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perspective

## One-size-fits-all approach doesn't work

By Beverly Ingle

I have been a classroom teacher for 25 years and currently teach sixth-grade social studies. The goal of the federal No Child Left Behind Act is that all students will achieve.

This is also my goal. I want each and every one of my students to succeed.

Within the almost 1,200 pages of the law there are some rigid and confusing rules that negatively affect public education and me as a classroom teacher. Two issues that affect me most directly are Adequate Yearly Progress and the Highly Qualified Teacher requirements.

I believe that all children can learn, but I know that they do not learn in the same way or at the same pace. Parents know this, too: Their children are unique individuals who learn at their own rate, some quickly and some not so quickly. For example, all children do not learn to read at the same age. Some learn by seeing and others by doing. Some hear or read something once and commit it to memory. Some master skills easily, while others struggle to learn the same skills. And, some have learning disabilities such as dyslexia that make learning an even greater challenge.

I have had all these kinds of students in my classroom, and I individualize my instruction to help each one learn and succeed. I know that all my students will not be at the same achievement level at the same time.

Yet, No Child Left Behind requires that in 2014, every student, regardless of the pace at which he or she learns, will score at the proficient level or higher on state tests. All the students in the United States at the same time! The advancement made each year toward achieving

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this lofty but impractical goal is called Adequate Yearly Progress.

In Colorado, AYP is measured by students' scores on the Colorado Student Assessment Program. Some of my students race through their CSAP tests and score high. Some do better on the math CSAP than on the writing test. Some need more time to finish the test than the rules permit, or they need the instructions repeated. In the world of testing, these are called accommodations. No Child Left Behind permits accommodations for a certain number of students based on a national average, so it's possible that some children needing extra help will not be allowed to have it.

Every day, I work with my students to accommodate their individual learning needs. The law does not recognize that this is what teachers do to help every student learn. The law treats all children in every classroom as if they are the same, as if they learn and achieve at the same rate. No Child Left Behind is a "one-size-fits-all" approach to learning that is neither practical nor sensible. And it certainly is not educationally sound.

Adequate Yearly Progress applies to every school and every school district. My school did not make the grade this year because our English language learners did not do well on last year's CSAP tests. These students are working hard to learn to speak, read and write English at the same time that they are learning their academic subjects. No Child Left Behind says students have up to three years to learn English before they must take the state tests. For some students, this is not enough time for them to become proficient enough in English to do well on the CSAP.

Those students are one of several subgroups defined by the federal law. Another subgroup is special education students. Under the law, every subgroup must make Adequate Yearly Progress in order for a school to meet the standard.

No Child Left Behind not only regulates the measurement of student achievement, but it also standardizes the definition of a "highly qualified teacher." I believe a highly qualified teacher is one who has a mastery of subject matter, understands how students learn and knows how to teach them. Every student deserves to be taught by a highly qualified teacher.

But the law's inflexible definition of "highly qualified" leaves many teachers uncertain about whether they are, in fact, qualified to be teaching the subjects they already teach. Middle school teachers (grades 6-8) are affected because some of us hold elementary teaching licenses, as I do, while others hold secondary licenses in a specific subject area. Middle school teachers and some high school teachers, especially in rural areas, often teach more than one subject. The law requires that we must be "highly qualified" in every subject we currently teach.

Many middle and high school teachers with years of successful teaching experience in subject areas for which they are not officially licensed will have to take additional college classes or pass tests to demonstrate their subject knowledge. Ironically, a brand new teacher with the right license is automatically considered highly qualified. I believe successful teaching experience at whatever level should count for something under No Child Left Behind.

The law may have been written by the Bush administration and passed by Congress with the very best of intentions. The broad concepts are fine, but the specific details are problematic. In my school and in thousands of schools across our nation, the law's rigid rules are confusing and distracting.

Teachers and parents know that when it comes to children and learning, one size does not fit all. Federal law should recognize that as well. Then we can all focus on the goal of helping every child succeed to the best of his abilities.

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