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How We Spend Our Money: An NCLB Commentary

Liz Hollingworth

It is a strange time to be a professor of educational policy in this country. As a junior faculty member at the University of Iowa, I hesitate to share my perspectives because my institutional memory is short compared to that of my colleagues. When people ask my opinions about No Child Left Behind (NCLB), especially journalists, I usually defer to the senior faculty in our college, particularly the professors I work with in the Iowa Testing Programs. They know more about the unintended consequences of high-stakes testing than I do.

Yet I've listened to the rhetoric as educators were brought before Congress to testify about the changes that should be made to the NCLB, and I believe that my eight years of teaching in public schools have prepared me to comment about the most important change being overlooked in the debate: it's about how we spend money to fix what's wrong with public education while overlooking many schools' most obvious needs.

At the beginning of the movie, *Akeelah and the Bee*, Akeelah, an at-risk middle school student in Los Angeles, easily wins her school's spelling bee. Her principal encourages her to prepare for the citywide competition with the goal of qualifying for the national spelling bee. But Akeelah is suspicious. She says, "Why would anybody want to represent a school that can't even put doors on its bathroom stalls?"

I've thought about that line a lot.

As a classroom teacher in Chicago Public Schools in the early 1990s, I remember that the administration's response to elementary students throwing wet, wadded up toilet paper at the ceilings was to remove the toilet paper from the stalls. Toilet paper was then only available to students who asked the teacher to take the roll from the classroom supply and walk it to and from the bathroom. The stalls in the boys' room did not have doors because the boys kept swinging on the doors, breaking them. We did not have a full-time janitor at our school. We emptied our own trash cans, washed our own boards, and when something needed to be repaired (like a bathroom door), the principal submitted a request to central administration and waited for a custodian. Sometimes, it took weeks.

Which brings me back to NCLB. I will leave it to the politicians to debate whether the money being poured into testing, Reading First programs, and initiatives to reduce the achievement gap is sufficient. What surprises me is that so many people are leaving out an obvious place where we should be spending money: to fix the buildings.

How many of us have been in school buildings where there is a trash can in the middle of the hallway to catch the rain (or melting snow) as it drips from the ceiling? Don't let children go to schools with leaky roofs. Put air conditioning in schools so kids aren't trying to learn math when it's 90 degrees—or hotter—in the classroom. We certainly wouldn't expect to work in an office with a leaky ceiling and no air conditioning. What are we telling our children about the value of schooling and education when, as a society, we don't put resources toward fixing the building itself?

In Pittsburgh, Pa., First Street Elementary School, a school that had been struggling to meet minimum standards due to low test scores, recently was designated a U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon School. The new principal, Dawn Nicolaus, who was held responsible for the success of the school, was asked by the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* about what she had done. The article says, "Shortly after Dr. Nicolaus arrived, she had the walls painted and new carpeting installed, an act that 'amazed' the students," (McKay, 2007). But the article does not explain **why** it "amazed" the students that someone would bother to spend money on the infrastructure of a school in the inner city that serves mostly poor children.

As we engage in a national debate about how to refinance public education, let's amaze our children by showing them that grown-ups have decided to invest in the school buildings themselves as a first step toward school improvement.

Reference

McKay, G. (2007, October 21). A blue ribbon performance. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. Available: www.post-gazette.com/pg/07294/826549-58.stm

[Liz Hollingworth](#) is an assistant professor in the College of Education at the University of Iowa.

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