

## EDUCATION WEEK

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# Top Students Said to Stagnate Under NCLB

By [Debra Viadero](#)

While the nation's poorest-performing students have made academic progress under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, the brightest students appear to be languishing for lack of attention, according to a report released today by a Washington think tank.

"People have been complaining ever since NCLB passed that focusing resources on the bottom students would come at the expense of high-achieving students," said Tom Loveless, one of the authors of the report. "There hasn't been any Robin Hood effect, but the high achievers haven't been gaining, either."

Titled "[High-Achieving Students in the Era of NCLB](#)," the report from the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation draws on national test-score data and results from a nationwide survey of 900 public school teachers in grades 3-12 to paint a portrait of a generation of high achievers left to fend for themselves as schools and teachers shift their time and resources toward educational strategies aimed more at bringing the bottom up than on raising achievement for all children.

The data show, for instance, that from 2000 to 2007, the scores of the top 10 percent of students essentially held steady on National Assessment of Educational Progress tests in reading and math. The scores for the bottom 10 percent of students, meanwhile, rose by 18 points on the 4th grade reading test and 13 points in 8th grade math—the equivalent of about a year's worth of learning by Mr. Loveless' calculations. (One exception to that pattern was in 8th grade reading, where low-achieving students' scores declined and the achievement gap widened slightly.)

What's difficult to tell is whether the disparity was caused by the federal law or whether it reflects longer-term educational trends. The legislation, which was signed into law in 2002, imposes consequences on schools for failing to improve the scores of low-achieving students.

"We would make the argument that NCLB is linked to state standards, and some state standards are not terribly high, so maybe one of the problems for the high-achieving kids is that there isn't enough stretch for them," said Amy Wilkins, the vice president for governmental affairs and communications for the Education Trust, a Washington-based group that promotes educational equity and is supportive of the federal law.

## Roots in the 1990s

A handful of studies in recent years have examined the 6-year-old law's impact on students who are academically struggling, on the "bubble kids" who fall just below passing levels on state tests, and on poor and minority students. Yet few—if any—have focused on academically advanced students.

The new report combines findings from the first two of five planned reports from the Fordham Foundation on the educational status of children at the high end of the academic spectrum. The Washington-based research organization advocates high academic standards and is a prominent supporter of charter schools.

To some extent, the narrowing of the achievement gap that occurred in the post-NCLB years had its start in the 1990s, according to Mr. Loveless, who is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and director of its Brown Center on Education Policy. During those years, the gains made by low-achieving students outpaced those of top achievers and then began to accelerate after 2000.

The gains for low achievers were most pronounced, however, in states that had begun to put in place accountability systems similar to that of NCLB's. In those states, Mr. Loveless found, test scores improved for the bottom 10 percent of students at a faster clip than they did for the top 10 percent. The academic gains for the latter group began to slow after states imposed new high-stakes testing systems.

“We can't say that NCLB 'caused' the achievement of the nation's top students to stagnate, any more than it 'caused' the achievement of our lowest-performing students to rise dramatically,” the report says. “All we know is that the acceleration in achievement gains by low-performing students is associated with the introduction of NCLB (and, earlier, with state accountability systems).”

## **Teachers' Take**

According to results from surveys and focus-group interviews conducted as part of the study, teachers seemed to agree that the federal law had negative consequences for their best-performing students.

Eighty-one percent of teachers, for example, said low-achieving students are most likely to get one-on-one attention from teachers, while only 5 percent named advanced students as the group that drew the most individual attention.

Likewise, 73 percent of teachers agreed that “too often, the brightest students are bored and underchallenged in school.”

More than three-quarters of teachers—77 percent—agreed that “getting underachieving students to reach 'proficiency' has become so important that the needs of advanced students take a back seat.”

“I had expected public school teachers to say that it was far more important to raise the achievement of low-performing kids, and they said equity means that no group of students should be neglected,” said Steve Farkas, the president of the New York City-based Farkas Duffett Research Group and the co-author of that part of the report.

Teachers also expressed concern about being inadequately trained to teach advanced students or to differentiate their instruction so that all students make progress in classrooms with students of mixed academic abilities.

Nancy Green, the executive director of the Washington-based National Association for Gifted Children, said the findings fit with the anecdotal reports that she gets from teachers and parents of gifted children.

“You get what you measure,” she said. “Given that we’re getting beaten over the head over issues of the U.S.’s [economic] competitiveness now, we’re wondering how long it will be before policymakers make the connection between the needs of gifted kids and national competitiveness.”

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