics and science.
When reading *Education and Freedom*, it becomes apparent to the reader that Rickover (1959) falsely believed that all students had always shared equal access to a quality education when he said that youth had been educated “under equally favorable circumstances” (p. 53). He went on to assert that “[t]he Constitution insured fullest scope for each individual’s abilities” (p. 53). However, history says otherwise. Rickover (1959) seemed not to remember that the Constitution did not in reality provide equality for all people—it privileged wealthy white males—and at the time *Education and Freedom* was published the Civil Rights Movement had not even gained full momentum.

What Rickover (1959) implied was that for a democracy to work, each individual should accept his or her role in society. He stated, “Sometimes we forget that democracy is not a matter of rights alone; that it depends on its very life for acceptance of corollary duties” (p. 59). However, doing so would mean that suppressed groups would continue to be held back in society. To Rickover (1959):

Democracy guarantees everyone freedom and opportunity to develop his [sic] mind and character without hindrance from external sources so that he [sic] may put them to use not only for himself [sic] but for the community as well. It is an inspiring banner under which to fight the enemies of freedom. (p. 60)

Rickover (1959) believed that education was the key to democracy. He argued that “advanced countries…provide for the formal education of all their children” (p. 100; italics in original). If the United States were to remain advanced among world powers, Rickover (1959) maintained that “its best investment for the future is effort and money put into the schools” (p. 100). It is clear that Rickover
supported education, but his rhetorical stance was that granting admittance was enough—if the students fell behind then it was not the fault of the school. Simply put, to Rickover (1959), equality meant having access.

Rickover (1959) did believe that in the name of freedom of democracy that education reform was needed in order for the United States to remain competitive as a world power, citing that for years “our educational system has been allowed to deteriorate” (p. 101). He blamed a lack of funding for exacerbating the problem. However, the primary reason for funding deficits, according to Rickover (1959) was a population expansion that had outgrown the tax dollars needed to keep schools running. He blamed the government for a “long term trend [in which] taxes were not raised fast enough or high enough” (p. 102). To remedy this problem, Rickover (1959) argued that “[w]e must spend substantially more for education” (p. 105) and that tax revenues must be spent “more wisely” (p. 105).

Although Rickover (1959) did not specifically point out who the “we” is that is to spend more and spend more wisely, his message seemed to indicate that improving schools was to be a joint burden of the schools, the government, and Society as a whole. He stated that within the next decade a plan must be put into place that would show marked improvement on America’s schools. Rickover’s (1959) vision did come to fruition at least to some extent, because during the next decade after Education and Freedom was written, a spate of education reform bills were enacted—but they were geared toward serving disadvantaged students instead of the most talented ones (see Chapter Two).
In addition to improving the school buildings themselves, Rickover (1959) pointed out that public school teachers had always been underpaid, and he says that the only way to recruit and retain quality, devoted teachers was to pay them a fair salary. “It will profit us very little,” Rickover (1959) maintained, “to spend millions of dollars on scholarships and then place the students under incompetent teachers” (107). Where the No Child Left Behind Act supports hiring and retaining highly qualified teachers due to their ability to pass pre and post employment testing, Rickover’s (1959) suggestion would add more incentive for college students to enter teacher education programs in the first place, thus increasing the talent pool and competition for jobs.

Another point that Rickover (1959) put forth in regard as to why the teaching profession was not more enticing was that when not enough teachers were available to staff schools, class sizes were simply increased and teachers did not have adequate amounts of time to devote to students; the result was that students learned even less. By raising salaries and recruiting highly talented teachers, Rickover (1959) believed that the overall quality of the education field would increase. Even today, teachers are paid less than that of most other professions (Smallwood, 2006). Since the No Child Left Behind Act places so much emphasis on accountability through proficiency testing, it would make sense that having quality teachers with manageable class sizes would help students and teachers alike.

Despite his passionate pleas for the nation to educate its school-aged children, improve schools, and increase teacher salaries, much of what Rickover (1959) wrote in regard to the students themselves seemed to be done through blinders. He said that
the United States education system had not done a good job identifying and bringing out the full potential of its brightest students. On several occasions he alluded to the Declaration of Independence and claimed that it had made everyone equal. As such, Rickover (1959) maintained that:

Democracy guarantees everyone freedom and opportunity to develop his [sic] mind and character without hindrance from external sources so that he [sic] may put them to use not only for himself [sic] but for the community as well. It is an inspiring banner under which to battle the enemies of freedom. (p. 60).

The reason why many students were left behind, in Rickover’s (1959) view, was that “the Lord has seen fit to give us minds that differ in capacity to absorb formal education” (p. 112). However, what Rickover (1959) did not take into account was that for many years only the children of the affluent were given access to quality education; he did acknowledge that for this reason other socio-economic/racial groups lagged behind upper class white males.

Rickover (1959) seemed oblivious to the years of discrimination that all minorities had faced; this became evident when he stated, “In our society all men are considered equal as human beings and as children of God; they are also equal as citizens” p. 113). The fallacy in this reasoning is that even though the Declaration of Independence did indeed claim that all were created equal, history shows that not all people were treated equally. In addition, whether it was intentional or not, the fact that Rickover (1959) used gender-biased language throughout Education and Freedom is a testament that when spoke of whom had benefited the most throughout the history of American Society, he was speaking of the privileged.
Ostensibly, Rickover (1959) advocated access to education for all students, but he was also quick to point out that “intellectually we are not all equal” (p. 13). He argued that it was the most talented students, not those in danger of falling behind, who should be given precedence in receiving a high quality education. Rickover (1959) did say that all students who had the ability to excel in science and technology should be those who were given preference for a high quality education, but the problem with this logic is one that had plagued the United States education since its start—racial minorities and economically disadvantaged students had not typically had access to a quality education, and the Brown decision had not brought on immediate results. Consequently, minority students who did not have access to quality schools had not received the opportunity to cultivate their talents to their full potential. As a result, that group of students by and large would be the ones who would be left behind if the public school system diverted most of its attention on those who were academically advanced.

As the title Education and Freedom suggests, Rickover’s (1959) text focused on the relationship between education and freedom, with democracy as a key term in tying the two together. This can perhaps be explained by Bormann, Cragan, and Shields (2000), who say that during the Red Scare/Cold War, America held a rhetorical vision of “an international communist conspiracy, with its master plot line to overthrow the free world” (p. 261). With the fear of communism and loss of democracy being seen as a fantasy theme by a large faction of American Society, it is no wonder that Rickover’s (1959) rhetoric was influential at the time. Because of
this, many children were destined to fall by the wayside in the name of preserving a
democratic sovereignty.

Rickover (1959) argued that educating less talented students held back the
talented ones, and he believed that allowing this to continue would be a thorn in the
side of democracy. Rickover (1959) believed that “the most effective step we can
take immediately is to unshackle our talented youth from the lock step of the average
and below-average pupil who is forced to or wishes only to have fun at school” (p.
115). Apparently, in Rickover’s view students either learned or they had fun, but the
two were not to be done in combination. By doing this, he could use the achievement
gap as a rhetorical device to show the seriousness of the worldwide situation—a fear
that the Soviet Union posed a clear and present danger to democracy. Rickover
(1959) used the fear tactic that the United States was in danger of losing the
technology race to Russia, and only those who were serious and talented could help
save the country and thus preserve democracy.

Where the No Child Left Behind Act requires proficiency testing to measure
student achievement, Rickover (1959) believed in looking at another type of testing to
determine who the talented students were—intelligence quotient (IQ) testing, which
first became popular in the earlier part of the Twentieth Century. Rickover (1959)
said that quantifying what constitutes a high IQ is a matter of debate; however, he
believed that if the top 25% of public school students were placed into advanced
curriculum tracks, this would identify all the talented students and would give those
with less than average intelligence but with high levels of motivation a fair chance.
Studies have been conducted that show the relationship between motivation and
achievement (see Chapter Three), but here Rickover (1959) relied on his own speculation—and not research—in determining which students were to be earmarked as being talented.

Rickover (1959) admitted in *Education and Freedom* that not much effort had been put forth into identifying the talented class of students. However, he believed that “the slower group sets the pace and receives more attention from the teacher” (p. 117). As a result of this, the more intelligent students were “kept from advancing at a speed appropriate to their ability” (p. 113). Many of NCLB’s detractors argue that is exactly what is happening in today’s schools—even when the pace is slowed down for poorer students, the talented students must tread water until the slower students catch up (Haas, Wilson, Cobb & Rallis, 2005).

As far as leaving children behind in the education world, Rickover’s (1959) philosophical stance was generally in opposition to the *Brown* decision and most certainly he did not believe that extensive efforts should be devoted to leaving no child behind. To Rickover (1959), allowing all students access to public schools was enough—it was their responsibility to find ways to advance.

Rickover (1959) did not seem to take into consideration that at no time during the history of the United States had disadvantaged students received a chance to cultivate their brains to their fullest potential. His rhetorical stance was that the Declaration of Independence had indeed made everyone equal, even though it had not.

Rickover (1959) was not saying that students with less than above average intelligence should not be given a chance to learn; his bottom line was that if they fell
by the wayside, then so be it. He maintained that American Society had tricked itself into believing that a democratic education could be achieved “by forcing all children—below average, average, talented, and brilliant—to march together to their eighteenth year, absorbing lots of life adjustment but so little real education” (p. 121). Rickover (1959) failed to accept the fact that some children were behind others because of their disadvantaged status in Society. He was concerned only with the fate of the best and the brightest of America’s students. It stands to reason that if intelligence testing and advanced curriculum tracking were to be implemented, then minorities would fall even farther behind, but Rickover (1959) turns a blind eye to this probability.

However, Rickover (1959) did acknowledge that historical eras are different; the point he made was that in light of the Red Scare and Cold War and the launching of *Sputnik*, American schools needed to make a commitment to educating its best students in order to protect a democratic form of government. As I pointed out in Chapters One and Two, the rhetorical meaning behind artifacts changes in regard to socio-political climes within each historical era. With that being said, *education, equality, excellence, freedom*, and *democracy* are all terms that undeniably changed in scope and meaning from the time of the *Brown* decision and Rickover’s (1959) work. These terms would change again during the next decade as the ominous specter of the Red Scare began to a take a back seat to the Civil Rights Movement.

Taking into account his military background, it should come at no surprise that Rickover (1959) would argue for preservation of democracy and freedom at any cost, even if it meant falsely claiming that all children had been given equal access to
an education throughout the United States’ existence. In retrospect, it can be argued that *Education and Freedom* (1959) was a politically driven rhetorical artifact. Hall (2005) maintains that when taking a revisionist look at the era surrounding the Red Scare, it becomes apparent that the threat of a Soviet overthrow simply had been blown out of proportion. Hall (2005) further argues that much of the scare tactics that came about as a result of Red Scare rhetoric was done to further suppress the black race. This is because, as Horne (2005) points out, many people believe that to bring all groups onto an equal economic and social status promotes a trend toward a communist or socialist state. Changes would come about with the next decade, but it would not be the end of the shifts in political rhetoric concerning public education.

**Envisioning a Great Society: Education Reform in the 1960’s and 1970’s**

The 1960’s brought on the Cuban Missile Crisis, followed by the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. America remained in turmoil for the first part of the decade and changes were needed in order to restore faith in the United States as a land of equality, freedom, and democracy; thus, the rhetorical meanings of these terms once again changed. Kennedy’s successor, Lyndon Johnson, used political rhetoric to promote what he referred to as a “Great Society” (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988, p. 24) to begin a trend toward promoting equality for all citizens, regardless of their racial or socioeconomic background. Morale among most citizens of the United States was low in the wake of the Red Scare/Cold War and Kennedy’s death.

Consequently, Johnson sought to restore the country to prominence in order to regain the faith of the people by using the rhetorical strategy of promising equality for
all people (Frost, 2002). In the realm of education, where Rickover (1959) argued that the preservation of freedom and democracy would be accomplished by educating the brightest students, in Johnson’s view providing access as well as assistance to all students—especially those at risk—was vital to maintaining democracy and freedom. Changes in civil rights and education reform took hold almost immediately upon Johnson’s swearing-in.

In the realm of public education, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed in 1965 as part of Johnson’s vision of America prospering as a “Great Society.” As a senator and later as United States president, in the eyes of many Johnson was a champion of Civil Rights (Frost, 2002). At the same time, Johnson was seen as an advocate for all of American Society. At first, his Great Society produced “an avalanche of legislation designed to improve the lives of millions of Americans” (Frost, 2002, p. 81). The legislation included the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The acts were passed to help blacks and other minorities. Other bills were passed to help the poor and the elderly, and a tax cut bill was enacted to provide more spending money for all Americans (Frost, 2002). On a long term scale, however, Johnson’s dream was to be short lived.

With the Vietnam War escalating in the late 1960’s, Johnson abandoned his vision for America attaining the status of having one Great Society (Barnes, 2005). Fortunately, however, federal money from the legislation passed under Johnson was still being distributed in some form or another, especially in the field of education (Frost, 2002). Thus, while Johnson’s Great Society was never fully realized from a rhetorical perspective, the educational aspect of his dream still lives today.
The Elementary and Secondary Education Act was enacted thorough a series of title designations, with each title distributing money toward different aspects of education. Two of the most controversial and highly funded elements of ESEA are Title I and Title III. Title I of ESEA provided the most funding to schools—literally billions of dollars was designed “to supplement the education of disadvantaged children” (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988, p. 24). To do so, students with special needs were pulled from their regular classes for at least a portion of the day in order to receive specialized instruction (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988). Proponents of Title I believed that it would help these children “improve their achievement, and hence redistribute economic and social opportunities in society” (p. 25). Obviously, in the minds of ESEA reformers, equity meant more than simply having access to an education; it meant that disadvantaged students were to be placed on a more even playing field with others. It is also apparent that unlike Rickover’s view of education, at-risk students should be given additional support instead of being left by the wayside in the name of serving only the most talented students. A shift in political regimes, a lessened fear of the Soviet Union, and a new rhetorical vision for the country all had a hand in funneling federal education dollars to public schools for the first time.

In spite of all it set out to accomplish, controversy surrounded ESEA’s Title I in that local schools believed that they should be allowed to use Title I money at their discretion, while legislators demanded “review of local programs and for evaluation of their results that were designed to hold local districts responsible for producing tangible results with disadvantaged children” (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988, p. 25).
While the government wanted the money to be spent on the “special needs” (p. 25) of the most disadvantaged children, local schools wanted to have the discretion to spend the money in ways that would provide “the maximum benefit for the largest number of children” (p. 25).

While these arguments extend elements of *Brown* and Rickover’s (1959) *Education and Freedom*, the debates also set the battle lines for current problems in today’s schools and illustrate the cyclical nature of education reform. The Civil Rights Movement lobbied the government to provide the monies for disadvantaged students, yet when it was disbursed the local school districts believed that they knew how to best spend the funds. This was very much like the way in which Rickover (1959) believed that education dollars should be spent. By the end of the decade the federal government began to demand accountability for monies it provided schools.

At first the local districts won the fight, but in 1969 the NAACP published a report stating that an “extensive misuse of funds” (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988, p. 26) had actually caused minority students to be even more disadvantaged. As a result of this report, Title I became “a more regulatory policy” (p. 25). Despite its good intentions, if Title I funds were mishandled by the schools then the problems this misuse created recalls memories of *Brown*—the language for change was in place but the desired outcomes were not achieved. However, in this case the minority voice actually was heard and influenced the modification of Title I distribution.

Over the next half decade Congress amended Title I, so despite the fact that the NCAAP initiated changes, in reality this gave the government more control over allocation of the funds and the right to monitor its use (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988).
In addition to regulating funds, the government also began monitoring students that were enrolled in programs that received Title I funds. As a result, it found that from 1966 to 1978, 87 percent of the students participating in programs funded by Title I money had been identified as being low-achieving, poor, or both. Elmore and McLaughlin (1988) call this “a remarkable targeting of federal resources” (p. 26). However, they point out that the numbers only show the demographic of students who had access to Title I resources, not the degree of success of the program or the degree of student achievement.

The No Child Left Behind Act, an extension of ESEA, seeks to measure student achievement. The difference is that under NCLB, success hinges upon all students reaching proficiency levels. At issue is the debate as to how well proficiency tests can accurately measure student achievement. Under NCLB, accountability in the form of assessment scores determines how well resources are used.

Another significant phase of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was its Title III provision. Title III of ESEA originally provided federal “discretionary grants” (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988, p. 20) to assist local school districts as well as individual schools in a variety of ways. After the grant money was awarded, it was up to the districts and schools to decide how to use it where it was most needed (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988). Although specific instructions were not spelled out as to how the money was to be used, in most cases it went toward personnel training and improving teaching methods (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988). While schools welcomed these ESEA funds, the unlimited and unmonitored flow of
money soon came under fire when the overall vision of a “Great Society” did not come to be.

Frost (2002) says that from an educational standpoint the Great Society did not succeed in part because there was no system of accountability put into place to monitor the dollars put forth by the government. In regard to ESEA, the ways in which schools and districts used the monies were negatively criticized by politicians as time passed because no method of accountability had been put into place, and that measuring the effectiveness of student learning, teacher training, and changes in classroom techniques was “difficult to document” (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988, p. 22). Once the money was allocated, it was up to each state to determine which districts and schools received funding and how much they received. Critics argued that it was “impossible to say precisely who was being helped and how” (p. 22). In today’s society it is not surprising that the government wants to see a return on its investment; consequently, the No Child Left Behind Act is steeped in accountability. Critics, however, believe that requirements are too difficult to reach (Cook, 2005).

A stronger move toward surveillance of government funding took hold in the early 1980’s after Ronald Reagan began his presidency. As I discussed in Chapter Two, much like Rickover (1959) used Education and Freedom to advance his views, Reagan used the A Nation at Risk (1983) report as a rhetorical vehicle to put forth the fear that the country was in peril of falling behind the rest of the world. In Reagan’s view, too much education money and resources had been spent on helping the disadvantaged students. Because of this and the controversy Title I and Title III had generated, Reagan commissioned a study in the early years of his presidency to
examine the distribution and use of ESEA funds. As a result of this study, researchers found that the original funding of ESEA had been granted on the false “assumption that reform originates in local settings, rather than in expert knowledge and social science methods” (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988, p. 24). This type of reform foreshadows the tenets of the No Child Left Behind Act—it calls for outside agencies to observe classroom activities and that schools evaluate learning based solely on the basis of social scientific proficiency testing.

Despite the negative criticism that surrounded its intent and results, Elmore and McLaughlin (1988) point out that ESEA should not be seen as a failure. Even though there were no measurable results to quantify the amount of student learning that took place, “Title I produced a wealth of practical insight at the school and district level into the special problems of educationally disadvantaged children” (p. 27). Without federal funding, according to Elmore and McLaughlin (1988), this would not have happened. Despite the regulations placed on ESEA, Title I funding is still used in 70% of today’s schools (Cook, 2005).

Nevertheless, the results of the study conducted in regard to ESEA has had a profound effect on federally funded educational reform and is no more evident than it is in the No Child Left Behind Act, which is an extension of ESEA. NCLB, unlike ESEA, is rooted in accountability that is measured by standardized proficiency tests. However, unlike the early mandates of ESEA in regard to student learning, instead of removing students from classrooms for special instructional methods, NCLB mandates that all children are to be educated in the same classrooms.
Rhetorically speaking, under ESEA and Titles I and III, it can be argued that
excellence in education is not possible without equity. It also can be argued that
ESEA’s original mission was not realized in part due to the preservation of
democracy and freedom—afters all, Lyndon Johnson’s plans for a Great Society was
upset by America’s commitment to participate in the Viet Nam War (Frost, 2002). In
a similar vein to how society reacted to Rickover’s cautionary rhetoric in response to
the Cold War shortly following the Brown decision of 1954, the same can be said for
Reagan’s conservative political rhetoric in that it also changed the ways in which
Society viewed the public education system beginning in the 1980’s.

The 1980’s: Ignoring the Plight of the Disadvantaged to Preserve the Greater Good

Around the same time ESEA was being overhauled, the A Nation at Risk: An
Imperative for Educational Reform report was published in 1983 by the National
Commission on Excellence in Education. After two decades of education reform
bills, A Nation at Risk (1983) was published as a mechanism to warn that the nation
was still in peril of falling behind other countries in the areas of technology and
education. However, in order to understand the relevance of this document, it is
essential to look at the rhetorical implications of the report, as well as the driving
political forces behind it. Ronald Reagan began his presidency in 1981, and the
country took a turn toward conservatism shortly afterward (Hall, 2005). While
Reagan did not directly argue against a free public education for all students, he
stated that educational reform geared toward helping minorities was detrimental to
the overall good of the country (Mondale, “The Bottom Line,” 2001). Much like
Rickover (1959), Reagan believed that it was vital that only the most talented students should be the ones that were guaranteed the best educational opportunities.

The National Commission on Excellence in Education was created by the United States Department of Education in 1981 (A Nation at Risk, 1983). Its purpose was “to present a report on the quality of education in America” (A Nation at Risk, 1983, p. iii). Much in the same vein of Rickover’s (1959) work, the report was published at a time when the nation feared that it was losing its competitive edge with the rest of the world. While Rickover (1959) had written in response to the “Red Scare/Cold War,” or the fear that the Soviet Union might overthrow democracy, A Nation at Risk (1983) was published to report “that downwardly spiraling pupil performance had rendered the U.S. education system dysfunctional, thereby threatening the nation’s technological, military, and economic preeminence” (Guthrie & Springer, 2004, p. 8) and that the only way to reverse this trend was for the educational system to subordinate “itself to the educational superiors and economic competitors” (p. 8).

David Gardner, the chair of the commission at the time, asserted that the commission had been “candid in our report regarding both the strengths and weaknesses of American education” (A Nation at Risk, 1983, p. iii). Issues that the commission explored included assessing “quality of teaching and learning” (p. 1), and examining how well United States schools measured up against each other, as well as “those of advanced nations” (p. 1). Like Rickover’s (1959) work, A Nation at Risk (1983) was written to make the public aware that the United States was in danger of
falling behind other countries in how well it educated its students and prepared them for life beyond secondary school.

Gardner says in the introduction to the report that *A Nation at Risk* (1983) also addressed whether or not “college admission requirements and student achievement in high school” (p. 2) showed any clear connection. Moreover, according to Gardner, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) sought to evaluate to what degree “social and educational changes” (p. 2) since the 1950’s had “affected student achievement” (p. 2). Lastly, the report set out to identify “problems which must be faced and overcome if we are successfully to pursue the course of excellence in education” (p. 2). In its rhetorical context, achieving excellence is something that an elite group of talented students must achieve in order to preserve democracy and freedom; this is to a large degree the same message that Rickover (1959) put forth in *Education and Freedom*. Similarly, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) supported access for all, but admitted that many children would necessarily be left behind in order to preserve the well-being of American Society in general.

The rhetorical overtones of the report can be seen in its first line when the commission states: “Our nation is at risk” (*A Nation at Risk*, 1983, p. 5). In support of this statement the commission makes the claim that “our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world” (p. 5). This issue that the commission raised is not that the United States educational system had not necessarily taken a step backward—the argument was that other nations had surpassed the United States in overall knowledge.
As was the case with Rickover (1959), *A Nation at Risk* (1983) alluded to the *Sputnik* “challenge” (p. 5) as a means to point out the starkness of what it deemed to be a severe problem. Using a war metaphor, the report asserted that by falling behind in the field of education, American Society was guilty of “committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament” (p. 5). The report went on to say that because other nations had presumably surpassed the United States in terms of performance, “the educational foundations of our society are being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people” (p. 5). *A Nation at Risk* (1983) likened the threat of other nations leaving the United States behind in the field of education to “an act of war” (p. 5). While Rickover (1959) wrote during the beginning of the Cold War, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) used war more as a metaphor—but the implications were severe nonetheless. The report stated that “[o]ur society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined study needed to attain them” (p. 5-6).

*A Nation at Risk* (1983) blamed the problems in the United States educational system on Society for placing conflicting demands on America’s schools. The report stated that the public school system had shouldered the burden of helping students work through the “personal, social, and political problems” (p. 6) not addressed within the home or by other social agencies. The commission believed that this was not what schools should be concerned with. In a similar vein as Rickover’s (1959) rhetoric, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) maintained that public schools must prepare children for college by educating them in “literacy and training essential to this new
era” (p. 7) in order for the nation to keep up with the educational systems of other
countries. The report also recalled the theme of freedom and democracy, citing that a
quality education was essential in order to maintain “a free, democratic society” that
helped to develop “a common culture” (p. 7) in order to foster “pluralism and
individual freedom” (p. 7). Like Brown, Rickover, ESEA, and later NCLB, *A Nation
at Risk* (1983) acknowledged that educational reform is vital and beneficial to all
people regardless of their age, social, or racial status. However, like the
aforementioned artifacts, the ideologies behind each are fundamentally different upon
a closer look.

Pedagogically, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) strayed from Rickover’s (1959) work
in that it called for more of an emphasis on literacy, as well as science and math—
academic subjects that have been earmarked for increased student achievement under
the guidelines of the No Child Left Behind Act. In support of its findings, the *A
Nation at Risk* (1983) report provided statistics showing a decline in American
students’ overall achievement levels in all subjects. This, coupled with advances by
other nations in regard to academic achievement, was the reason cited within the
report to explain why American students were not performing as well as students in
many other countries in reading, math, and science. The significance of this is that,
according to the report, the United States had fallen behind in the “information age”
(p. 8). Like the rhetoric surrounding the Cold War/Red Scare and the Great Society,
allusions to falling behind in an age where information owning and sharing became a
strong rhetorical tool that politicians could use to reinforce the concept that the nation
was truly at risk.
While the Commission on Excellence in Education did acknowledge that on the whole the average American student at the time the report was written was more educated in reading, math, and science than was the average student of the past, the problem, according to *A Nation at Risk* (1983) was that many American students who graduated high school were not as prepared as school-aged children from other countries entering the workforce or college:

Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is one that undergirds American prosperity, security, and civility. (p. 5)

Just as it had been the case in Rickover’s (1959) work, the issue of preserving democracy and freedom in the name of the ruling classes fueled the rhetorical implications of *A Nation at Risk* (1983). The report stated that education reform had caused the quality of schools to be “eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and as a people” (p. 5). This mindset was in contrast to how democracy and freedom were viewed in light of the *Brown* decision and the educational reform enacted under Lyndon Johnson. Thus, the cycle of change was woven in light of changes in Society’s views of how prepared the country was to compete with the rest of the world.

*A Nation at Risk* (1983) called for “reform and excellence throughout education” (p. 12). The commission placed emphasis on reading, writing, and literature as, with an emphasis on understanding “the customs, ideals, and values of
today’s life and culture” (p. 25). The report also pointed out that the purpose for high school mathematics was to prepare students to have the necessary skills to enter college or the workforce. Like mathematics, science was another subject that the commission believed should be emphasized in the classroom.

Reading, mathematics, and science are all staples of the No Child Left Behind Act, and were supported as well by the *A Nation at Risk* (1983) report. However, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) argued that equal emphasis must be placed on computer sciences and social studies. While computer use has become essential to survival in today’s world, it is not required under NCLB proficiency testing requirements. The importance of teaching social studies, according to *A Nation at Risk* (1983), was to allow students to make connections between the past, the present, and the future in the areas of economics and understanding the difference between “free and repressive societies” (p. 26) and was “requisite to the informed and committed exercise of citizenship in our free society” (p. 26). Again, the reference to freedom and democracy in this rhetorical context is different from that of *Brown* and that of Johnson’s Great Society. Like Rickover’s (1959) work, the *A Nation at Risk* (1983) report sends the message that Society must understand the importance of freedom and democracy in order to preserve the nation.

As I mentioned earlier, understanding the rhetorical connotations of key words is vital to making an informed analysis of any document. In the eyes of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, *excellence* takes on different meanings. On an individual basis, excellence means to reach achievement levels “on the boundary of individual ability in ways that test and push back personal limits, in
school and in the workplace” (p. 12). The report defines excellence for schools as setting “high expectations and goals” (p. 12) for students and providing a way for students to attain this. For the nation to achieve excellence, the report states that its citizens must cooperatively work with students and schools in order to make these goals reach fruition:

- We have come to understand that the public will demand that educational and political leaders act forcefully and effectively on these issues. Indeed, such demands have already appeared and could well become a unifying national preoccupation. This unity, however, can be achieved only if we avoid the unproductive tendency of some to search for scapegoats among the victims, such as beleaguered teachers. (A Nation at Risk, 1983, p. 12)

The message put forth by this statement was that in a politically driven society, schools were expected to produce students that met the needs of that society. As far as curricula go, the commission found that that schools had become too “homogenized” (p. 18). The argument it made was that students should be trained for living a productive life after high school, whether that life included going to college for further training or entering the workforce immediately upon graduation. Consequently, the commission believed that students must enroll in courses that would prepare them for one of the two post-graduation scenarios.

The issue of equality is also addressed in the A Nation at Risk (1983) report. Like the Brown decision and Rickover’s (1959) Education and Freedom, the National Commission on Educational Excellence believed that students should be given access to a public education. Unlike Rickover (1959), the commission acknowledged the
diversity of the population and maintained that “[t]he twin goals of equity and high-quality schooling have profound and practical meaning for our economy and society, and we cannot permit one to yield to the other either in principle or in practice” (p. 13). To look at this statement on its face value, one could argue that the report sought to ensure that no child would be left behind. However, it was not the well-being of individual students that the report sought to address—it was the well-being of the country that was seen as being in peril if educational standards were not raised.

In order for schools to reach the goals set forth by *A Nation at Risk* (1983), the commission maintained that schools, parents, and Society as a whole must work together. The report was in line with NCLB in that it called for schools to hire teachers who were highly qualified within their field. The commission said that college education programs should be evaluated on how well they prepared prospective teachers for entering the classroom. Like the No Child Left Behind Act, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) proposed penalties for teachers whose students failed to reach proficiency; however, unlike NCLB the commission advocated giving pay raises to teachers whose students perform well. This was in opposition to Rickover (1959) who proposed higher salaries to increase competition at the hiring level. It also differed from ESEA funding, which sought money to be distributed toward teacher training at the discretion of individual states and districts. Despite their differences, these documents all provide direct links toward the passage of No Child Left Behind Act and show how the cycles of change during political administrations affect education reform.
A Nation at Risk (1983) also differed from the No Child Left Behind Act in that it suggested that all children, “regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost” (p. 8). This statement did not mandate that no child would be left behind; it only implied that all children should be given access to an education. Moreover, the report placed much of the burden of achievement on the children themselves by declaring:

All children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself. (p. 8)

Another way in which A Nation at Risk (1983) contrasted the No Child Left Behind Act was that it called for a curriculum that allowed students to choose which courses to enroll in based upon their career goals; NCLB’s demand for proficiency testing forces schools to prepare all students for passing standardized tests. On the issue of assessment, A Nation at Risk (1983) proposed that a combination of measurements should be applied to determining how much or how well students learned, while the No Child Left Behind Act places reaching proficiency as the sole benchmark for measuring student success.

The commission found that proficiency testing should be used as one means of assessment, but that traditional grading by teachers was still important. A Nation at Risk (1983) also reported that the rigor of the courses themselves must be taken into consideration in order to determine how much students learn. Moreover, the
commission determined that proficiency testing should be used to “assist” (p. 28) teachers in determine the level of progress each student had reached. Under NCLB, proficiency testing is the sole means of determining student success. The rhetorical message sent by the *A Nation at Risk Report* (1983) was that in times of peril students should be encouraged to determine their own career tracks. Schools were responsible for providing the means to attain an education and it would be up to the students to determine what they would do with their educational opportunities.

Where the No Child Left Behind Act requires all students to meet a high level of proficiency, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) said that in order for students to reach their full potential, schools should “expect and assist all students to work to the limits of their capabilities” (p. 13). Like NCLB, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) reported that schools must set high standards for all students, regardless of their backgrounds. Unlike NCLB, however, the report did not propose penalties for schools that failed to produce excellent students. Neither artifact provides solutions for educating a diverse populace. As for the role of teachers, where the No Child Left Behind Act raises standards for teacher qualifications, *A Nation at Risk* (1983), much along the same lines of Rickover (1959), argued that education reform could not be successful unless it provided teachers more incentives for remaining on the job.

The federal government has set a number of elevated goals for schools under the No Child Left Behind Act; in contrast, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) stated that in addition to receiving input from politicians, it was imperative that educators and outside professionals (such as scientists or other technological experts) should work together to identify problems and to agree on solutions that would facilitate
educational reform. Moreover, the *A Nation at Risk* (1983) report found that the federal government should not implement across the board proficiency testing; it maintained that state and local school systems should be responsible for testing students and determining which means of assessment would best serve students. The primary responsibility for financing schools, according to the report, also lay with the local and state entities. This differs from NCLB in that in the federal government provides funding only as long as the individual states and districts meet the expectations set forth by the act.

While *A Nation at Risk* (1983) placed the main burden of funding and running schools on state and local educators and politicians, it recognized that the federal government did have a responsibility to support public education, but it differed greatly from the role it now has with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act. According to the *A Nation at Risk* (1983) report, the federal government must “identify the national interest in education” (p. 33). The commission also reported that the federal government should provide supplemental financial support to public schools. Under NCLB, supplemental assistance is promised—as long as the schools reach proficiency. Giving states more freedom to run schools was a key issue under the Reagan presidency. Leaving the schools under state rule gave them the freedom to set their own rules and to educate the students in the ways they saw most fit. This non-intervention carried a downside financially—if the states ran the schools then the federal government could spend money earmarked for education in other ways. Another main difference in the ramifications of the *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and the
No Child Left Behind Act is that *A Nation at Risk* (1983) merely offered suggestions while NCLB operates on a rewards and punishment system.

The *A Nation at Risk* (1983) report warned Americans of the dangers they would face if school reform was not made. In essence, the rhetorical significance of the report can be articulated as follows: “Excellence costs. But in the long run mediocrity costs far more” (p. 33). Reaching the status of excellence under the terms of *A Nation a Risk* (1983) was much like the definition Rickover (1959) would give—educating American students so that they could stay ahead of students from other nations. This indicates that excellence did not need to be achieved by each individual student; the main concern was that on the whole American students would be better educated than those of other nations.

Ensuring equity, to the commission, was to provide each student with the chance to have a quality education. This falls in line with the *Brown* decision, Rickover’s (1959) work, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Along the lines of democracy and freedom, *Brown* and ESEA seemed to be more internalized—getting a quality education is a tenet of freedom and democracy. To Rickover and the National Commission on Excellence in Education, staying ahead of other nations in technology and economics is the way to support democracy and ensure freedom.

Rickover (1959) wrote in response to the Red Scare; the Commission on Excellence in Education wrote in response to a national risk. These rhetorical devices were used as an attempt to sway American Society into changing its definition of education reform from being a mechanism geared toward helping disadvantaged
students to that of a means of preserving a free, democratic nation. The rhetoric provided an articulation that excellence would be determined based on talent alone, and not on which students would become excellent. In effect, at-risk students would still be left behind.

Guthrie and Springer (2004) believe that *A Nation at Risk* (1983) was published in order to support President Reagan’s political agenda. They argue that in retrospect, the nation was not at risk of economic peril as the result of a flawed education system, and that the nation’s schools were actually as well off as they had ever been in any time in history. Guthrie and Springer (2004) say that Reagan took over the presidency “with a pledge to downgrade the importance of education” (p. 10). They maintain that Reagan sought privatization of schools, and that creating a false sense of fear was one way of accomplishing that. Guthrie and Springer (2004) say that at the time *A Nation at Risk* (1983) was published, most of the nation bought into the fear factor. In hindsight, they argue that no such fear was justified. This is another reason that looking at discourse through a rhetorical history lens is effective.

The language of the *A Nation At Risk* (1983) report, like that of Rickover’s (1959) publication, sent the rhetorical message that equality for students simply meant giving them access to schools but that in the name of preserving our democratic nation schools should prepare students to be competitive as they entered a globalizing workforce.
The No Child Left Behind Act: Moving Ahead or The Same Old, Same Old?

Elmore and McLaughlin (1988) argue that “[t]he history of American education is, in large part, the history of recurring cycles of reform” (p. 1). A rhetorical analysis of the artifacts that I have discussed in this chapter supports this claim. Minorities continued to struggle for equality decades after the Brown v. Board of Education decision was handed down. This was in part because many states simply chose to ignore the edict. However, the rhetorical impact of Rickover’s (1959) work at a time when many American’s feared that the Soviet Union would try to take over the world also was a factor that shifted the face of education away from equity and more toward excellence—all in the name of democracy and freedom.

The fact that Johnson’s Great Society rhetoric helped galvanize the Civil Rights Movement during the early part of the 1960’s no doubt was a factor in initiating federally authorized educational reform acts. It also helped to downplay the rhetoric of the Red Scare/Cold War. The same can be said of the A Nation at Risk (1983) report—it came at a time when many believed that school children of other nations began to surpass United States students in terms of learning. Once again, the shift was made toward producing master students in the name of democracy and freedom. In all cases, political rhetoric helped to shape the definition of democracy, freedom, and equality in regard to education reform.

The rhetorical aspect of each of these artifacts reflected the cycles of change in history—cycles driven by politics, economics, and world events. The Brown Supreme Court decision came about largely as a result of the empowerment the NAACP gave blacks as the Civil Rights Movement was beginning. Brown affirmed
that in a democracy, equality for all students was a must. However, equality in this sense meant that blacks could attend the same schools as whites. *Education and Freedom* was written in reaction to the Red Scare/Cold War. Rickover (1959) saw equality as meaning access as well, but in the name of freedom he argued that only the brightest students should have the right to a high quality education. However, what Rickover (1959) ultimately failed to acknowledge was that the brightest students he was speaking of came from privileged backgrounds because democracy had not always provided equality.

Lyndon Johnson’s rhetorical vision was that of all Americans living in a Great Society. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act was a result of that and for the first time, equality in education meant more than simply having access—it meant federal assistance for at-risk students. The rhetorical implications of ESEA as it applies to the public education system of the United States are internal as well as global. ESEA seeks to provide access and excellence in education on a national basis to all students; however, when Lyndon Johnson proclaimed his vision for a Great Society, this also entailed worldwide ramifications. Nevertheless, when the nation itself was deemed to be at risk by the Commission for Excellence in Education’s report, once again the definition of equality changed to mean that disadvantaged students would be provided with educational access only in the name of preserving freedom and democracy.

This issue remains prominent today when discussing the rhetorical and historical significance of the No Child Left Behind Act. Like all the artifacts examined thus far, NCLB demands equality and excellence as being essential to a
free, democratic society. Brown proponents associated equality with access, which would lead to overall excellence in schools. This was not so much in the realm of academic excellence; it was more that integration finally gave blacks and other disadvantaged groups the taste freedom and democracy the Founding Fathers of the country superficially guaranteed everyone in 1776. Rickover (1959) also saw equality in the form of access, but maintained that excellence could only be achieved by the highest achieving students. To Rickover (1959), this in turn maintained democracy and preserved freedom. As a part of Lyndon Johnson’s idea for a Great Society, ESEA promoted equity as a means to providing access and federal assistance for disadvantaged students. Excellence in education under ESEA meant that all students would have fair access, which in turn would produce a society of educated youth. In light of worldwide events that preceded Johnson’s presidency (the launch of Sputnik, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the assassination of John F. Kennedy), it is no wonder that Johnson wanted to restore faith in the American people by assuring that freedom and democracy would be preserved. A Nation at Risk (1983), in the same vein as Rickover, sought to provide equity through access, but acknowledged that not all students could reach the level of excellence. Those who achieved excellence would be the ones destined to safeguard freedom and democracy.

The No Child Left Behind Act differs from each of the previous educational artifacts discussed to this point. Like the other documents, NCLB seeks to provide equity and excellence simultaneously in the name of freedom and democracy. However, the cyclical nature of educational reform to this point in history has been greatly affected by the socio-political state of the nation. The relationship shared by
the terms *equality, democracy, and freedom* is what defines the circumstances surrounding each era of public education and educational reform throughout the history of the United States.

The No Child Left Behind Act seeks to accomplish everything these documents sought to do, and more. Under NCLB, equity in the form of simply having access to public schooling is not enough to ensure student success. The No Child Left Behind Act demands that *all* students will reach a level of excellence that will be demonstrated through the results of standardized proficiency testing. The No Child Left Behind Act has many opponents because many educational experts believe that accomplishing these goals is impossible (Wraga, 2006).

The artifacts I have examined in this chapter are all in one way or another driven by political rhetoric. However, politicians are not the ones delegated with the responsibility of teaching children. In the next chapter I will take a more in-depth look at the No Child Left Behind Act and how it affects teachers, students, and schools. I also discuss how the No Child Left Behind Act came to be, what it is doing and what it is not doing from a rhetorical perspective, and how it can or can not be looked at as a means to promote equality, freedom, and democracy in today’s society.
Who could object to a law that promises no child left behind when it comes to our schools? After all, isn’t this the great promise of our public school system—that all children, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, gender, creed, color, or disability will have equal access to an education that allows them to enjoy the freedoms and exercise the responsibilities of citizenship in our democracy? (Wood, 2004, p. vii)

Introduction

In light of the evolution of the American educational system and longstanding problems associated with whom is entitled to a free public education, who funds educational costs, how curricula are shaped and enacted, what dictates teacher qualifications, and how student progress is to be assessed, the No Child Left Behind Act was passed by Congress in 2002 in order to remedy the problems that American public schools face today.

A democratic society that wholly supports freedom and equality would likely embrace an educational act that promised to leave no child behind in the realm of education. While historically this has never been the case, this is exactly what the No Child Left Behind Act promises that educational dollars will do—as long as schools keep up their end of the bargain and ensure that all students will reach proficiency levels on standardized tests.

As the first four chapters show, each of the issues mentioned in the first paragraph of this chapter has been a major factor that education reformers must take
into account when addressing the inequalities many school-aged children have endured throughout the history of the United States.

Despite all the problems that have plagued the country since its pre-Revolutionary times in regard to public education, the United States has arguably come a long way—especially in the past four decades—in remedying a number of its problems in regard to its public education system. Despite stumbling blocks that have historically held back women, the poor, the disabled, and those who are members of minority racial and ethnic groups, the concept of providing a free, quality public education system to all school-aged children by assuring that they are proficient in math, reading, and science is something that the No Child Left Behind Act says it will accomplish by 2014 (Wood, 2004).

The No Child Left Behind Act promises federal funding for research to ensure that schools will offer curricula that best suit students’ needs and learning styles, to hire and train highly qualified teachers, and to provide state-of-the-art facilities (United States Department of Education, 2004). NCLB also proposes to cut unnecessary administrative costs in order to provide more flexible use of funding to meet the needs of individual districts (United States Department of Education, 2002).

Despite all these promises, many educators believe that the No Child Left Behind Act simply will not work, while at the same time the act is being staunchly defended by the United States Department of Education and by President George W. Bush and his presidential administration. As such, many politicians and educators are at odds over the validity of NCLB. In this chapter I will look more closely at what
the act requires schools to do and examine the pros and the bill from the perspective of politicians and educators.

The Bill

In 2002, the United States Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which was at that time was hailed by many as “a sweeping, bipartisan overhaul of federal education policy” (Mantel, 2005, p. 2). The bill was passed because of “low academic achievement exhibited by… many public school students in the United States” (Yell, Drasgow, and Lowrey, 2005, p. 130). NCLB was enacted in an attempt to increase the levels of academic performance for all students seeking a public school education (Mantel, 2005). However, since the No Child Left Behind Act was signed into law it has created a hotbed of controversy in the educational world.

In its present form, the bill mandates that 98-99% of all students enrolled in public schools in grades three through eight will reach a proficiency level in reading, math, and science by 2014 (Wood, 2004). To track this, report cards showing the progress of each school in each district in each state are made public on an annual basis. States are required to determine the perceived academic performance of the lowest subgroup or the lowest performing district and set their goals toward raising the lowest groups to where they reach proficiency levels (“Examining ESEA,” 2002). Despite the fact that proficiency levels often vary significantly from one state to another, all non-compliant schools are subject to the same degree of penalties that can
range from budget cuts and other sanctions that will reduce their annual funding (Darling-Hammond, 2004).

To ensure that the individual needs of all students are met, NCLB classifies students who are deemed to be at risk of not performing at proficient levels into subgroup categories that in theory are designed to cater to the students’ individual needs (United States Department of Education, 2002). The designation *subgroup* primarily focuses on racial and ethnic minority students, students with physical and mental disabilities, students who do not speak English as their first language, as well as students who come from low-level socio-economical backgrounds; these students traditionally fare more poorly than mid to upper class white students—those students who make up the majority of the student population of United States schools (Mantel, 2005). Most children assigned to subgroups are students who have traditionally been disadvantaged (Yell, Drasgow & Lowrey, 2005).

Under NCLB, at-risk students are categorized into subgroups in order to emphasize their need for special attention. The No Child Left Behind Act holds to the premise that if students assigned into subgroups are held to the same proficiency standards as students who are not at-risk, then academic success for all students will ultimately be achieved (Mantel, 2005). In other words, the assumption is that if students on the bottom rung of the physical, mental, social, and academic spectrum can pass proficiency exams, then students with higher abilities to “learn”—English speaking students free from disabilities that come from mid-to-upper economic backgrounds—should certainly succeed as well. Under this scenario, it appears as if
proficiency testing is geared toward measuring the ability of the lowest common denominator of students.

Under NCLB, raw test scores are measured in relation to ten different categories, which include the overall student population, students with physical and learning disabilities, non-white students, and students who have difficulty speaking English (Karp, 2004). If schools fail to show adequate progress toward proficiency in as little as one category, the school is in danger of facing funding cuts or being subjected to other penalties (Karp, 2004; Wood, 2004). Even though these sanctions might seem extreme, they are indeed a reality under NCLB, and this has caused many educators to question the fairness of the act.

Despite the potential problems brought forth by the passage of the NCLB Act, many federal officials embraced it upon its inception. In a letter addressed to “Dear Colleague” which is included as a Foreword to No Child Left behind: A Desktop Reference (2002), Education Secretary Rod Paige, who had been a school superintendent in Texas during the 1990’s when George Bush was governor, begins by stating:

This year began on a wonderful note for America's 50 million school children. When President Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act into law on January 8, 2002, our Nation embarked on a new era in how we educate our children and how the federal government supports elementary and secondary education. (p. vii)

The “wonderful note” reference would indicate that the “colleague” referred to by Paige would warmly receive this Act. The term “colleague,” used in this
context, presumably refers to public educators nationwide, because the *No Child Left Behind Act* has had and will continue to have a profound effect on anyone associated with the educational field.

The No Child Left Behind Act promises that parents will be kept up to date with what and how well their children are learning because states are required to produce annual report cards on students. The annual report card NCLB releases in its quest to identify the levels of success and failure for each school is problematic in itself. After the scores for each of the 40 sub-categories are calculated, the report cards then identify how the well the schools have performed in regard to the subject being tested, the teacher, and the grade level being assessed (Mantel, 2005). The United States Department of Education then reviews each state’s report card and ranks them from highest to lowest (Chapman, 2004).

After the state reports are issued, NCLB then identifies Schools Making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), Schools in Need of Improvement, and Schools in Need of Corrective Action (Chapman, 2004). It is by these designations that NCLB determines which schools are successful and which ones have fallen short. Schools that meet the AYP will receive continued federal funding, but 2004 figures show that from twelve to twenty-five percent of the nation’s schools fell short of reaching NCLB’s definition of reaching AYP status (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Mantel, 2005).

Schools designated as being in Need of Improvement are so named when it is determined that they have not achieved AYP two consecutive years. In these cases the schools are required under NCLB guidelines to develop and institute a plan for improvement, the goals of which must be completed within two years. If a school
subsequently fails to submit an acceptable plan of intervention, it faces immediate federal sanctions (Chapman, 2004). In addition to the schools losing funding, students enrolled in these poorly-performing schools have the option of seeking outside tutoring at the school’s expense (Chapman, 2004). In addition, parents whose children attend persistently low-performing schools have the option of moving their children to higher performing schools (United States Department of Education, 2004).

Under NCLB, schools are designated as being in Need of Corrective Action if they fall short of showing Annual Yearly Progress after working under a remedial plan of action for one year (Chapman, 2004). Schools designated into this category face drastic measures under NCLB: teachers and administrators may be terminated, and the curriculum may be completely revamped to suit the needs of NCLB. Furthermore, the remaining teachers and administrators may lose management power, as outside sources can be brought in under NCLB rules to oversee the implementation of the corrective measures (Chapman, 2004). In addition, the parents of students who attend these schools still have the option of transferring their children to another school, to which they may receive free transportation and at which they will be eligible to receive free tutoring—all at the expense of any school that falls under the NCLB category of being in Need of Corrective Action (Chapman, 2004).

Undoubtedly, it is vital that in order to serve students’ needs, teachers must be competent in their chosen academic field, and the No Child Left Behind Act addresses this issue by requiring all teachers to be deemed highly qualified by the end of the 2005-2006 academic year. Even though certification requirements for teachers vary significantly from state to state, the NCLB Act defines a highly qualified teacher
as one having a minimum of a bachelor’s degree, a full certification for that state (as defined by the state), and a demonstrated competency (also defined by the state), in each core academic subject he or she teaches (United States Department of Education, 2004). Under NCLB, beginning in the 2006-2007 academic year states will not be allowed to employ teachers holding emergency or temporary certificates, which many schools currently permit (“Implementing,” 2003). Furthermore, NCLB requires that in these schools teachers consult with educational specialists, and the school administration is responsible for overseeing how teachers develop day-to-day lesson plans (United States Department of Education, 2004). This ostensibly ensures that the needs for each subgroup of at-risk students are adequately addressed.

In recent years some individuals graduating college with teaching degrees in the K-12 areas have been required to pass state tests such as Praxis, which are set to measure their knowledge of the content area in which they are to teach prior to being allowed to teach in public schools (Morrison, 2003). In the case of prospective teachers who are required to take a Praxis exam, a teacher certification will not be awarded until the individual proves that he or she has reached a high degree of proficiency in “content knowledge and pedagogical skills” (Morrison, 2003, p. 42).

In most cases, primary school teachers teach several different courses; thus, they are required to demonstrate levels of expertise in each course they teach (United States Department of Education, 2004). Prospective middle school and high school teachers must be even more specialized; therefore, many are required to successfully pass competency tests in the specific academic field or fields in which they hope to teach (United States Department of Education, 2004).
By requiring all students to reach proficiency levels in core subjects and by demanding that all teachers are highly qualified, The No Child Left Behind Act has set high standards for American schools. However, despite the elevated expectations of this bill, it has detractors who argue that the promised funding will not be available throughout the duration of the act; that it places unfair requirements on teachers, schools, districts, and states—and that it does not take into consideration the fact that children’s learning development varies according to each child. NCLB is rooted in accountability, which will ultimately determine the status of schools in regard to receiving federal funding and enrollment. Most educators do not support the bill, and its detractors seem to increase on a daily basis. The mandates of this controversial act have been the subject of discussion and concern among most educators, and many of its early supporters now believe the punitive measures brought forth by NCLB are not in the best interest of educators, parents, and students.

All in Favor?

Upon its passage, President George W. Bush referred to the No Child Left Behind Act as “the start of a new era, a new time in public education” (Mantel, 2005, p. 2). According to President Bush, the act was designed to increase the accountability of the states, districts, and individual schools for how well students perform (United States Department of Education, 2004). Supporters of NCLB argue that the bill is aimed to ensure that every student enrolled in an American public school will receive a quality education regardless of his or her family income, the
students’ academic competence, physical ability, or racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic background (United States Department of Education, 2002).

Supporters of the No Child Left Behind Act cite annual testing and the resulting report cards as being important guideposts for parents, students, and teachers, as well as individual schools and districts in each state. Despite the controversy it has caused, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings and First Lady Laura Bush both strongly support NCLB. Spellings (2005) maintains, “Without that information, parents will not know how their children are doing, and educators won’t know what to adjust to best help their students. Quite simply, what gets measured, gets done.”

Spellings’ claim is supported by Laura Bush (2004), who contends that regardless of students’ ethnic or economic status, or the students’ previous academic performance, “All children have the ability to learn, and it’s incumbent upon us to make sure that they do.” However, ambiguity lies within each of these statements, in that Spelling does not clearly define what is to be “done” with measurement; so Bush’s assertion—while it is arguably true—does not offer a rationale or means in which to quantify results. It is clear that political experts, not educators, designed this bill. Consequently, the fact that it has come under fire from educators should be no surprise. In fact, NCLB has been generally rejected by all factions of American Society (Ripley, Steptoe, August, Mustafa, & Sieger, 2005)

Research shows that there should be no debate as to whether or not students that are designated into “subgroups” have a dominant effect on overall proficiency scores. Students who are grouped into classifications according to their ethnicity,
race, family income, disability, and ability to speak English are expected to meet the same levels of proficiency as any other student under NCLB (Mantel, 2005).

On the White House’s website, First Lady Laura Bush (2004) states that adding at-risk students to the mainstream for the purpose of determining federal funding allotments is a good idea, saying that all schools—large and small, rich and poor, rural and urban—are helping to identify the progress of schools with high levels of at-risk students “so that children who need help are not hidden in the averages.” By doing so, Bush (2004) argues that “achievement gaps are being identified and closed.” However, this does not take into account the degree as to which at-risk students will learn, nor does it predict the overall impact it will have on the entire school.

Funding is also an issue under NCLB. With budgets already being tight in regard to educational funding, one might have legitimate concerns as to where the money will come from, not only to make sure that the NCLB Act is fully implemented, but also to reward the efforts of high performance schools. However, Laura Bush and many other supporters of the act contend that ample funds have been set aside in order to facilitate the demands of the NCLB Act for all states and local districts (Robelen & Galley, 2004). Proponents of the NCLB Act assert that since 2002, federal funding for educational costs has increased by thirty percent (Mantel, 2005) and that more than $530 billion is being spent annually to educate students in grades K-12 (Spellings, 2005).

Even though President Bush continues to be a staunch supporter of the No Child Left Behind Act (Robelen & Galley, 2004), his second and final term ends in
2009, shortly after the NCLB Act is up for review. Even if it were accepted in principle by educators and the rest of American Society, given the volatile world of politics, the act might be on shaky ground if it is renewed in its present form in 2007 because there is no guarantee that Bush’s predecessor—or the voters—will support the act. The next section reveals some of the pitfalls of NCLB that educators have identified.

Those Opposed

No Child Left Behind affects every public school system in the United States and despite the fact that no two school systems are alike financially or demographically, all schools are being held to the same standards of compliance and must reach those standards by the same deadline. Woods (2004) maintains that no data exists that would indicate that the educational reforms the NCLB Act supports have benefited anyone; instead, Woods (2004) believes that standardized tests do nothing but to “sort and label our kids and our schools. It has been a multibillion dollar gamble with nothing at all to show for it to date” (2004, p. 44).

In light of all the problems states, schools, and educational leaders cite in regard to the No Child Left Behind Act, other than funding concerns the two issues that have caused the most fallout are that of the elevated expectations placed on at-risk students and the reliance on proficiency testing as the sole method of assessment. Chapman (2004) contends that NCLB reduces schools to being no more than learning factories, leaving no child “behind on the assembly line” (p. 13). Sternberg (2005) believes that poorer schools and students who are traditionally considered to
be at-risk—those for whom the bill ostensibly was intended to help—will be those who suffer most at the hand of the No Child Left Behind Act. This is because, as Darling-Hammond (2004) argues, prior to the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, students with special needs were at least given the opportunity to learn at their own pace; but under NCLB rules their degree of success is judged solely on the result of a standardized test score. She believes that standardized testing not only penalizes at-risk students, it holds back all students because the entire school is punished if it does not meet NCLB standards.

Schools with a large number of at-risk students are those that have to date shown the most need for annual improvement than those with less diversity (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Mathis, 2003). Mathis (2003) asserts that nationwide, minorities such as blacks and Hispanics, the physical and mentally disabled, students who have difficulty speaking English, as well as all students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, make up a significant percentage of all students designated into NCLB subgroups—and that their rate of failure is far greater than that of white students from middle to upper class socioeconomic backgrounds. Since at-risk students are those who have been traditionally shut out of a quality education, it should not surprise anyone that their scores would be lower than those who have historically had access to quality schooling.

No district wants to face sanctions if its students do not meet the government’s standards—but this is one of the tenets of NCLB that has made the act a matter of debate. Linda Darling-Hammonds (2004), an education professor at Stanford University with an extensive background in educational research, argues that
school systems set goals for student proficiency according to what the state school boards dictate and as a result some schools that are above the national average in proficiency scores are listed as failing because their state school boards have set their standards much higher than the national average (Darling-Hammond, 2004). One might correctly assume that to compare all the test results among states would be like comparing apples and oranges, given the diverse demographic of the United States’ population—but under NCLB regulations each state is indeed measured against the next (Darling-Hammond, 2004).

NCLB allows the federal government to have a strong hand in the management of all schools, and this “raises the stakes for schools, districts, and states” (Mantel, 2005, p. 2). If all students were indeed capable of reaching proficiency, then raising expectations would ostensibly raise the quality of education each student received. However, what NCLB does not take into consideration is the maximum achievement potential of at-risk students, especially those who have severe mental and physical disabilities. Darling-Hammond (2004) argues that some schools fare more poorly than others because schools with large concentrations of racial/ethnic minorities or students with disabilities are held to the same degree of accountability as those that consist of students from more privileged backgrounds.

Mantel (2005) makes that point that schools falling just short of NCLB standards are penalized just as heavily as those who fail miserably (p. 8). Missing proficiency in just one subgroup category warrants the same sanctions as schools failing in all subgroup categories (Mantel, 2005). However, the scores of students who show improvement but fall short of reaching proficiency are not taken into
account on the NCLB’s annual report cards. Because of this, Darling-Hammond (2004) argues that instead of measuring student learning based solely on the results of standardized testing, the benchmark that measures a school’s success should reflect “actual performance and progress rather than a statistical gauntlet that penalizes schools serving the most diverse populations” (p. 25). Furthermore, Neill (2004) posits that NCLB must turn away from a strictly scientific-based assessment process in order to ensure that an equal amount of classroom time is also allocated for the arts and humanities, as well as social sciences. He argues that both qualitative and quantitative assessment means are the only ways in which to measure how much students have learned.

Because students with special educational needs are the ones that tend to fare poorly on standardized tests, it appears as if schools who serve the most diverse populations of students are those that are most poised for failure (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Moreover, research shows that students who fail proficiency tests run a greater risk of dropping out of school than those who do not (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Thus, it would seem that holding at-risk students to the same standards as all other students is not in the best interest of the at-risk students.

In addition to not taking into account all the other potential problems that lumping students into subgroups poses, there is no clear definition as to how well achievement gaps are being identified and to what extent they are being closed. To put things into a realistic perspective, researchers from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) estimate that completely eliminating the achievement gaps would take more than one hundred years at its present pace (Darling-Hammond,
2004); nevertheless, NCLB holds firm to its insistence that the gap must be closed in a twelve year window.

Some supporters of NCLB argue that high proficiency scores do indeed signify that a student has mastered the material; however, research shows that the information that students store in memory in a “drill and kill” environment promoting rote memorization as a way of learning quickly leaves a child’s brain after the test is administered (Mantel, 2005). Moreover, figures based on the results of standardized tests using multiple-choice answers do not adequately predict how much a student has learned, nor do they serve as a long term predicator as to whether or not the student will ultimately reach the proficiency objective (Olson, 2005). George Wood (2004), an Ohio public school principal and the director of the Forum for Education and Democracy, points out that test scores are not accurate predictors of students’ success after they graduate. Furthermore, standardized tests do nothing to measure the students’ motivation levels, critical thinking skills, and social maturity skills (Bracey, 2001). Most educators agree that standardized testing simply does not measure intelligence or how much students learn.

It is also difficult to compare progress in student learning in any given school from one year to another because of a transient population of students who move from one district or one state to another—and some school administrators encourage at-risk students to simply stay home on the days proficiency tests are given. An already rapidly-changing student population is further escalated when under NCLB, students are permitted to leave low-performing schools (Wood, 2004).
Many people believe that the No Child Left Behind Act actually makes it more difficult for at-risk students to receive a quality education. Prior to the implementation of NCLB, students with disabilities were provided a curriculum based on their learning styles and abilities under the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA), first mentioned in Chapter Two. IDEA provided an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for each student diagnosed with a disability. However, under NCLB, IEPs are in effect eliminated, even though some school districts have filed lawsuits on behalf of the parents of students who had previously worked under an IEP system (Samuels, 2005).

Most schools agree that to count at-risk students as part of the overall proficiency scores usurps the whole concept of helping students with special needs (“Illinois Districts Say,” 2005). However, NCLB seemingly assumes that all under-achieving students have the same degree of motivation and ability to reach proficiency levels (Darling-Hammond, 2004), but research shows otherwise (Renchler, 1992; Strom & Strom, 2002). Not surprisingly, many states resent the fact that the federal government is intervening in the ways individual states run their public schools (“Conn Lawsuit,” 2005).

To many, the mandates set forth by NCLB are seemingly impossible for numerous schools to reach (Fuentes, 2005). Negative criticism of the bill ranges from the use of proficiency tests to measure students’ learning progress, the disparity in teacher qualifications from one state to another, the categorization of students into subgroups, and the fear that sufficient funding does not exist to support the bill. Even if meeting all the goals and objectives of NCLB were possible, the price tag will
certainly be an expensive one. While the funding dollars set aside by the government might seem to be impressive on the surface, one must take into account what the money is being spent on and the number of children enrolled in the 93,000 public schools currently in operation in the United States (Darling-Hammond, 2004).

Despite the fact that NCLB supporters contend that sufficient funds will be provided to states by the federal government, Mathis (2003) states that since the federal government does not fully fund the educational budget of any state then NCLB funds will do no more than to provide supplemental help to the states’ educational systems. In other words, even though the No Child Left Behind Act is federally mandated, individual states will eventually face the brunt of the funding burdens, which will ultimately amount to billions of dollars annually (Mathis, 2003). In order to deal with already existing financial woes, even before the implementation of the NCLB Act, several states had been forced to cut back on educational expenditures in order to make ends meet (Mathis, 2003, p. 4). As a result, it is no wonder why that on the whole, many states are not adequately prepared to take on the extra expenses brought forth by NCLB (“Face of Funding,” 2004).

It might also be the case that some states were initially misled in regard as to whom would be responsible for picking up the tab for the additional expenses of meeting NCLB standards and how much these costs would actually add to each state’s annual budget. Mathis (2003) asserts that when the bill was introduced that the federal government pledged to assist the states if additional funding were to be needed in order to maintain the program. However, since that time, according to Mathis (2003), “tax cuts, a sluggish economy, and the cost of war in Iraq” (p. 4) have
brought about significant cuts in the funding the government initially promised the states in order for them to meet the standards set forth by the No Child Left Behind Act. In fact, Chapman (2004) maintains that the federal government has reduced its original funding promises for NCLB by a total $65 billion. To put this in perspective, the average cost of proficiency testing alone costs in excess of $3 billion annually (Chapman, 2004). Thus, it is no wonder that many states are falling short of the federal government’s expectations and are balking at the prospect of footing the bill on their own.

Not surprisingly, many state legislators and educators have done their own research in an attempt to predict the ultimate consequences of the No Child Left Behind Act. The results of this research show that in some cases states will see slight financial gains, but in most cases they will see significant shortfalls (Mantel, 2005). For instance, a study commissioned by the state of Ohio estimated that the annual cost of fully implementing NCLB at one and a half billion dollars, while in turn the maximum amount of additional funding that Ohio can receive by meeting every tenet of the NCLB is $44 million (Mantel, 2005).

Mantel (2005) cites the Ohio scenario as being just one example of how educational funding has been cut across the board for most states. Using Ohio as an example of subgroup performance, while 84% of Ohio’s high school students graduate, “only 58 percent of its urban students and only half of its African-American students” graduate (“Ohioans Rank Education,” 2004, p. 5). Low performance by minority students is present in many other states as well (Jimerson, 2005; Valencia & Villarreal, 2003).
Dan Kaufman, the head of the National Education Association—the union to which the majority of teachers belong—argues that thus far funding has not been sufficient in meeting the rigid standards that the NCLB Act requires (Mantel, 2005). Taking the teachers’ concerns into consideration, NEA would like to see Congress hold to its funding promises, but as of 2005 the funding has been underprovided by $27 billion (Mantel, 2005) of what the act originally promised to deliver. Pascopella (2004) agrees, contending that many districts do not have sufficient financial reserves to carry out the mandates of the act. In fact, NEA has filed a lawsuit against United States Secretary of Education secretary Margaret Spellings, contending that the bill is “an unfunded mandate” (Hendrie, 2005, p. 21).

Most states believe that they are left in a volatile position because whether or not sufficient federal funding is available to support the regulations of the No Child Left Behind Act, they fear that the government will still hold them responsible for carrying out the mandates of the act (Mathis, 2003). If the funding is not in place, it does not seem fair that the federal government would hold the states responsible for meeting the requirements of a federal act—yet that is exactly what NCLB’s current language mandates. Clearly, the demands of NCLB are magnified when looming state budgets cuts are already set to have a negative impact on the funding of statewide educational dollars (“Face of Funding,” 2004).

In August, 2005, the state of Connecticut filed a lawsuit against the No Child Left Behind Act, citing that the program was under-funded and that the proficiency tests are unfair (“Conn Lawsuit,” 2005). Other states are threatening to do so as well; for example, Wisconsin filed a similar suit in June, 2006 (Pascopella, 2006). In
addition, NEA filed a similar suit on behalf of teachers in July, 2006 (Honawar, 2006). Attorney Tom Hutton argues that NCLB mandates a “one-size-fits-all” (“Illinois,” 2005, p. 27) approach to education while ignoring the parents’, teachers’, and schools’ views on what type of curriculum best suits special needs students. Chapman (2004) argues that NCLB is guilty of trying to “micromanage” (p. 4) public schools by promising every student a quality education without researching what works best for individual students. Those who are opposed to the potential ramifications that they fear will come about as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act hope that challenges such as lawsuits and other forms of protest will open the eyes of legislators when the No Child Left Behind Act comes up for review in 2007.

The Effect of NCLB on Students, Teachers, and Schools

Students

In light of all the debate surrounding the No Child Left Behind Act, seemingly lost in the mix is the reason that schools exist in the first place—to educate students. Mark Ginsberg of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) argues that any time education funding is cut, students are the ones who suffer most. Because the federal government put the NCLB Act in place, Ginsberg believes that it is the government’s duty to hold up to its end of the bargain. Ginsberg argues for an overhaul of the NCLB Act, especially in the area of funding. If this is not done, he says that children who are already economically disadvantaged will be hurt the most (“President’s Budget,” 2003, p. 2). Wood (2004) points out, “It is upon the children in the very schools NCLB was designed to help that the greatest blows
will fall” (p. 45). As of 2004, almost 12% of American schools had failed to meet NCLB’s standards in annual proficiency testing (Mantel, 2005, p. 7), and schools with high concentrations of at-risk students were those that most often failed to reach proficiency (Darling-Hammond, 2004).

Because of the demands placed on students due to proficiency testing, independent tutoring centers such as the Sylvan Learning Center are making large profits as a direct result of the No Child Left Behind Act (Kohn, 2004). While the option of securing outside tutoring is a good idea for any student who needs academic help, it does nothing to help the schools overcome financial deficits that are probably a primary cause for the low performance ranking they have received in the first place—and being forced to pay for tutoring services only puts the schools in a deeper hole to climb from as they attempt to meet federal standards (Mickelson & Southworth, 2005).

One benefit of the No Child Left Behind Act is that it allows additional academic support for children from low-income families, but doing this will be impossible if the financial resources are not also available. Mathis (2003) conducted a study that looked at the projected costs and benefits for the duration of NCLB and concluded that “the federal government is asking too much and giving too little” (p. 1). Even before the No Child Left Behind Act was passed, Secretary of Education Richard Riley predicted that individual states would ultimately be the ones responsible for “providing educational resources to meet state standards” (Mathis, 2003, p. 4). In other words, the federal government expects the states to follow
NCLB mandates even if they do not receive the promised amount of federal dollars needed to get the job done.

While it is true that students in underperforming schools have the option of moving to another district, Wood (2004) believes that many at-risk students identified as being members of subgroups will simply drop out instead of moving on to another school. Moreover, there is no guarantee that moving to a higher performing school will ensure that a student with disabilities will show any more progress at the new school than he or she did at the old one.

While it can be argued that all at-risk students will have difficulty living up to NCLB guidelines, students who have physical or mental disabilities will have a more difficult time reaching proficiency than those students who are at-risk due to their racial or socio-economic background (Yell, Drasgow & Lowrey, 2005). At the same time this group is the one most likely to pull overall testing scores down for the entire school because in many cases they simply do not have the cognitive ability to learn or the physical ability to complete proficiency tests.

In all cases, students relegated to subgroups face stigmatization because teachers, administrators, and other students hold them responsible when their schools fail to meet AYA standards under NCLB (Karp, 2004). NCLB refers to at-risk students as being “exceptional,” but they are exceptional only in the fact that because of their disadvantaged backgrounds or disabilities they have a more difficult time passing standardized tests than any other group of students. Nevertheless, according to Chapman (2004), only one out of every hundred “exceptional” students, those with “the most severe cognitive limitations, are exempt from tests” (p. 4).
Further compounding the problem associated with educating at-risk students is the fact that if only one fails to meet proficiency standards, the entire school will be listed as being deficient on the NCLB’s annual report card (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Consequently, many schools have resorted to taking drastic measures in order to meet NCLB standards. Mantel (2005) contends that many schools that face sanctions have intentionally revamped their curricula to place more emphasis on raising proficiency scores in the areas in which students will be tested and have devoted less attention to the courses that students are not measured on by annual testing, such as foreign language and social studies (Mantel, 2005). While all students suffer when this happens, once again it is the less fortunate students who will be hurt the most by curriculum overhauls. To Mathis (2003), modifying the curriculum does nothing but produce meaningless quantitative test results at the expense of overall learning proficiency (Mathis, 2003).

Although one would be hard pressed to find many educators who are staunch supporters of the “teaching to the test” method of instruction, many teachers believe that it is their only option if they are to live up to NCLB standards. Mantel (2005) argues that not only are students being deprived of adequate instruction in subjects such as composition, art, music, and social studies, some schools have even eliminated recess and other forms of recreation time in order to devote more time to preparing students for passing standardized tests (Mantel, 2005). Wendy Puriefoy, president of the Public Education Network (PEN), maintains that the downside to proficiency testing is that it creates an atmosphere in which the students feel like they are being punished (Olson, 2005). However, when activities such as art and recess
are taken away to make way for intensified instruction that has no practical application, students and teachers alike have little choice but to see testing as being nothing other than a form of punitive measure.

Despite the fact that the notion of a scientific-based educational system is not new, one of the main criticisms of the No Child Left Behind Act is that the narrow mandates it sets forth run in diametric opposition to the views traditionally held by most experts in the field of education. Goodlad (2004) points out that determining “what students ought to learn on the basis of what is significant to the discipline and what can be learned by a majority of the students” (p. 69; emphasis in original) is a difficult task to accomplish. This statement summarizes a significant portion of the ongoing debate concerning the No Child Left Behind Act. What students ought to learn has been traditionally left for the states, districts, schools, or even individual teachers to decide. Meeting NCLB guidelines basically make necessary a shift toward a scientific-based education because of the assessment methods it mandates. What students—especially those at-risk—actually can learn is another point of controversy.

The No Child Left Behind Act demands that all students reach proficiency, even if they face major stumbling blocks when it comes to passing proficiency tests. Gordon and Browne (2004) argue that teaching to the test does not take students’ learning styles into account, nor does it cater to students with special needs (Gordon & Browne, 2004).

It is the group of at-risk students that are designated into subgroups who have the most difficulty learning because of their economic or ethnic/racial background, or
because of a disability; but instead of allowing them to learn according to their individual needs, the No Child Left Behind Act mandates that they are held to the same academic standards as other students (Wood, 2004). Darling-Hammond (2004) argues that “the chances that a school would be designated as failing increased in proportion to the number of demographic groups served by the school” (p. 15). When they do not meet the goals set forth by the No Child Left Behind Act and their schools are penalized as a result, this group of children will no doubt fall farther behind academically from where they were to start with.

Instead of leaving no children behind, many schools are forced to hold back children from progressing to the next grade level if they do not meet NCLB proficiency ratings, then after spending twelve or more years in school they are awarded certificates of attendance in lieu of high school diplomas. Darling-Hammond (2004) equates this to “denying access to the economy and to a productive life. The child is accountable to the state for test performance, but the state is not held accountable to the child” (p. 22).

Supporters of proficiency testing do not take into consideration that not everyone possesses the same degree of learning potential; furthermore, research shows that not every student learns in the same ways or at the same pace (Chapman, 2004). When students’ success is measured only on the basis of proficiency testing, they are seen only as statistics and not as individual learners (Barton, 2004). As a result, Goodlad (2004) contends, state and local education systems should work with the federal government to ensure that a proper curriculum is being taught in public schools. However, under NCLB, the federal government basically calls the shots as
the state and local districts have their hands tied as far as what is to be taught in the classroom and how student progress is to be assessed. These issues have led many educators to call for a reassessment of the No Child Left Behind Act in order to bring it more in line with traditional curriculum goals and methods of assessing student progress.

> Teachers

When all is said and done, the burden of providing a quality education ultimately rests on the shoulders of the teachers. Even though the bill is still relatively in its infancy, the No Child Left Behind Act has placed an extreme amount of pressure especially on teachers, in that they are the ones with the primary responsibility of ensuring that their students reach the required level of proficiency. Next to students, teachers comprise the most important parts of an education system; consequently, it is the primary responsibility of each teacher to ensure that the students are learning the material set forth by curriculum demands, which have traditionally included English, reading and language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, economics, the arts, and foreign language. However, under the No Child Left Behind Act, the only subjects that matter are math, reading and science.

Given the rigors already placed on teachers in regard to preparing lesson plans, grading assignments, and meeting their regular class times, being required to fulfill additional federal requirements will only add to teachers’ workloads while at the same time it reduces the amount of time teachers have to devote to educating their students. For instance, Yell, Drasgow, and Lowrey (2005) point out that under
NCLB guidelines special education teachers are required to work in correlation with
the regular classroom teacher to assist students with physical disabilities who have
been placed regular classrooms. Many teachers see sharing the classroom as an
intrusion because they prefer to have complete control of their classrooms and do not
feel that they are as effective when outside entities are present (Freire & Macedo,
1999).

Because each state sets its own rules in defining what makes a person
competent to teach, the issue concerning what determines teacher qualifications is
also a very complicated one. Brabham and Villaume (2003) argue that the shift
toward a scientifically based classroom further complicates the problem and will
“minimize the role of knowledgeable and expert teachers” (p. 699). Instead of
relying on teachers who know the how to convey the material to the students,
scientifically-based teaching places the emphasis on teachers who know “a certain
method of teaching” (p. 699). This method is geared toward helping students pass a
standardized test.

It makes sense to hire teachers who are well-versed in the content area(s) in
which they are to teach, for it is nearly impossible to effectively teach a subject in
which one is not an expert—and being taught by competent teachers should obviously
lead to improved student learning. However, no evidence exists to show that
teachers-to-be who can pass a content-specific test are any more qualified to teach a
specific subject or subjects than someone who has not. Simply having knowledge of
a content area does not automatically make one an effective teacher (Sternberg,
2005). Even if a test like Praxis could accurately measure a teacher’s qualifications,
under NCLB it is still left to the discretion of each state to determine which, if any, pre-employment testing potential teachers must pass (Morrison, 2003).

Demonstrating expertise in a content area does not end upon new teachers’ initial date of employment; NCLB demands that after three years of teaching new teachers must successfully complete a national certification process set forth by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards to evaluate teachers in order to determine whether or not they “know the subjects they teach” (Morrison, 2003, p. 47). However, even though these accountability mechanisms follow NCLB requirements of having a highly qualified teacher in the classroom and even though the certification is a “national” one, the level of aptitude each teacher is required to achieve is still left to be defined by individual states (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). This lack of consistency is problematic because even if all students were the same (and they are not), the degree of competency that teachers must have in each state is certain to influence students’ proficiency scores. In addition, teachers might find themselves pigeonholed to teaching within a specific state—while in one state they might be highly qualified to teach, if they were to seek employment in another state they very well might find that they would not be qualified to teach under that state’s guidelines (Morrison, 2003). This is another inconsistency that arises when a federal law sets forth to regulate a state’s educational policy.

New teachers are not the only ones that are held under intense scrutiny by the No Child Left Behind Act; even teachers who were hired before the implementation of pre-employment testing are still required to be evaluated on the High Objective Uniform State Standard of Evaluation (HOUSSE) (United States Department of
Education, 2004; Yell, Drasgow, & Lowrey, 2005). Housel sets out to document whether or not the material veteran teachers are teaching in the classroom meets state guidelines set to determine if the teachers’ academic subject matter knowledge and teaching skills are grade-appropriate and are in line with state-approved academic content and student achievement standards (United States Department of Education, 2004; Yell, Drasgow, & Lowrey, 2005). Again, what is acceptable in one state might not be in another—so to many people, this system seems flawed.

Another measure of accountability required under the No Child Left Behind Act is that teachers must keep themselves up to date on the core content knowledge in the academic subjects they are teaching (United States Department of Education, 2004). Ideally, these conditions would be applied consistently to all teachers, but NCLB allows more leeway for veteran teachers (United States Department of Education, 2004). If individual states have the latitude to enact their own criteria that determine whether or not experienced teachers meet the states’ objectives, then the states may implement multiple ways of determining whether or not the teachers meet the minimum standards, such as requiring them to complete additional educational requirements in order to be qualified under NCLB (United States Department of Education, 2004). Obviously, an across the board definition for what constitutes minimum teaching qualification simply does not exist. Nevertheless, a significant degree of latitude in measuring teaching competency is granted to more experienced teachers, while recent college graduates are placed under a much higher degree of scrutiny (Miller, 2004).
NCLB does provide alternative ways for teachers to obtain permanent teaching certificates if they successfully pass a test devised to measure their knowledge of the subject matter they will teach (Miller, 2004). However, this does not ensure that the teacher is competent or qualified to teach. In many ways this alternative test is similar to the Praxis test that new teachers are required to pass before receiving state certification. However, Sternberg (2005) finds flaws with this alternative method of certification. Under this system anyone who can pass a subject matter test is deemed qualified to teach, and simply having a demonstrated knowledge of content verified by passing a standardized test does nothing to measure the other factors that make a teacher effective in a classroom. In addition, as Sternberg (2005) contends, “All the academic achievement in the world will not offset moral lapses, lack of responsibility, and indifference to student needs” (2005, p. 32).

The bottom line is that having the ability to pass a test does not automatically define a person as being a qualified teacher. Emerick, Hirsch, & Berry (2004) agree, arguing that having content knowledge alone simply is not enough. Merely knowing the subject matter does not make a person an effective educator; teachers must have an understanding of children’s behavior and learning patterns. Most education specialists agree that understanding how children develop learning habits is vital to teachers if they are to be able to disseminate the material to be learned by each student (Brulle, 2005). Brulle (2005) says that teachers must know which types of assessment tools to use in order to measure how effectively they have taught the students (p. 436).
It is also vital that teachers know how to communicate effectively and affectively in order to have positive interactions with their students (Brulle, 2005; Richmond & Gorman, 1992). Furthermore, effective teachers must recognize and understand each developmental stage in student learning and administer various types of measurement and assessment, and be able to make necessary adjustments according to students’ individual needs (Brulle, 2005). In addition to facilitating classroom learning, teachers are also expected to deal with potential behavioral problems (Brulle, 2005), but NCLB does not seem to take this into consideration. Standardized tests, whether they are taken by the students or by the teachers, do not accurately measure any of these extrinsic factors.

_Schools_

Because of the “highly qualified” designation that must be bestowed upon every teacher under NCLB, most rural districts and small schools, regardless of their socio-economic status, have been and will continue to be penalized by the No Child Left Behind Act simply because of their size and location (Au, 2004; Jimerson, 2005). For example, under NCLB regulations, because of the number of subjects taught, schools must have teachers who are specialized into very narrow fields of concentration. A teacher holding a general college degree in English, for example, would likely have to prove his or her qualifications in specialized categories such as reading, literature, composition, and journalism in order to be deemed “highly qualified.” This is impractical in most rural schools with small enrollments (Jimerson, 1995). NCLB’s demand for specialization forces schools to further strain
their budgets by hiring more teachers in order to ensure that a highly qualified teacher for every subject matter is accounted for (Au, 2004; Jimerson, 2005). In addition, another problem rural schools face is not being able to recruit teachers who “understand the local culture” (Jimerson, 2005).

In order to make sure that they have enough teachers to cover every subject, under NCLB states have the latitude to “dumb down” the proficiency tests for teachers if necessary in order to ensure that all schools have a sufficient amount of qualified teachers. Being qualified to teach is certainly an important condition that teachers need to live up to, but the fact remains that under NCLB the federal government still allows individual states to set their own standards in order to determine just how highly qualified their teachers actually must be, making the “highly qualified” designation quite ambiguous (Wood, 2004). This in itself will cause the quality of education a student receives to vary from teacher to teacher, school to school, and state to state—with the poorer states and school districts having the least qualified teachers (Jimerson, 2005).

Schools deemed as performing poorly under NCLB report cards find themselves in a double bind—they are the one’s who have the most at-risk students, and the federal funding they lose each year in turn causes them to stay below proficiency because they do not have the resources to hire more qualified teachers and to purchase curriculum materials (Jimerson, 2005). Darling-Hammond (2004) points out that in many cities and poor communities students are forced to “attend under-resourced schools where they lack the texts, materials, qualified teachers, computers, and other necessities for learning” (2004, p. 22).
Keller (2003) contends that the mandates set forth by NCLB cause problems for schools in high poverty areas especially, because most teachers do not choose impoverished districts in which to teach in the first place. This is compounded by the fact that most at-risk students reside within the poorest school districts (Furumoto, 2005; Jimerson, 2005; Karp, 2004). With the new regulations imposed on teachers, even fewer will chose low income districts in which to work out of fear of not being able to bring their students up to proficiency levels, and many teachers currently employed in these districts will seek to relocate elsewhere for better working conditions, better students, and better pay (Keller, 2003; Jimerson, 2005). Instead of forcing more rigid rules on teachers, Emerick, Hirsch, & Berry (2004) suggest that states should instead actively recruit new teachers to come to their districts, and that these districts should also make every effort to retain the veteran teachers they already have. Under NCLB, doing so will be next to impossible.

What NCLB seemingly does not take into account is that large schools with more substantial budgets can hire educational specialists much more easily than can small schools with smaller budgets. Despite this, small schools are penalized as severely as larger ones if they do not meet every mandate of the NCLB Act (Au, 2004)—and the schools with the smaller budgets are those that typically have the highest number of at-risk students (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Not only do they face reduced federal funding, they also lose funding when students leave for another school—and they are further penalized by paying all expenses for students who transfer. It should be apparent that schools in this situation may be placed at an
insurmountable disadvantage, but are still will be required to conform to all NCLB mandates by 2014.

Summary and Analysis

Many educators are opposed to the No Child Left Behind Act as it exists in its present form, and many people working within the political realm have begun to have second thoughts as to both its long and short term effectiveness. Although she strongly supports NCLB, Education Secretary Spellings concedes that perhaps students with “persistent academic disabilities” (Mantel, 2005) should be permitted to take alternative means of testing “geared toward their abilities and not necessarily at grade level” (Mantel, 2005, p. 8). Other educational experts have also asked for more lenience when assessing the test scores of at-risk students (Mantel, 2005, p. 8). Olson (2005) says that the subgroup designation is unfair to at-risk students, parents, teachers, and schools because requiring children with disabilities to take tests commensurate with their grade-level and not their level of ability is “inappropriate and unfair” (p. 1). Obviously, the majority of America’s educators believe that NCLB is not in the best way of educating at-risk students.

At-risk and disadvantaged students are the ones who tend to fare poorly on proficiency tests, and many of them are born with learning difficulties ranging from physical and mental problems to not being able to speak English well (Wood, 2004). Many other at-risk students also face poverty, physical abuse, and mental abuse in their home lives (Karp, 2004). In addition, many poor students attend poorly funded schools to begin with, so their chance at getting a quality education is already limited
Regardless as to why students are classified into one or more subgroup category, attending poorly funded schools will not catapult these students into better social or economic environments, nor will passing a standardized test prove that they have received a high quality of education (Karp, 2004).

In order to position all students on a level playing field Monty Neill (2004) contends that students should be placed in learning environments and not testing labs. Many educators echo his sentiments. Falling in line with Neill, George Wood (2004) says that “opposing NCLB is not to oppose school reform” (p. xiii). Neill (2004) says that in order for the No Child Left Behind Act to work, from a financial perspective the federal government must calculate how much the bill will cost to fully implement and to earmark that money. Neill (2004) points out that under current NCLB guidelines, parents may transfer their children out of schools that fail to meet proficiency standards, but he argues that there is not currently enough classroom space available in schools that reach proficiency to accommodate students who might wish to transfer into them. To remedy this, Neill (2004) argues that NCLB must allocate funds to build new schools or to expand existing schools.

In a society that promises equality, democracy, and freedom, educational reform set aside to benefit at-risk students is indeed necessary when students are not learning what they should; however, if what educators say about the negative ramifications of the bill is true then Congress needs to take a hard look at the NCLB Act in 2007 and make necessary changes that allow schools to function without fear of funding cuts and that allow teachers to cater to students’ individual needs, and to assure every student the opportunity for a quality education. Wood (2004) argues that
“well-prepared, well-supported, and well-paid teachers; clean, safe, and well-supplied schoolhouses; community and parent input school goals; and equitable schools resources for every child” (p. xiv-xv) are the key to assuring that all students receive a quality education. Wood (2004) also argues that “high standards of demonstrated achievement” (p. xiv) will be the result of a quality, but that test scores are not the only indicator of student progress.

The No Child Left Behind Act was enacted in the name of educational reform, but it has been at the center of controversy since its inception. The problem is complex, but in a nutshell the federal government is dictating to individual states the ways in which they must run their school systems, and will ultimately punish the schools that do not reach government mandated proficiency levels. Despite all the controversy that surround the No Child Left Behind Act, if all its provisions would indeed come to fruition, America’s education system would appear to show great improvement by 2014 if all students are skilled in math, reading, and science. Obviously, if all teachers are highly qualified in their area of content knowledge and if 100% of all students the content of the required subjects, the United States should have one of the best and highly successful educational systems in the world. However, most educators do not believe that proficiency testing is the best way to measure student success, nor do they believe that 98-99% of all children will be able to meet proficiency requirements. Consequently, most people believe that the mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act are unfair and overreaching, and will never be attained.
For the most part, the No Child Left Behind Act was written by politicians, not by educators, and the current presidential administration is adamant the NCLB will remain in its present form until at least 2007 (Finn & Hess, 2004), when it is scheduled to be reassessed by Congress (Spellings, 2005). Not surprisingly, most educators are not in favor of the No Child Left Behind Act. The entire No Child Left Behind Act document runs nearly one thousand pages, so obviously a great deal of work was put into drafting the bill. However, many people today believe that ultimately, the NCLB Act will go down in history as the worst attempt at reform that has ever happened to the free public education system of the United States. The rhetorical implications of failure will be just as severe if the No Child Left Behind Act fails to deliver what its title demands.

Many educational reform acts enacted prior to NCLB helped some school-aged children slowly escape from suppression—what Foucault (1998) calls heterotopias. Women, the poor, racial and ethnic minorities, and children with disabilities began gaining easier access toward a quality education beginning in the 1960’s. NCLB attempts to bring all students into a common educational environment and provide them with a quality education, but many educational experts believe that the very students NCLB is trying to help are actually being left behind because they do not have the ability to reach proficiency standards. When teachers had the latitude to teach students according to the children’s individual needs, by having access to schools these at-risk students had in effect escaped the heterotopias they had been confined to for many decades. By being forced to measure up academically with non at-risk students, disadvantaged students once again find themselves in heterotopias.
The No Child Left Behind Act is not the first controversial document to be published in regard to education, nor will it likely be the last. While it would be impossible to look at every artifact published in regard to the state of education and proposed reforms, looking at the representative sampling of other notable documents discussed in previous chapters helps set the passage of NCLB into context for analysis. Past reform efforts have been done in the name of equity, freedom, and democracy—with each term holding a different meaning that reflected the socio-political eras in which the reform movements took place.

NCLB: Where Did It Come From?

Although the No Child Left Behind Act was passed on a federal level and is in many ways an extension of and departure from previous federal reform efforts, the roots of the current version of NCLB began in the state of Texas under then governor George W. Bush. Palmaffy (1998) says that in the early 1990’s Texas was one of the most under funded states in the nation, its teachers were paid poorly, and its students were performing inadequately. Moreover, Texas had one of the highest populations of at-risk students—racial and ethnic minorities and the poor. Despite facing these deficits, students in Texas made a significant turnaround in math and reading scores by the end of the decade (Palmaffy, 1998). This was due to the fact that under Bush, schools took on a “no child left behind” approach and began forcing at-risk students into regular classrooms while requiring them to reach proficiency levels in math and reading through standardized testing. If the students failed, the teachers and schools were held accountable (Palmaffy, 1998). When compared to the Texas reform
movement of the 1990’s, it becomes very obvious that the No Child Left Behind Act was developed from this model. Finn and Hess (2004) say that “Bush rode into the White House touting the results of Texas school reform…[and]…dispatched a legislative blueprint that drew heavily from his experience in Austin” (p. 38). However, with NCLB the stakes are raised dramatically in regard to student achievement and accountability on the part of the schools.

Like NCLB, proficiency testing was the yardstick set to measure student achievement in Texas schools. After students took proficiency tests, the schools were ranked from highest to lowest—as is the case with the No Child Left Behind Act. Teachers and principals from top rated schools were rewarded with promotions and raises, while educators from low-performing schools were given assistance in the form of training specialists or extra funding for training (Palmaffy, 1998). Obviously, the Texas model of reform set in motion the seeds for NCLB and its strict accountability measures.

The roots of accountability can be seen in Rickover’s (1959) *Education and Freedom*, in that Rickover (1959) warns the nation that if schools are not held accountable for educating the brightest students, then freedom and democracy are at-risk. The same can be said for the message behind the *A Nation at Risk* (1983) report. The rhetorical message put forth by these documents was that equality would have to be sacrificed in the name of preserving the nation’s well-being. Nestled between these artifacts is the discourse surrounding the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Passed in correlation with the Civil Rights Movement, its rhetorical message was that democracy meant that at-risk students must also be given
more than access to schools; they must be given extra help in the form of federal aid. This act eventually came under fire for not providing enough accountability, and lead to publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and a shift away from providing help to at-risk students. These rhetorical shifts are cyclical, but not on a predetermined continuum; these changes are as the result of shifts in socio-political agendas. Like Rickover’s (1959) *Education and Freedom* and *A Nation at Risk* (1983), the Texas model of education after which NCLB was patterned came as the result of business leaders demanding that school-aged children be better prepared to enter the workforce or attend college after leaving high school (Palmaffy, 1998).

Accountability was at the root of the Texas model, and like the No Child Left Behind Act, the Texas reform movement was ostensibly based on a “deeply held conviction that any child can learn, even in the most challenging of circumstances” (Palmetto, 1998, pp. 30-38). However, the benchmarks set for Texas schools differed greatly from the standards set by the No Child Left Behind Act. For one, the standards were much lower—in some districts a 20% success rate defined an acceptable level of proficiency (Palmaffy, 1998). In addition, the rewards outweighed the penalties. One penalty schools faced under the Texas reform movement was dealing with “the shame of a ‘low-performing’ rating” (Palmaffy p. 30-38).

Another aspect of Bush’s Texas reform policy that is present in the No Child Left Behind Act was that it ended social promotion for students who failed to reach acceptable proficiency scores (Valencia & Villarreal, 2003). Valencia and Villarreal (2003) say that unless all schools have the same facilities, resources, and level of
qualified teachers, then minorities and students in poor districts will consistently produce the lower test scores. The issue at hand is the fairness of allowing a test score to be the sole determinant of whether or not students move on or are retained at a certain grade level.

To say that students who fail proficiency tests should not be promoted to the next level is to say that proficiency testing is the only way to evaluate student progress. Many educators disagree with this and as Valencia and Villarreal (2003) point out, “Standards-based school reform via high stakes testing, [and] the distorting and corrupting effects of measurement-driven instruction on literacy bodes ominously for students, teachers, administrators, and schools alike” (p. 618). These issues began to come under fire during Bush’s tenure as Texas governor, yet there are many obvious parallels between his reform model and the No Child Left Behind Act—but the stakes are much higher under NCLB, not only because it is enacted on a national level, but also because its surveillance methods are much more severe than that of the Texas model.

Another problem that surfaced with the Texas reform model was that minorities were still the students who most often failed to reach acceptable levels of proficiency with blacks and Hispanics scoring much lower than all other groups. For instance, one school in Houston that typically sent “its top 50 students to the Ivy League” (Palmaffy, 1998, pp. 30-38) was rated as being low-performing because only 28% of its black students reached proficiency (Palmaffy, 1998). By 2000, ten years after the Texas reform movement began, only 30% of minorities were reaching acceptable proficiency levels by grade nine and more than half of the minority
students who entered high school did not graduate (Haney, 2000). Even though on a national basis minorities perform below the national average (Valencia & Villarreal, 2003), the No Child Left Behind Act still requires all subgroups of at-risk students to reach proficiency.

Another area where the Texas reform movement foreshadows the No Child Left Behind Act is that both have been challenged by litigation. In Texas, lawyers for blacks and Hispanics filed suit, claiming that standardized testing was unfair to minority students (Palmaffý, 1998). Valencia and Villarreal (2003) point out that statistics show that overall all Texas students’ test scores rose, but “that high stakes testing distorts and corrupts the school process, thus challenging the validity of any inference drawn from test scores” (p. 617). That being said, there was a large gap in test scores between minorities and white students—the whites students overwhelmingly scored much higher than other students (Haney, 2000), resulting in what Valencia and Villarreal call an “adverse impact” (p. 613) on the effectiveness of school reform. In other words, minorities learned more when evaluated by their classroom teachers and not on the basis of standardized tests.

In 2004, the Texas reform model was ruled unconstitutional by the Texas Supreme Court, which cited that not enough funding was being distributed to help at-risk students and that “[a] standards-based accountability system is virtually guaranteed to leave children behind” (Welner & Weitzman, 2005, p. 246). Despite the fact that its prototype has come under fire from the courts, the No Child Left Behind Act continues to have a stranglehold on United States public schools.
Even though NCLB supporters profess that it is a bipartisan bill, the Texas model it was based on was actually designed by business leaders in an effort to bolster the workforce. Bankers, CEOs, and other business leaders lobbied the state school board to make changes in the way schools were run (Palmaffy, 1998). Since the roots of NCLB were developed on a state level, the fact that business people—not educators—shaped these standards is not as evident on the surface as it would have been if business leaders had claimed credit for designing NCLB. Nevertheless, while it is not as obvious as Rickover’s (1959) *Education and Freedom* and *A Nation at Risk* (1983), the No Child Left Behind Act is indeed driven by the economy.

James Barnes (2005) writes that while in the 1960’s Lyndon Johnson promoted the concept of a Great Society, one where all Americans prospered, George Bush seeks to create an “‘ownership society’—intended to increase homeownership, business creation, and American’s control over their own retirement and health care funds” (p. 105). This ownership society concept carries a strong rhetorical message. Barnes (2005) argues that Bush’s vision “was shaped by his Texas experience” (p. 105) of living a wealthy lifestyle; thus, according to political scientist John Burke, Bush “has a broad sense of where he wants to go” (qtd. in Barnes, 2005, p. 106) without understanding the lifestyles of most Americans—especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This same ideology can be applied to Bush’s view of education. He comes from a wealthy background and attended quality schools, thus he, much like Rickover (1959), ignores the fact that not all children come from privileged backgrounds.
NCLB: Where Is It Going?

While NCLB at first seemed to have bi-partisan support in Congress, it has begun to take on many detractors. Upon the act’s inception, one democratic legislator, George Miller, called the prospect of annual report cards “the centerpiece of the accountability system for school districts and schools” (Miller, 2004, p. 2). However, no one has yet to provide proof that these report cards can offer an accurate measurement of how much children have learned. Moreover, bipartisan support for the No Child Left Behind Act has declined considerably since the act was originally passed. For example, long time Democrat senator Edward Kennedy, who initially endorsed NCLB, has subsequently withdrawn his support because in his view the act “has been under-funded, mismanaged, and poorly implemented” (Mantel, 2004, pp. 2-3) and now amounts to no more than a “broken promise” (Mantel, 2004, pp. 2-3). A poll conducted in January, 2004 by a bi-partisan research committee found that 67% of voters felt that the No Child Left Behind Act was unreasonable because it penalized schools even if only one subgroup failed to reach proficiency (“NEA Poll Shows,” 2004). It should be obvious that different children have different needs, but many educators do not believe that NCLB takes these individual differences into consideration. The No Child Left Behind Act has many critics, ranging from educators to parents to students to politicians.

Despite taking a hands-off approach to public education until the 1950’s, in the decades preceding the passage of NCLB the federal government infused billions of dollars into the public education system. However, the No Child Left Behind Act is the first educational reform bill that has demanded 100% proficiency, dictated
exactly what is to be taught and how success is to be measured, and has allocated funding based on a system of performance-based rewards and punishments.

In the sixth and final chapter I address the research questions defined in Chapter Two, and I will follow this with concluding thoughts that will pose suggestions as to whether or not it is in the best interest of all students that the No Child Left Behind should remain intact, undergo modifications, or be abandoned completely. I will also revisit the historical rhetoric surrounding previous reform documents and how it compares and contrasts to the rhetoric surrounding NCLB; in addition, I will discuss ways in which the intent of the act—to leave no child behind in today’s schools—can come closer to fruition.
Chapter Six

Policymakers would be wise to redirect ameliorative legislation so that it targets a wider range of social pressure points that those accessible only within the classroom, school, or district. However spectacular our accomplishments in closing the achievement gaps, the long term improvement in the well being of African Americans and other people of color requires a more concerted effort than this. To begin with, it is necessary to pay specific attention to those societal forces that lead to unequal accomplishment in schools. (Freeman, 2005, pp. 194-105)

Introduction

The second chapter of this dissertation posed five research questions in regard to examining the No Child Left Behind Act. In light of the research presented to this point, this chapter provides answers to those questions. Most educators do not believe NCLB is in the best interests of public education, so I will also discuss ways in which the No Child Left Behind Act can be modified to more effectively serve schools and school-aged children. This dissertation will conclude with a reflection back onto the ways in which politics uses rhetorical documents to shape societal views—which in turn affect every aspect of society, not the least of which are schools.

Reflecting on the Research

Research Question 1
The first question sought to explore how much politics plays a role in how federal money is spent on public schools, and specifically, in light of shifts in the economy, world events, and changing political regimes how the discourse surrounding the No Child Left Behind Act has attempted to change public policy.

A look back at the past half century shows that changes in political administrations do indeed influence the ways in which the government views the schools and the degree of emphasis placed on assisting at-risk students. However, the ways in which societal movements are rhetorically presented also influence the ways in which political systems view public schools. Politics, world events, and shifts in the economy all dictate how well at-risk students are served in the sphere of public education.

Black students, especially, have always been left behind in receiving a public education. Since the times of slavery, blacks have been suppressed by the dominant white race. Freeman (2005) says that “[r]ace is the social expression of power and privilege, and its mutable nature makes it possible to trace how racial meanings and attitudes undergo successful periods of rearticulation” (p. 190). Further, maintains Freeman (2005), “[W]ithin these twisting currents, it is possible to discern how new configurations take shape in conjunction with alterations of the political economy of American society” (p. 290). Political rhetoric shapes the ways in which events are historically recorded (Lewis, 2000). This is seen in the cycle of education reform.

The Brown v. Board court decision and Rickover’s (1959) Education and Freedom were both produced during the presidency of Dwight Eisenhower, who is described on the White House’s website holding moderate political views. The
Brown decision demanded equality through desegregation, and while it was not enforced at the time Brown did serve as a catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement a decade later. However, for the remainder of the 1950’s the Civil Rights Movement was by and large placed on hold due to the Red Scare and the Cold War—the looming fear that the Soviet Union might at any time surpass the United States in technology, which in turn could cause the very core of democracy to be crushed if the Soviets had the capabilities and desires to invade and take over the United States.

This was the rhetorical message that pervaded the era immediately following the Brown decision, and many believe that the large degree of emphasis that was put on this crisis that never came to be was done to undermine the Civil Rights Movement itself (Horne, 2005). Aside from the War of 1812 and the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the Red Scare/Cold War was the first time since the United States had come into being when an outside force had threatened to disrupt America’s democracy on its own soil. Despite President Eisenhower’s supposed moderate views, he did little to enforce Brown or to downplay the Soviet threat because of the underlying rhetoric of the Red Scare/Cold War. As Horne (2005) points out, “the issue was ‘black’ and it was ‘red’ and it was ‘green’ (i.e. economic inequality) and it was ‘white’—as in white supremacy” (p. 196). This statement exemplifies how assisting the disadvantaged has historically been placed on hold under the false pretenses of preserving a democracy and freedom as a whole.

Written in response to the fear the that freedom and democracy was endangered and to inform its citizenry of the impending danger the country faced unless drastic means were taken, Rickover’s (1959) Education and Freedom
suggested that all students should have access to an education, but that only the most
talented students should be given a high quality education. Much of American
Society bought into Rickover’s rhetoric and had been convinced that the nation was
in danger, and this mindset remained in place toward education until the end of
Eisenhower’s presidency.

In the wake of John F. Kennedy’s untimely death, the rhetoric behind public
policy in regard to public education again shifted as civil rights legislation and the
Elementary and Secondary Education Act were born under a democratic presidency
in which Lyndon Johnson envisioned all children receiving a quality education in the
name of a forming a Great Society. The rhetoric that surrounded Johnson’s Great
Society platform was punctuated in his “We Shall Overcome” speech delivered in
1965 (Frost, 2002).

Indeed, America did have much adversity to overcome—in the wake of
Kennedy’s assassination, the lingering specter of the Red Scare was still on the minds
of many. Despite, or perhaps because of this, for the first time in the history of the
United States the political rhetoric during the first part of Johnson’s presidency told
Americans that the time had come for legislation to make amends for two centuries of
discrimination against minorities in all aspects of Society, not the least of which was
in the area of public education. However, Johnson’s overall dreams were shattered
when the country’s attention shifted to the war in Viet Nam and at least to some
extent away from domestic social change. While ESEA funds continued to be made
available to schools until the decade of the 1980’s arrived, the roots of surveillance
began to take hold as the vision of the Great Society faded (Frost, 2002).
The United States was under the reign of ultra conservative president Ronald Reagan for most of the 1980’s, when education reform in the form of financial assistance to disadvantaged students all but came to an end. Experts will argue that these cuts in funding were political in nature (Guthrie & Springer, 2004). Reagan, sometimes called “the Great Communicator,” (Lewis, 2000) was as a master of using rhetoric that Lewis (2005) says was “uninformed, irrational, and inconsistent” (p. 313). Lewis (2005) argues that the reason Reagan’s scare tactic rhetoric was effective in changing society’s views was that he had the ability to manipulate “his language, his strategy, or his style to make himself and his politics to be attractive” (p. 313). Reagan effectively convinced much of Society that the United States was falling behind the rest of the world economically, and this was supported by the A Nation at Risk (1983) report. However, the “risk” rhetoric should have come as no surprise since the commission that reported to Congress that America and its tradition of democracy and freedom were at risk had been authorized by Reagan’s administration.

Rhetoric does indeed shape societal mindsets. In a matter of twenty-five years, the discourse that dictated public policy in regard to education had gone from mandating that that elite students must be educated in the name of freedom to suggesting the possibility that the United States would become a Great Society, and then it changed to warn the public that the country was at risk.

Reagan was succeeded by another Republican, George H. Bush, whose political leanings were more moderate than Reagan’s, and Bush was followed by Democrat Bill Clinton—both of these presidents were more liberal toward education funding than Reagan. New educational reform bills passed under the Clinton
administration focused primarily on assisting at-risk children. These acts focused not only on academics; they were also passed to provide students with meals and funded facilities to help keep them off the streets (Morrison, 2003).

Despite the negative criticism the No Child Left Behind Act has received, current George W. Bush has not wavered on his stance that the bill will work. Finn and Hess (2004) say that Bush and his administration have “stoutly defended NCLB as enacted, refusing to acknowledge that it needs revising, and refusing sensible regulatory modifications” (p. 47). It can be argued that George W. Bush’s neoconservative political leanings are much more moderate than Reagan’s, but not as liberal as Clinton’s. However, the younger Bush seemingly has taken on the role of education advocate throughout his presidency and the No Child Left Behind Act follows very much along the same lines as the reform model implemented in Texas when Bush was governor there in the 1990’s. Nevertheless, when placed under close scrutiny the rhetorical implications of both the Texas reform model and NCLB show that preserving the power of the hegemonic class is at the root of each reform movement. The underlying rhetoric of NCLB’s goals is not as obvious at that of Rickover’s (1959) work or A Nation at Risk (1983), but it is present nonetheless.

As this section has shown, the rhetorical slant placed within public policy discourse does indeed change in light of shifts in political power and the role politics plays in regard to shaping society’s views on the state of the economy and the stability of the country. These shifts affect all aspects of Society, and can seen quite prevalently in the educational sphere.
Research Question 2

The second research question centered on academics and assessment and sought to determine the effectiveness of proficiency testing as a valid assessment tool, especially in regard to at-risk students. The question also looked into the rationale behind placing so much emphasis on proficiency testing and giving privilege to only three subjects, and the effect this has on the rest of the curriculum. Furthermore, this question sought to look at how effective the No Child Left Behind Act’s and other education reformation movements’ uses of surveillances affected the students’ abilities to learn, the teachers’ abilities to teach, and how the ramifications of students who fail to live up to the surveillance culture affect their ability to be productive members of society. Lastly, this question examines the rhetorical message the government is sending by taking control of public schools but placing the burden on reaching NCLB’s goals on individual states and districts.

From an assessment and communicative standpoint, grades are assigned, according to Kamber and Briggs (2002) for the purpose of sending the message as to “how well or poorly” (p. B14) students have completed the requirements of an assignment. Traditional grading procedures are to an extent a necessary evil, and the A through F system, albeit still a widely accepted way of assessing student progress, is not necessarily the best (Hargis, 1990). However, neither are the results of standardized proficiency testing. In fact, many educators believe that a true objective measurement of student achievement is next to impossible; consequently, multiple assessment measures must be used (Stiggins, 2001). Moreover, George Wood (2004) argues that no evidence exists to support the claim that students’ scores
on standardized tests have determined how much or how well students have learned. Despite this fact, the No Child Left Behind Act sees standardized proficiency tests scores as an accurate measurement of how well students have learned the subject matter.

In regard to both the traditional grading assessment and the reliance on test scores to determine achievement levels, Richard Stiggins (2001), president of the Assessment Training Institute of Portland, Oregon, asserts that teachers and students alike must be involved in the process of assessing academic progress in order to attain an accurate measure of what students have learned, and that teachers must present students with “evidence of their own success in order to generate within them the expectation that they can succeed” (p. 367). Thus, for assessment to be an effective communication tool, it must measure student achievement in both a reliable and valid manner, and the resulting assessment measurements must be clearly communicated to students (Stiggins, 2001).

Assessment has been a sticky issue for a number of years, and although assigning grades might not be the best way to measure student success (Hargis, 1990), no evidence exists to show that proficiency testing is a viable alternative to measuring student achievement (Wood, 2004). Stiggins (2001) asserts that these problems can be eliminated when teachers at all levels convey to students exactly what is required in order for them to achieve mastery goals as long as the teachers utilize valid and reliable measurement procedures and effectively communicate the results of assessment to the students. Townsend (2002) says that in addition to being unfair to at-risk students, standardized proficiency tests such as those used under the
No Child Left Behind Act do not offer an accurate assessment of student learning overall.

How to best assess the progress of students from diverse backgrounds is a major issue today’s educators face. Since the inception of NCLB, a debate has resurfaced over measuring achievement through proficiency testing. In addition to receiving tradition grades ranging from A-F, for much of the Twentieth Century students were given intelligence tests and slotted into career tracks. This caused controversy in many circles because the tests were accused of being culturally biased (Mondale, “As American as Public Schools,” 2001). Assessing the degree of student success, argues Stiggins (2001), can be facilitated through a variety of testing and feedback methods, which include selected response, essay, performance assessment, and personal communication—none of which rely solely on a standardized test. Obviously, if accurate assessment and communication procedures are not followed, then problems can occur in which students will feel dissonance.

Maxine Greene (1999), an education professor emeritus at Columbia University, argues that educators need to take an open-minded approach to teaching students. She points out that in today’s world of education, teachers who embrace scientifically-based teaching strategies in essence box out students from diverse cultural backgrounds or those who have special learning needs. Greene (1999) claims that searching for objective truth eradicates the very core of democracy and that schools must cater to the “multiple experiences and realities that students face” (pp. 13). Furthermore, noted education expert Howard Gardner’s teaching philosophy claimed that students learn in different ways, and according to Gordon and Browne
one “single broad ability…[or]…a set of specific abilities” (p. 153) is not an accurate measure of a student’s overall intelligence (Gordon & Browne, 2004, p. 153). Morrison (2003) contends that multiple choice questions like those on standardized proficiency tests appeal to a lower level of thinking but disregard the individual’s higher level of thinking skills—those that cause students to extend their intellect beyond rote memory when seeking the answers to problems. While it is evident that many educators believe proficiency testing is unfair to at-risk students, this form of assessment is the only measurement tool NCLB recognizes.

Using proficiency testing is also problematic for teachers because as Quantz (2003) argues, in order to be effective instructors must adapt their teaching styles to fit all students’ learning styles because most minority students do not learn in the same ways that traditional white American students do. For many students, it is the sense of accomplishment and the feeling of well-being in the classroom that causes them to stay in school (Ames, 1992). Many educators believe that the school must view each student as an individual learner. Before school curricula can be effective across the board nationally, schools must allow teachers to view students as imitative learners and knowledgeable thinkers (Alexander, 2000). Many people believe that this cannot be done if students’ primary form of assessment is through proficiency testing.

Villegas and Lucas (2002) predict that within a few years minorities will make up the majority of the student body of United States schools. They argue that many of these students will not speak English as a first language; consequently, many will be doomed to failure if the education system does not require teachers to prepare for
teaching students of diverse racial, cultural, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. Instead of taking language barriers into considerations, the No Child Left Behind Act requires all students to reach the same levels of proficiency in reading, and this poses potential problems for students who have difficulty mastering English.

In light of the No Child Left Behind Act, A. C. Besley, a professor of education at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (2003), argues that educational systems have begun “hybridizing” (p. 172) marginalized students into regular classrooms. She argues that while on the surface hybridization is a good thing, students’ individual needs and diverse backgrounds are often pushed aside in the name of placing all students on level playing fields. Besley (2003) claims that problems arise when schools force marginalized students into classes where they are classified as ‘‘mainstream,’ ‘talented and gifted,’ and ‘at-risk’’ (p. 155) without taking students’ ethnicity, cultural background, gender, and mental maturity level into consideration. She argues that along with recognizing hybridization, schools must also cast aside traditional notions of assessing students’ learning levels based on the expectations of a “traditional” student.

Democracy is a theme that runs through most of the rhetoric surrounding educational reform. In regard to what is being taught, Furumoto (2005) says that to participate in a democratic society, students must have the “capability to ‘read’ the world and to engage as active participants in addressing social justice concerns in their communities and the world” (p. 201). Students who are classified into NCLB subgroups are mostly those who have existed in heterotopias, and it seems as if the being designated into subgroup categories is a way for them to go through the ritual
of passing a proficiency test is the purification process Foucault (1998) describes.

Ironically, the reason educational reform became necessary in the first place was because of the very heterotopias—the non utopian situations—that Foucault (1998) speaks of.

Furumoto (2005) maintains that the No Child Left Behind Act takes on education reform from “an ahistorical perspective and a lack of concern for truth beyond immediate methodological correctness” (p. 201). The No Child Left Behind Act does not look at past mistakes and attempt to correct them. The cycle of education reform has always been both socio-politically and economically driven and for the most part at-risk students have been those who have suffered as a result. To not look at past educational reform bills and their rhetorical implications turns a blind eye to the hegemony that wealthy whites have held over at-risk students. *Brown* was an example of the judicial system handing down a court decision that southern states simply ignored. Rickover’s (1959) *Education and Freedom* implored schools to educate its brightest students, which were mainly those who had benefited from white privilege. ESEA did bring forth changes to help at-risk students but its worthiness was dismissed with the release of the *A Nation at Risk* (1983) report. In short, equal opportunity for at-risk students has always taken a back seat to educating the children of those in power. Moreover, in modern times providing education reform geared toward helping at-risk students depends on whether or not American Society believes that the country in general is at risk.

Many educators believe that proficiency testing is biased against minorities (Mondale, “As American as Public Schools,” 2001). Although NCLB ostensibly sets
out to educate marginalized students by requiring all students—regardless of their backgrounds—to pass standardized proficiency tests, Gutierrez et al. (2002) believe that students from diverse backgrounds will suffer as a result of failing and will be even more ostracized by Society. Furumoto (2005) points out that the more than 3.5 million students enrolled in today’s public schools that do not speak English as a first language are destined to fail proficiency tests, especially in the area of reading. Students who do not speak English as a first language are listed as subgroup members under the No Child Left Behind Act, and as such they are obviously at risk of not passing proficiency exams.

The No Child Left Behind Act fails to look at history in regard to curriculum issues as well. Furumoto (2005) argues that NCLB’s underlying goal is to “maintain and perpetuate dominant values and ideology” (p. 202). By basing assessment on scientific-based reasoning “students’ teachers’ and parents’ potential for human agency and social consciousness is completely ignored” (Furumoto, 2005, p. 202). Instead of leaving no child behind, scientific testing in effect keeps the status quo between the privileged and the suppressed, leaving an “adverse impact” (Valencia & Villarreal, 2003, p. 613) on the educational fate of at-risk students.

Research shows that limiting the curriculum hurts at-risk students. Gordon and Browne (2004) argue that if math, science and reading are the only subjects that receive a high degree of emphasis, then many students who learn in ways other than from reading or completing mathematics and science assignments will be automatically disadvantaged under NCLB regulations. For instance, Soto (1997) argues that when American schools force Spanish-speaking students to abandon their
first language and adopt English as their primary language, those students not only face academic challenges, but they often feel ostracized and lose their sense of cultural and historical identity. Thus, instead of keeping pace with other students, in reality they will regress.

Despite the increasing degree of diversity present in today’s classrooms, the teaching-to-the-test mode of instruction teachers must use in order to prepare students for proficiency exams does indeed lump all students into a single category of learners. For example, Meaney (2002) points out that the method in which math is taught has a large degree of influence on how students develop math skills. That being said, she argues that teachers need take into consideration the students’ cultural backgrounds in order to ensure that students understand the concepts being taught. Meaney (2002) argues that students from diverse backgrounds learn in different ways, and that teachers from diverse backgrounds teach in different ways. Meaney (2002) argues that some students prefer an affective approach to learning. Therefore, with the growing diversity within the demographic makeup of many of today’s schools, it becomes more apparent that one way of teaching does not benefit all students.

Furumoto (2005) asserts that by requiring proficiency testing and limited curricula, NCLB caters to business and the economy by providing “greater continuity in meeting both the local and global needs of capital” (p. 202). This was also the case with the Texas model of education reform developed by George Bush during his governorship. Shor and Freire (1987) say that classrooms should be innovative learning environments rather than politically driven holding cells for students as they methodically pass through the education system. Seah (2002) argues that some
students learn better when they are taught conceptual knowledge, while others respond better to being taught procedural knowledge. Consequently, teachers in all disciplines need to have the latitude to be flexible in their teaching styles while keeping the learning styles of today’s students in mind. As Seah (2002) points out, it is the duty of the teacher to recognize that understanding differences equates to accommodating different learning styles. This is difficult to accomplish under the No Child Left Behind Act.

Hass, Wilson, Cobb, and Rallis (2005) say that productivity from both students and teachers will decline in schools that cannot live up to the expectations of the No Child Left Behind Act. Students who fare poorly will likely give up, and teachers are likely to leave schools that face NCLB sanctions (Furumoto, 2005). Where Rickover’s (1959) Education and Freedom and A Nation at Risk (1983) implored society to accept these facts, the No Child Left Behind Act sends up a smoke screen to hide these problems. Under NCLB, when students fail, it is the fault of the schools, not the government that is held accountable for their failure.

Many at-risk students feel little incentive to succeed in school to begin with, and facing the stigma of failing if they do not meet proficiency standards does nothing to solve this problem. Giroux (2002) argues that because of negative stereotypes they have become accustomed to, many of today’s marginalized teens see themselves as part of a hopeless generation that is neglected by Society. However, Giroux (2002) points out that in today’s world, corporations demand that highly productive students graduate and enter the workforce; as a result, schools do indeed leave marginalized students behind. Further, Giroux (2002) claims that schools
suppress at-risk students to such a degree that many do not try to succeed academically because they can not perceive themselves having a successful life after they leave school.

Rickover’s (195) *Education and Freedom* and *A Nation at Risk* (1983) sent the message that only the best students should be educated in preparation for college while others were to be slotted into curriculum tracks that best suited them for the workforce. However, in today’s society Freeman (2005) believes that students who fail to live up to the mandates of NCLB will be pigeonholed for failure after they leave school. He says that blacks in particular are at risk for dropping out of school and settling for low paying jobs because they do not go on to college. Freeman believes that NCLB needs to be “attentive to improving proxy measures that imperfectly signify the life chances of children” (p. 194).

Despite its rhetorical message steeped in equality and democracy, Furumoto (2005) believes that the No Child Left Behind Act actually promotes racism and classism. She maintains that instead of allowing the poor and minority students to learn at their own pace, NCLB is actually a tool used by the United States government to recruit minorities and the poor for the military. Indeed, since the government has been monitoring schools under NCLB regulations, many school principals and administrators have been “receiving requests from military recruiters to supply the names, addresses, and phone numbers of high school juniors and seniors” (Bracey, 2002, p. 141). Furumoto (2005) believes that students who cannot reach proficiency are likely to perceive themselves as failures, drop out of school, and join a branch of the armed services. While she does not criticize the military’s worth or
purpose, Furumoto (225) that the No Child Left Behind Act is being used to slot students into career tracks.

Gutierrez et al. (2002), who have conducted research to determine how ESL students learn in English-speaking classrooms, discuss what they call “backlash pedagogy,” which they say is an educational trend promoted by the government that suppresses minorities by portraying them as exception-seeking entities who wish to undermine the United States’ tradition-laden education system. This is a far cry from the rhetorical goals of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, one that would elevate all people to being successful. Gutierrez et al. (2002) argue that the United States’ education system privileges white, male, English-speaking people and casts everyone else in the role of villains. Gutierrez et al. (2002) claim that the “backlash” to these theories is that it ensures white hegemonic privilege at the expense of sensitivity to diverse cultural histories and current practices and hybrid language patterns; furthermore, the authors point out that backlash pedagogy disregards the resources culturally diverse teachers can bring to the classroom and places emphasis on teaching rather than learning. In an education system that has traditionally privileged certain classes of people while sometimes intentionally leaving others behind, the No Child Left Behind Act dictates how teachers teach and what subjects are to receive priority instead of taking students’ special needs into account.

Having a negative reaction to living in a surveillance culture does not apply only to at-risk students. Many students who typically receive A’s in math, science, and reading fear that they might not be able to pass standardized tests, since this is not the method of assessment they are accustomed to (Hass, Wilson, Cobb, & Rallis,
While most people think the No Child Left Behind Act affects only at-risk children, the fact is that the education of all children is placed in jeopardy.

Rickover’s (1959) *Education and Freedom* and *A Nation at Risk* (1983) were rhetorical vehicles produced to save democracy and ensure freedom. It can be argued that the underlying purpose of the No Child Left Behind Act is to accomplish the same measure. Giroux (2002b) believes that American Society has marginalized today’s youth in the name of national security, welfare reform, and politics. He asserts that educational cuts and reactionary tactics by the government instill negative attitudes in students, especially marginalized racial and cultural groups. Again, this does not affect only at-risk students.

Even in the case of children from wealthier economic backgrounds, Giroux (2002b) blames today’s consumerism for children promoting products geared at “unbridled narcissism and quest for goods” (p. 38). Giroux (2002b) contends that many of today’s youth—rich and poor—are growing up in a world of fear, and that most of them have no reason to believe they have a chance of living as safely or as comfortably as did their parents did while growing up. As a result, Giroux (2002b) believes that when students do not believe they have a bright future, they display apathy in the classroom. This situation is made worse when students’ minds are not stimulated by a rich, varied curriculum. When students realize that all they have to do is to rely on rote memorization skills in order to pass standardized tests, their apathetic attitudes become stronger, which gives them a sense of entitlement when they enter college or the workforce after leaving school (Kamber & Biggs, 2002).
When the government intervenes in the day to day activities of the public school system, teachers and administrators alike see intrusive surveillance measures as being a “Big Brother aspect” (Bracey, 2002, p. 141) of NCLB. Nevertheless, when educational acts mandate that all at-risk students reach proficiency levels, most teachers are forced to alter their teaching styles in order to comply. This should not be a problem if modifying a curriculum or pedagogical doctrine, in fact, does increase the students’ ability to learn. However, by its nature NCLB places emphasis on a scientific-based form of education. Many educators believe that teaching rote memorization skills can increase short term retention of the material but that students do not master the material (Gordon & Browne, 2004). The No Child Left Behind Act, as well as the other documents that have historically dictated public policy in regard to education, causes teachers to face a sense of dissonance because most educators resent being told by politicians how to conduct their classroom activity.

While the government should and does have the right to monitor the allocation of funding provided to schools in order to prevent frivolous spending, most educators think that the surveillance measures taken by NCLB step over the line, and most education experts believe that such strict scrutiny is not in the best interest of students, schools, teachers, and society. By and large, educators believe that such as system rewards wealthy schools consisting primarily of white students and penalizes rural schools and other poor schools who cater largely to minorities (Freeman, 2005; Furumoto, 2005; Jimerson, 2005).

Jimerson (2005) says that the No Child Left Behind Act was passed under the assumption that performance would improve in all schools but that it is unfair to rural
schools, which as of 2003 made up 30% of all the students in the United States public school system. She says that most rural schools are poor to begin with and have large concentrations of at-risk students; thus, facing funding cuts at the hands of NCLB will simply make these schools poorer. Schools in rural areas are in a double bind, according to Jimerson (2005). Rural schools are located in remote areas and have lower teacher salaries than most other areas; as of 2005, rural school teachers were paid more than 13% less than teachers who work elsewhere (Jimerson, 2005). In order to attract more qualified teachers, these schools would need to be able to offer higher salaries. Instead, says Jimerson (2005), many rural schools struggle to stay afloat financially as it is and will suffer even more under the No Child Left Behind Act.

Not all disadvantaged students live in rural areas, and they suffer as well when their schools face penalties. Many cities also have high concentrations of minorities and other at-risk students, especially blacks. Instead of addressing this problem and providing funding especially to aid these students, NCLB ignores the problems that at-risk students have historically faced and expects them to reach proficiency simply by being placed in the same classrooms with and being taught at the same pace as all other students. Freeman (2005) says that Society has come to accept what he calls “colorblind racism” (p. 191), which has “penetrated American educational policymaking” (p. 191). Colorblind racism occurs when educational bills such as the No Child Left Behind Act maintain that all children will learn while ignoring that many minority students are far behind the rest of the pace (Freeman, 2005). This failure to acknowledge that inequities exist promotes a latent form of racism because
it “bestows material rewards on members of the white working-class [therefore] a large percentage of the population has little inclination to surrender their favored position” (Freeman, 2005, p. 195). This same fallacy was imbedded in the rhetorical message of Rickover’s (1959) *Education and Freedom* and *A Nation at Risk* (1983).

Finn and Hess (2004) say that “NCLB assumes that the entities that long permitted these schools to educate millions of children will now display the fortitude, ingenuity, and capacity to turn them around” (pp. 41-42). Bracey (2001) argues that the No Child Left Behind Act “makes no allowance for family, socioeconomic status, the impact of pre-school years, the K-2 years, or the community context” (p. 169). It is these very attributes of students that NCLB proposes to address, yet leading educators believe this is not being done. Again, this mindset recalls Rickover’s (1959) *Education and Freedom* and *A Nation at Risk* (1983). The implications of this show that the No Child Left Behind Act discriminates against at-risk students under the veil of promising to leave no child behind.

Historically, those students who make up today’s subgroups have been held back by American Society, so it is unreasonable to expect them to reach high proficiency levels by 2014. At-risk students have had access to a public education since the 1960’s and still fall far behind in the learning curve. All NCLB does to change this is to require that they be taken out of special education classrooms and then mainstreamed with all other students. This does not guarantee success; in fact, most educators believe that it will doom these children to failure.

Despite the No Child Left Behind Act’s insistence on standardized testing, most educational experts believe that teaching to the test is not an effective way of
promoting student learning. NCLB sets out to provide culturally diverse students
with an education, but does not leave enough room to educate all students on cultural
diversity. Moreover, simply reaching proficiency does not mean that the student has
learned anything other than how to memorize facts and formulas. It seems as if the
No Child Left Behind Act is more concerned that all students conform to the
expectations American Society has set for them in the workplace than it is with
meeting students’ specific learning needs.

Many education experts support the use of multiple assessment measures in
order to cater to students’ different learning styles. There is little doubt in regard to
the type of curriculum and teaching style required by the No Child Left Behind Act.
Yell, Drasgow, and Lowrey (2005) acknowledge that “NCLB requires that educators
use scientifically based strategies and methods, which represent the primary tools that
will allow schools to make meaningful changes in the academic achievement of their
students” (p. 130). Teachers and schools do indeed seek to make these meaningful
changes, but there is scant evidence to show that passing proficiency tests facilitates
these changes.

Assessing students’ progress only through scientific measurements limits
students who have other learning styles. Wood (2004) makes the point that under the
No Child Left Behind Act, “Test scores are all that matter” (p. 39). By categorizing
certain students into subgroups, the No Child Left Behind Act shows that it
recognizes that a very diverse student population exists in today’s schools; however,
it does not take students’ individual needs, learning styles, or abilities into account.
Only math, reading, and science proficiency are mandated under the No Child Left
Behind Act. This in itself supports the scientific teaching model but once again limits the curriculum.

It is obvious that NCLB does not see students as individual learners; its only concern is that each student reaches proficiency levels in math, reading, and science. Despite the fact that most educational researchers believe that students should be taught according to their needs and learning styles, this does not happen under NCLB. A major goal of the No Child Left Behind Act is retaining and educating at-risk students; however, scant evidence exists that passing a proficiency test provides students with a quality education, nor is there any research that indicates that students who pass a proficiency test will remain in school (Wood, 2004). On the other hand, research does show that students who experience failure are more prone to drop out of school than those who do not (Furumoto, 2005).

Even though NCLB claims that its purpose is to help students from diverse cultural backgrounds succeed, it does nothing to recognize the degree of diversity each student possesses. Instead, NCLB’s only concern is that students of all subgroups reach proficiency standards. In a democracy, discrimination in any form is an injustice that modern education reform acts like the No Child Left Behind Act should seek to set right. However, by taking a colorblind stance to educating students, NCLB is in fact promoting racism by ignoring racial inequities. From a rhetorical perspective, to say that no child will be left behind sends the message that all children will succeed. However, educators believe and statistics show that at-risk students are actually learning less and dropping out of school at higher rates than ever before (Jimerson, 2005).
Teachers suffer under the strict guidelines of NCLB as well. The No Child Left Behind Act leaves no room for educators to take differences in children’s motivational levels into consideration. While teachers might recognize that this is true and attempt to cater to the individual needs of each student, they are at the same time limited in the ways in which they address each student’s needs because of the teaching to the test mentality made necessary by the rules of the No Child Left Behind Act. Under NCLB, students must pass standardized proficiency tests that take nothing more into account than rote memorization. This type of evaluation does not take into account the degree of proficiency the student possessed when entering the class, nor does it show the degree of progress that the student achieved during the school term. Moreover, teaching students rote memorization skills in order to pass a standardize proficiency test seems to ignore the special learning needs that most at-risk students have.

Individual school districts and states are in jeopardy of losing federal funds if all students do not reach proficiency. The problem is that the amount of progress a student makes in a year counts for nothing in the eyes of NCLB, unless the student reaches his or her state’s predetermined proficiency level (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Moreover, even if standardized tests did provide an indicator of student progress, it would yield unreliable aggregate results because under NCLB the level of required proficiency changes from one state to another (Darling-Hammond, 2004) and that the tests themselves are flawed (Townsend, 2002). This discrepancy in what determines a passing or failing score will surely send mixed messages to students whose score
results would be interpreted differently depending on in which state the student took the test.

Some districts have trouble attracting quality teachers simply because of their location and salary limitations. This puts these schools at an automatic disadvantage. Then when some states relax minimum requirements for teachers and others keep them rigid, the gap in what defines a qualified teacher will further separate one state’s standards from another’s. This will undoubtedly have a profound effect on the actual degree of a quality education students will receive, and the level of quality depends primarily on which school district they attend. Most educators believe that schools should not be held accountable for extrinsic factors that negatively affect student learning—but under NCLB they are.

Despite the controversy NCLB has stirred, the fact is that the annual test scores yielded by students’ performances in math, reading, and science are indeed being used to grade the success and failure of America’s schools. Where NCLB ostensibly was designed to help students disadvantaged by poverty, race, ethnicity, or physical or mental limitation, it is in fact leaving these students in a worse predicament than before, not to mention the fact that it has placed the nation’s entire educational system in a quandary.

Even the term “subgroup” creates a problem in itself. Regardless of how sanitized the designation might sound, at-risk students who are classified as being different are certain to feel stigmatized. In this case the very name given these students identifies them as not being as privileged as other students—*sub* refers to one entity being beneath or inferior to another. Even though the number of minority
students in the classroom is growing steadily, the influence of teachers with an understanding of cultural diversity or who come from diverse cultural programs will be negated as long as the only criteria used under NCLB to measure students’ success rates is standard proficiency test that does not take diversity into consideration.

All blacks and white students living in poverty have traditionally made up a large sector of students that schools regard as being at-risk. However, in recent years a growing segment of the United States population speaks Spanish as it first language, and even though the No Child Left Behind Act has designated ESL students as subgroup members, it does nothing to ensure that these students will become proficient in speaking and understanding and mastering the language prior to taking standardized tests—it only penalizes schools if these students do not pass the tests. Clearly, testing alone is not the solution—but very likely is a contributor—to the overall problem. When at-risk students fare poorly, those districts that already were economically disadvantaged—those in which the majority of low performing students reside—are penalized.

While NCLB does acknowledge these problems, all it does to remedy them is to simply demand that schools teach these students to reach acceptable levels of standardized proficiency, without taking into account the difficulties teachers face when attempting to educate these children, or without recognizing academic limitations that many of these students face. Despite evidence that supports teaching and understanding diversity in the classroom, NCLB’s demand for proficiency testing does not support this form of education.
Teaching to the test is just that—the teacher is aware of the types of questions and the content areas to be covered on the proficiency tests, and he or she spends a large portion of the school year devoting class time to making the students memorize the material on the test. Teaching to the test has become a standard procedure in many districts, simply so that the schools can live up to NCLB guidelines. Although NCLB seeks to provide a quality education to at-risk students, it does not take their minority status into account as they prepare for proficiency testing. The No Child Left Behind Act measures success not on the basis of how much or how well a student has adapted to a certain method of learning or style of teaching; the score on the standardized proficiency means everything.

Even though the title of being “highly qualified” as a teacher is required by NCLB, each state has a large degree of latitude in determining whether or not a teacher is qualified in his or her academic area. If this is ostensibly because the United States’ educational system is to be left in the hands of each state, then one might have legitimate rights to question why the federal government has the power unilaterally invoke an act that mandates the level of student proficiency to which each school will be held.

Another problem is that even though the federal government is the entity that has unveiled NCLB, the act places the burden on the individual states to ensure that the provisions of the legislation are being carried out, including funding if they fail to meet NCLB’s expectations. The sanctions levied against non-compliant schools would reduce federal funding from already poverty-stricken districts under NCLB and would consequently do nothing to keep students from being left behind.
Furthermore, many educators have pointed out discrepancies between the amount of funding the federal government promised and the actual amount of funding NCLB has actually made available. If the funding is not available, then the No Child Left Behind Act will not work and should be modified.

Losing funding for lack of performance only puts poor schools with large concentrations of at-risk schools in worse financial shape than they were to begin with. Poorly funded schools allow access to students, but facing a lack of funding does not promote equality. Most at-risk students attend schools in the poorest districts, so losing funding actually lessons the playing field for poor schools that cannot meet NCLB’s proficiency requirements (Furumoto, 2005). As a result, the message being sent to schools who fail to live up to the stringent rules of NCLB is actually more damaging to at-risk students than Rickover’s (1959) *Education and Freedom* and the *A Nation at Risk* (1983) report. Those artifacts were straightforward in acknowledging that in the name of preserving democracy that some children would not receive the same degree of attention as others. What the No Child Left Behind Act does is to place under-performing schools further back than they were before the act’s passage (Jimerson, 2005; Furumoto, 2005).

A residual effect of the NCLB sanctions is that poor schools are not the only ones that suffer as the result of the NCLB’s reward and punishment system. Under NCLB, students from low-performing schools have the option of enrolling in high-performing schools. This, according to Finn and Hess (2004), will serve “to drag down the receiving schools’ overall academic results” (p. 44). Thus, while poor
schools are destined to failure in many cases, schools that currently perform well are also in peril of not reaching NCLB’s mandates either.

Finn and Hess (2004) argue that most Americans do want high quality schools that expect students to perform at high levels of proficiency; at the same time they “believe in local control of education and are skittish about heavy-handed federal intervention” (p. 47). To offer rewards to high performing schools makes sense, but if the aim of the No Child Left Behind Act is to ensure that all students reach proficiency, it stands to reason that schools that face punishments for underachieving will never be able to see their students reach acceptable proficiency levels. Moreover, it is the schools with the highest levels of at-risk students that are performing at the lowest levels of achievement, so it also stands to reason that these students who have been traditionally left behind will remain there.

The last three research questions examined how the rhetorical, socio-political, and historical meanings of the words democracy, freedom and equality have been changed by discourses preceding and surrounding the No Child Left Behind Act.

A Look at Rhetoric and Communication in Regard to Historical Education Discourse

In its mandated punishments for schools whose students score low, NCLB seems to assume that educators can shove America’s deep social problems—poverty, racism, drugs, crime, and the rest—right out the classroom door. Students must pass the same tests regardless of whether they lead lives of privilege or despair. But educators know the outside world is always in their classrooms, sitting with their students. (Jehlen, 2006, p. 27)
Messages are sent through communication. The rhetoric behind the message sets the message into its contextual meanings. Inevitably, the rhetoric behind political discourse shapes how societies view the message the discourse sends (Bormann, Cragan, & Shields, 2000). This is especially evident in the No Child Left Behind Act and other modern educational artifacts.

Research Question 3

The third research question examines how rhetorical, socio-political, and historical meanings are attributed to the relationship between education and democracy by historical educational discourses and those surrounding the No Child Left Behind Act.

In the case of democracy, its rhetorical context changes when it is used to define the United States as a sovereign nation; its connotation is also swayed by how politicians and public policy use the word as a vehicle to protect the United States’ ability to remain a sovereign nation. As shown previously, the Declaration of Independence was written to establish a democratic nation, with freedom from suppression and equality for all (Gordon & Browne, 2004). This definition changed once wealthy whites began controlling the socio-political and socioeconomic aspect of the country. Blacks were enslaved and women and the poor were suppressed by Society. Thus, a quality education was ensured only for the privileged class of white males and was for the most part unchanged until the 1950’s (Willie, 2005). The hegemonic ruling class of white males saw democracy as being a vehicle they used to educate their families, while those people living in heterotopias would argue that
democracy, as promised by the Declaration of Independence, had never come to be (Stanton, 2003).

Suppressed groups still did not have access to a quality education as the 1950’s came about, even though the Brown decision was a step toward meeting the promise of the Declaration of Independence. However, Rickover’s (1959) Education and Freedom sent the message to American Society that democracy was in danger because of Soviet technological advances. As a result, preserving democracy became the object of the rhetoric surrounding educational discourse, instead of the subject to be addressed by educational reform. This cycle changed with Johnson’s Great Society and the passage of ESEA, and changed again with the publication of A Nation at Risk (1983). As this dissertation has shown, the rhetorical meaning of democracy in regard to education has been in a state of flux depending on how Society views the nation’s stability.

When political rhetoric convinces American Society that the nation on the whole is in danger (as was the case with Rickover’s (1959) Education and Freedom and the 1983 A Nation at Risk report), then the preservation of democracy is the top priority of schools. At times when the nation is attempting to move forward (such as during Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society era), democracy is seen as a vehicle for providing all children with a quality education.

The latter is the case with the No Child Left Behind. However, because the bill extends beyond simply providing education to all children, its rigid surveillance measures may in the end show that not all children can bridge the achievement gap and the bill might very well set at-risk students back, all in the name of democracy. If
the No Child Left Behind Act fails to bring the results it promises, then the rhetorical messages it will send will be much more along the lines of Rickover’s (1959) _Education and Freedom_ and _A Nation at Risk_ (1983), and not the great democratic society the Declaration of Independence promised and Harry Truman’s Fair Deal and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society proposed. Rhetorically, Rickover’s (1959) _Education and Freedom_ and the _A Nation at Risk_ (1983) report served to instill fear in the American people. The Declaration of Independence contained false promises, while the Great Society contained visions of false hope. The No Child Left Behind Act promises what its name implies, but educators know that this will never come to be under NCLB’s current definition of what it means to leave no child behind.

Research Question 4

The fourth research question looks at how rhetorical, socio-political, and historical meanings are attributed to the relationship between education and freedom by discourses surrounding the No Child Left Behind Act and other educational artifacts.

Like the concept of democracy, the rhetorical meaning of freedom has shifted throughout the nation’s history. Not only did blacks not have the right to attend schools for many decades, they literally had lost the freedom to make their own decisions by being enslaved. Freedom, until the end of the Civil War, was something that blacks did not have the legal or societal right to enjoy. In the realm of education, freedom to attend school was reserved basically for the affluent until the mid-to-latter half of the Nineteenth Century, and the freedom to attend quality schools was denied
blacks and other at-risk students until the 1960’s. With the *Brown* decision of 1954, blacks were legally given the freedom to switch to better schools, but this did not happen because many states refused to comply (Willie, 2005).

The concept of freedom took on a different rhetorical meaning when Rickover (1959) published *Education and Freedom*. At that point in history, freedom was seen in collective terms. Instead of individuals having the freedom to choose where to go to school, the focus shifted to preserving the very essence of freedom as a nation. The meaning of freedom changed again during the 1960s as blacks began gaining civil rights and the federal government—through ESEA—began funneling money into public schools to help all disadvantaged students. For the first time, blacks had to freedom to fight segregation and attend better schools, while schools had the freedom to utilize federal money in ways they chose to best serve its students. The cycle of change continued when *A Nation at Risk* (1983) was published. Once again, the concept of maintaining national freedom took precedence over individual freedom.

The No Child Left Behind Act sends forth another rhetorical use of freedom—students not only have the freedom to attend public schools; they also have the freedom to leave public schools that are not performing to high standards. Many educators, however, believe that freedom in this sense will be detrimental to both the school the low-performing student leaves and the new school the school enters. The low-performing school will face sanctions, while the new school will be required to bring the low-performing student to proficiency or face penalties itself.


Research Question 5

The fifth research question addresses the rhetorical, socio-political, and historical meanings that are attributed to the relationship between education and equality by discourses surrounding the No Child Left Behind Act. Again, the Declaration of Independence promised some degree of equality, but the term itself is very ambiguous and its rhetorical meaning has changed many times throughout America’s history.

The fact that the Declaration boasted that all men were created equal is problematic in itself. For one, it ignored women, as Elizabeth Cady Stanton (2003) pointed out in “Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, Seneca Falls Convention, 1848.” In this document, Stanton argued that the framers of the Constitution did so in such a way that only the hegemonic white class would reap the benefits of what was supposedly a free, equal, and democratic society.

Slavery obviously was an indicator that freedom and equality did not apply to blacks, but the Plessy court decision of 1896 gave the term equality a whole new meaning. By ruling that the races were separate but equal, Plessy set the stage for another half century of discrimination by White Society against blacks.

The Brown decision once again changed the rhetorical definition of equality—the court case defined equality as meaning equal access (Willie, 2005). Willie (2005) argues that given the years of suppression blacks and other at-risk students had faced, simply having access to an education was a fair and equitable solution to overturning the separate but equal doctrine. Although their overall purposes were different, the issue of equality did not change much between the passage of Brown and the
publication of Rickover’s (1959) *Education and Freedom* in that both supported giving all children access to an education. However, while *Brown* brought to light decades of injustices, Rickover (1959) seemingly turned a blind eye to the years of discrimination at-risk students had faced.

Equality took on a new meaning with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. For the first time, federal money was being spent to make the playing field more even for disadvantaged students. This would all change with the Reagan presidency and the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983). In fact, the concept of equality actually regressed under Ronald Reagan’s presidency. While Rickover (1959) simply ignored the fact that blacks and other minorities were at a disadvantage, Reagan said that too much had been done to help them—and that the country was in peril as a result (Mondale, “The Bottom Line,” 2001).

The No Child Left Behind Act brings forth another concept of equality. Not only is equal access to schools provided, it is demanded under NCLB’s guidelines. However, whereas many students had been educated in special education classrooms, NCLB demands that all students must be educated in the same learning environment. Equality takes on more rhetorical connotations than the other terms discussed in this section. While NCLB proponents see all students as being equals, educators know that not all students possess equal amounts of talent, and that is another point where the No Child Left Behind Act becomes problematic.
Analysis

Despite the fact that NCLB is designed to provide a quality education for all students, it ultimately forces some students to be left behind. Politics does indeed play a part in the act, as it has with every previous reform bill. The bipartisan support the No Child Left Behind Act initially received is waning, and the increasing chasm between supporters and detractors grows along party lines more and more as time passes. In fact, Jehlen (2006) reports that there is “a new bipartisan consensus that the law is hurting more than helping efforts to close achievement gaps” (p. 24). NCLB sends the message that a perfect educational system—which to this point in history is nonexistent—is plausible if the mandates of NCLB sets forth are followed and every student reaches proficiency. However, most people believe that the No Child Left Behind Act does little or nothing to improve the American education system, except on paper.

Research shows that proficiency testing is biased against at-risk students (Karp, 2004). As a result, the very group that NCLB purports to serve—at-risk students—is actually being pushed back by being required to pass standardized proficiency tests. Likewise, many educators believe that by simply teaching to the test they are depriving their students of a well-rounded education (Valencia & Villarreal, 2003). In addition, teachers are disgruntled when they are not allowed to teach according to their own pedagogical beliefs.

Although the states were responsible for most educational funding until the 1960’s, the federal government has spent billions of dollars over the past 40 years on educational reform. It is not unreasonable for the government to expect some
accountability for how such a large amount of funding is used. However, the general consensus among educators and states is that the degree of federal intervention brought forth by the No Child Left Behind Act is far too intrusive and punitive.

Students and teachers alike resent the rewards and punishment aspect of the No Child Left Behind Act. Students who do not pass the proficiency tests label themselves as failures (Furumoto, 2005). Teachers live in the constant fear that if their students do not pass the proficiency tests then their own jobs are in jeopardy (Hill & Barth, 2004). In addition, many teachers do not feel they are doing what they were hired to do—to educate students when they are not permitted to devote enough time to subjects other than reading, math, and science (Jehlen, 2006). When schools are held to unreasonable expectations, problems quickly arise.

The following section provides a discussion of possible modifications the act should undergo, and this dissertation concluded by recapping how rhetoric has historically shaped Society’s views.

Possible Solutions

If the No Child Left Behind Act were to be abandoned entirely, then states and school districts will be left to wonder why they took the time, effort, and money away from what they were accustomed to doing before the inception of NCLB: providing students with the best education possible using the resources each state and district has to work with.

Some educators believe in the No Child Left Behind Act in principle, but contend that it needs to modified. Monty Neill (2004), the head of The National
Center for Fair and Open Testing and one of NCLB’s biggest critics, argues that the No Child Left Behind Act “is a fundamentally punitive law that uses flawed standardized tests to label schools as failures and punish them with counterproductive sanctions” (p. 101). Neill claims that NCLB needs to “be reconsidered and rewritten, particularly in the areas of assessment and accountability” (p. 101) as “a supportive law that really promotes school improvement” (p. 101). Neill (2004) believes that the No Child Left Behind can be revamped to the extent that it can benefit all students while at the same time accomplish the basic goals of the act itself. Many educators echo Neill’s sentiments.

Neill (2004) contends that “[o]pposition to NCLB doesn’t mean opposing any or all forms of accountability” (p. 105); however, he argues that some issues are beyond the control of individual teachers and school districts. He says that schools “do not control poverty or the historical consequences of racism” (p. 105). These two issues were at the root of why educational reform came to be in the first place. Proficiency testing cannot measure the magnitude of extrinsic factors on students’ ability to learn (Mathis, 2003). High test scores will not eliminate poverty per household or per school district.

Education reform began as a way to bring more equity to at-risk students, so if none were left behind then the argument could be made that equity has been reached. There are problems with this way of thinking. For one, racism still exists in the United States. This is seen covertly in proficiency testing—which is geared toward whites (Karp, 2004). Despite this, the “equality” factor of NCLB requires minority students to perform as well as all other students, even though the cards are stacked
against them. Aside from being held back by prejudice and poverty, another issue is that some students have such severe mental and physical limitations that they simply do not have the ability to learn.

Funding is also an issue in regard to NCLB. Although the federal government promises that funding will be available, the nation’s educators do not believe this to be true (Finn & Hess, 2004) and nor does a growing number of politicians (Welner & Weitzman, 2005). Hass et al (2005) suggest that even if the funding were available, it is unrealistic to expect that 98-99% of all school aged children would ever be able to reach a level of proficiency by 2014. They suggest that an across the board minimum level of proficiency be established, but that the 98-99% proficiency rate should be lowered. Moreover, Hass et al (2005) also argue that success should be measured through multiple forms of assessment, not solely by standardized tests.

The No Child Left Behind is the most controversial educational reform bill to ever be introduced in the United States. Finn and Hess (2004) say that “[l]ike other complex new laws, NCLB will need repairs before it works smoothly” (p. 48). However, they say that repairs have not occurred because:

The Bush administration has denied this reality or regarded it as a public relations failure. The administration has stoutly defended NCLB as enacted, refusing to acknowledge that it needs revising, and refusing sensible regulatory modifications until backed into a corner. The administration has also been needlessly defensive about the adequacy of federal spending to help states offset the costs of complying with NCLB’s mandates. (pp. 47-48)
Because it is no longer has bipartisan support, the No Child Left Behind Act is very likely to undergo major changes when George Bush leaves office, unless his replacement shares his same ideologies in regard to education.

A Return to Rhetoric and History

Rhetorically speaking, the term “no child left behind” is problematic. Equality in regard to having the opportunity to receive a quality public education should be guaranteed in a free, democratic society, but in the case of the United States, history shows that it has not been. Leaving no child behind would signify a truly successful democratic education system, but simply including the words “no child left behind” as part of the act’s title does not guarantee that no child will be left behind. However, the bottom line is that many people believe that the reality is that children are not failing; instead, because of its severe rewards and punishments system and its sole reliance on a single method of assessment, the No Child Left Behind Act is failing to do what it initially set out to do.

Most educators do believe that at-risk students benefit from educational reform geared toward helping them, but they also argue that NCLB’s demands and punitive measures are too rigid. Equity takes on different rhetorical meanings depending on the economy shapes the ruling socio-political class. The No Child Left Behind Act is up for review in 2007, and George Bush’s second term ends in 2009. If No Child Left Behind is to remain in effect beyond the Bush years, serious changes need to take place.
A bill that promises to leave no child behind in the world of education cannot do so on its name only if it is to be taken seriously. The problems that have historically left children behind have not been solved, and simply mandating that at-risk students must reach proficiency does not guarantee positive results. Equality will not be reached until all children are allowed access to a quality education. This has come much closer to reality because of the Brown decision and government monies from programs such as ESEA and its successors, including NCLB to an extent. However, having access is not enough. Students need to be able to learn at their own pace in order to get the best education they can as individuals. Ranking schools from best to worst based on the test scores of individual students does nothing to help the at-risk students and schools, especially those in poor areas.

Politics plays a large role in education reform and political rhetoric is always geared toward swaying Society one way or another. Until the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, in general education reform has commonly been geared to the disadvantaged when moderates and liberals have been in office, and it has been geared toward the most talented students when conservatives have been in office. In order to sway a society’s views, politicians must convince the public through rhetoric that what is being done is in the best interest of the nation. Public policy documents concerning education reform has had a profound effect on society, which in turn affects the ways in which public schools are run.

The Red Scare/Cold War rhetoric used by Rickover (1959) and others convinced the overall population that the nation was in peril, and that education dollars should be earmarked for the most talented students. The same was true with
Looking back from an historical perspective, it can be argued that both of these crises were not as serious as the nation was lead to believe (Guthrie & Springer, 2004). When Lyndon Johnson said “we shall overcome” our adversities and live in a Great Society, education reform began to assist the disadvantaged. When the nation was perceived as being at-risk, a reform movement took hold that sought to educate the best students. The most current political theme in regard to public schools is to leave no child behind. This is the cycle of education reform.

One might find it somewhat curious that President Bush would take such an interest in public education, but the fact is that NCLB is based on the model that Bush and business leaders developed while Bush was governor of Texas. While Texas schools improved overall, at-risk students still failed as an aggregate to reach acceptable levels of proficiency (Haney, 2000). Despite the fact that over a ten year period the test scores of at-risk students consistently fell below proficiency levels and many minority students were either retained or dropped out of school altogether (Haney, 2000), the No Child Left Behind Act very much parallels the Texas model, except that the expectations are higher and the penalties for non-compliance are greater. Taking this into consideration, it is obvious that the No Child Left Behind Act rides on the laurels of its name only.

History shows that race does indeed place a large part in the debate over education reform. Rickover’s (1959) *Education and Freedom* and *A Nation at Risk* (1983) simply ignored the issue of race, and while NCLB silently acknowledges race by categorizing at-risk students into “subgroups,” it is ignoring the history of racism and classism in the United States and presupposes that the problems of the past will
magically disappear within a little more than a decade simply because at-risk students are placed in regular classrooms. This line of logic ignores more than three centuries in which blacks and other at-risk students were intentionally left behind.

While ESEA was heralded by education experts as a means to help disadvantaged students, many argue that the No Child Left Behind Act actually hurts them. Freeman (2005) says that the preservation of White Supremacy runs alongside all educational reform movements and is especially prevalent in NCLB. He argues that democracy is not achieved as long as one racial or social group of people is in power, and that a bill like the No Child Left Behind Act fosters “colorblind racism” (p. 191). According to Freeman, as long as all children are required to achieve the same degree of proficiency regardless of their backgrounds, then the fact that more black children and other at-risk students fail only strengthens the “relations of domination and racial superiority” (p. 191) that whites have held since pre-colonial times. Because they have been suppressed, at-risk students have never been able to compete at the same academic level of privileged students, but NCLB expects them to do so.

The *Plessy* court decision was overtly racist in that it deemed that races should be separated. Rickover’s (1959) *Education and Freedom* and *A Nation at Risk* (1983) were more subtle in calling for a suppression of minorities, but the rhetoric used in each was done in the name of preserving freedom and democracy. The colorblind racism supported by the No Child Left Behind Act may be the most dangerous form of discrimination of them all, in that to this point the achievement gap between white and minority students is not closing significantly if at all.
Politicians need to realize that the mere passage of an act called “No Child Left Behind” will not magically bring all students to proficiency and finally bring equality and excellence to the public education system. All discursive acts are communication vehicles, and the rhetoric that surrounds each can have a large degree of influence on how a society perceives and reacts to a given text. Education reform has historically hinged on the rhetorical messages sent forth by educational discourse. Instead of blindly accepting the potential rewards of an act based solely on its title, one must instead look at the deeper motivation behind the reform bill’s real intent.

The No Child Left Behind Act needs not to be abandoned, but it does need modification. Instead of inflicting penalties on non-compliant schools, the bill needs to pump more education dollars into poorly performing schools and let the states have more of a hand in determining how the money should be used. This is not to say that surveillance and accountability should not be in place, but the bill needs to be modified to lower the nearly 100% proficiency rate to reflect the learning abilities of individual students, and not to assume that all students have the capability of performing at high levels. More money should indeed be earmarked for raising teachers’ salaries instead of imposing penalties on teachers whose students fare poorly. It can be said that proficiency testing does produce numbers, but at-risk students traditionally do not fare well on these types of tests. Therefore, instead of relying solely on one means of determining student success, multiple assessment measures must be used to gauge student learning.

In sum, if its name is to come close to more accurately reaching its self-proclaimed goals, the No Child Left Behind Act needs to undergo major changes.
Even if this happens, it is highly unlikely that true equality will ever be achieved, given the years of suppression that minorities faced, but if the rigid surveillance mandates of NCLB are relaxed to best accommodate the needs of all students, then at-risk students will stand a far better chance of attaining success. The No Child Left Behind Act needs to show more flexibility. This does not mean that the goal of providing a quality education for at-risk students should be abandoned. However, instead of making false promises that no child will be left behind, NCLB should be revised to fit more practical expectations and bring as many children forward as possible while providing access to a quality education to all students.

Rhetorically speaking, enacting a bill that promises to leave no child behind in the world of education has far-reaching effects that might affect society’s trust in the government as well as the world’s perception of the United States as a democratic nation. Rickover’s (1959) *Education and Freedom* and *A Nation at Risk* (1983) carried rhetorical messages that warned of eminent dangers and shaped Society’s views. This was done in the name of preserving freedom and democracy. Rhetorically, the No Child Left Behind Act does not provide a warning—it makes a strong claim that is impossible to come true.

If the No Child Left Behind Act remains in its present form and fails to eliminate the achievement gap by 2014, then it will not only go down in history as one of the most expensive and embarrassing mistakes the country has ever seen. The rhetorical significance of failure might be just as far reaching—if a country that prides itself in democracy, freedom, and equality devotes 12 years to a landmark
A dissertation that relies on rhetorical analysis in an effort to contribute to the body of literature in the field of communication studies can be effective when it examines artifacts from both a rhetorical and historical perspective. In this dissertation I have shown both the rhetorical and historical significance of a number of modern educational artifacts that have led to the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act. Rhetorical discourse written within and surrounding these previous documents has centered on the issues equality, freedom, and democracy—and how each of these meanings is interpreted differently during different socio-political eras. In the case of the No Child Left Behind Act, politicians need to understand that rhetoric alone will not create a perfect school system.

The fact is that at-risk students come from backgrounds that have made learning difficult for them, and there is no magic wand available to take the extrinsic factors out of barriers to student learning. All the mandates of NCLB would seemingly work if two contentious premises were acknowledged as being universally true—that all students, regardless of their backgrounds, enter the game on an even basis, and that proficiency testing is an unquestionably the one and only accurate way in which to evaluate student achievement. The No Child Left Behind Act presents these premises as positive truths; however, if one were to dispute either of these claims then the potential flaws of the bill quickly emerge.

Just by looking at its title alone, it becomes obvious that the No Child Left Behind Act is rhetorically driven, and history shows that rhetoric has a major
influence on how a society shapes its perception of the world. From the Red
Scare/Cold War to envisioning a Great Society to living in A Nation at Risk, rhetoric
has indeed manipulated the ebb and flow of the United States public school system.
Few people will argue that NCLB was enacted in the spirit of ensuring failure for at-
risk students, but it is impractical to believe that a title alone can cause a legislative
act to be effective. Rhetorically, the message being sent by the No Child Left Behind
Act is that if any children are left behind, then the schools have failed to do their jobs.
The No Child Left Behind Act, if it fails to live up to its name, will ultimately go
down in rhetorical history as a document that blindly made promises that it could not
deliver.
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