

Collision Course: Federal Education Policy Meets State and Local Realities,
by Paul Manna. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011, 206 pp., \$32.95 paperback.

Reviewed by Sandra Vergari
State University of New York at Albany

In this book, Paul Manna examines assumptions embodied in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and federal, state, and local implementation of the law during 2002–2009. He argues that NCLB demands for state and local accountability collided with state and local environments, policies, and practices. He identifies both positive and negative consequences of these collisions. On the positive side, student achievement gaps gained attention, there were improvements in state and local technical capacity, and NCLB offered policy entrepreneurs a lever for promoting education reform.

In terms of negatives, NCLB implementation practices involved decreased academic quality and lower academic expectations of students. Moreover, NCLB implementation efforts were focused on compliance with bureaucratic rules rather than substantive improvements in education.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide an overview of the federal role in education, NCLB assumptions, and the New Public Management emphasis on performance measurement. Manna identifies a “theory of accountability” and a “theory of administration” embedded in NCLB. According to the theory of accountability, measurement, transparency of results, and consequences for performance will yield improved education outcomes. The theory of administration assigns core responsibility for NCLB implementation to the states; and, localities are accountable directly to their respective states rather than to the federal government. Manna notes that the federal government lacks capacity to hold each school accountable for boosting equity and excellence in education.

NCLB permitted states to determine their own academic standards, tests, and definitions of student proficiency. Manna observes that the U.S. Department of Education (ED) was not authorized to assess the substantive rigor and validity of state standards, tests, and claims about student proficiency. Therefore, ED focused on whether states were complying with procedural rules.

Chapter 3 addresses federal-state relations and challenges of NCLB implementation. Here, Manna shows how initial ED promises of robust NCLB enforcement gave way to more flexible approaches on matters such as the highly qualified teachers requirement, school choice, and supplemental educational services.

In Chapter 4, Manna turns to the local level, highlighting variations in state expectations and local factors that shaped school district responses to NCLB. In his discussion of local implementation of the supplemental educational services provision, he conveys a sympathetic tone. While acknowledging critics' complaints about local responses, Manna suggests that federal and state guidelines made it difficult for districts to notify parents about their rights and tutoring options in a "concise, coherent letter without technical jargon" and to "craft effective letters that met legal requirements" (p. 78). He asserts that, as a result, "parents receiving the letters could have been confused about their options" (ibid.).

Under NCLB, lagging schools are required to notify parents about free tutoring options and use a portion of their federal Title 1 monies to fund the tutoring. Should families not access supplemental services, districts maintain control over the funds originally set aside for such services. Some districts resented this NCLB-mandated use of their Title 1 funds and did little to inform and encourage parents to access the tutoring.

It was quite possible for districts to notify parents about the tutoring option in an accessible manner and to offer useful assistance to families exercising their right to free tutoring. However, some districts chose to do the minimum necessary for compliance and mailed letters loaded with technical jargon. Later in Chapter 4, Manna offers a more nuanced and convincing discussion of reasons for mediocre local responses to NCLB's corrective action and restructuring requirements.

Chapter 5 examines variations in state standards for classifying teachers as "highly-qualified," a narrowing of the curriculum as teachers faced incentives to focus on reading, math, and test preparation, and state assessments of questionable rigor. Manna also observes that some schools avoided the tendency to narrow instruction and were able to meet state proficiency standards while delivering a rich curriculum of diverse subjects.

In Chapter 6, Manna addresses a series of complex technical and political issues in a balanced and readable manner. First, he discusses consequences of NCLB for special education students and English language learners. Second, he reviews disparities between student scores on national tests and state tests that suggest lower state standards. Finally, he reveals how school decision makers, concerned with meeting adequate yearly progress requirements, were motivated to focus attention on students who were near proficiency and easiest to move to the next level. The result was relative neglect of the education needs of the lowest- and highest-performing students, counter to the philosophy of leaving no child behind.

In the concluding chapter, Manna, discusses some education reform initiatives of the Obama administration and lessons of NCLB for federal education policy designers. In terms of prescriptions for addressing the many NCLB design and implementation problems examined in the book, he speaks mostly in generalities. He offers little in the way of concrete, convincing suggestions about how to address longstanding intergovernmental challenges in education policy in the United States or the likelihood of policy makers addressing these challenges successfully in the future. Perhaps asking the author to specify effective responses to enduring problems in the education policy process is akin to asking him how to produce world peace. Nonetheless, some more precise proposals could enhance the discourse on federalism and education.

Manna advises federal policy makers to "think carefully about federalism, institutions, politics, and administrative conditions and then design accountability systems that enhance prospects for success" (p. 165). He suggests that improving education outcomes will require "frank and difficult discussions" among federal, state, and local officials but does not

speculate on the prospects for such dialogue (p. 163). The book highlights various technical capacity deficits. Beyond capacity concerns, the scholarly and policy communities would benefit from additional attention to the challenges of building consensus, motivation, and genuine commitment to education excellence among policy makers, policy implementers, families with school children, and the general public.

Manna has written a reader-friendly, informative analysis of key components of NCLB, how and why the policy implementation process took shape as it did at each level of government, and how NCLB yielded some unintended, negative consequences. The book is an excellent resource for those interested in federalism and education policy.

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