

NCLB: Narrowing the Curriculum?

The No Child Left Behind Act holds schools and school districts accountable for improving student achievement in mathematics and reading/language arts. One strategy used by school districts to improve student achievement in these subjects is to increase the amount of instructional time spent on them.

Our nationally representative survey of school districts shows that 64% of districts required elementary schools to devote a specific amount of time to reading, and 53% required them to devote a specific amount of time to math. Districts that receive federal Title I funds require an average of 94 minutes of instructional time in reading, or about an hour and a half, and an average of 64 minutes in math, or about an hour. Since the enactment of NCLB, about 20% of Title I districts have changed their policies for

instructional time by either instituting a new requirement or increasing the time required for reading or math.

Our survey also asked school districts whether they had reduced the amount of time spent on subjects other than reading and math. In particular, we asked whether social studies, science, art and music, and physical education had been cut. For each of these subjects, the majority of districts reported that instructional time had been reduced only minimally or not at all, as illustrated in the table below. But 27% of districts reported reducing the time devoted to teaching social studies somewhat or to a great extent, and 22% reported reducing time in science. Twenty percent reported cutting art and music, and 10% reported reducing time for physical education.

Several officials interviewed as part of our school district case studies expressed

concerns that NCLB's focus on reading and math would take time and energy away from other important subjects, as well as from gifted and talented programs or extracurricular activities like performing arts. In St. John the Baptist Parish Public Schools, Louisiana, students in one elementary school that did not make adequate yearly progress according to the NCLB definition gave up half of their physical education time for small group instruction in math and reading. The Bayonne City School District in New Jersey created after-school clubs to address subjects eliminated from the regular school day. And officials in the Heartland Community Schools in Nebraska expressed concern that NCLB's strong emphasis on mastery of basic academic skills is taking attention away from music and art—activities that are a source of pride to this small rural community.

Percentage of Districts That Have Reduced Instructional Time in Some Subject Areas to Make More Time for Reading/Language Arts and/or Math

	Reduced Minimally or Not at All	Reduced Somewhat or to A Great Extent	Don't Know
SOCIAL STUDIES	69%	27%	4%
SCIENCE	74%	22%	3%
ART AND MUSIC	77%	20%	3%
PHYSICAL EDUCATION	88%	10%	2%
OTHER SUBJECTS	68%	18%	14%

Table reads: Among districts that require schools to devote a specified amount of time to reading/language arts and/or math instruction, an estimated 69% report that instructional time in social studies has been reduced minimally or not at all to make more time for reading/language arts and math.

SOURCE: Center on Education Policy, December 2004, Fall District Survey, Item 14 (Table 13)



In March 2005, the Center on Education Policy released its third annual report on the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act. *From the Capital to the Classroom: Year 3 of the No Child Left Behind Act* is the most comprehensive review of state and local efforts to implement NCLB. This policy brief, one of a series, is intended to highlight a major finding of our report and help policymakers and the news media better understand the effects of the Act. To learn more about the Center's work or to view the full Year 3 report, please visit the Center's web site at www.cep-dc.org.

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