

The America's Choice School Design and the No Child Left Behind Act

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is placing extraordinary new requirements on educators. The America's Choice[®] School Design can help states, districts and schools meet these requirements. It is built on the premise that teaching to explicit standards is the best strategy for helping disadvantaged and low-performing students □ the same strategy adopted by the authors of NCLB. Listed below are several key elements of NCLB, and the ways the America's Choice program helps educators and policymakers respond to the law.

Schools must meet state standards as measured by state assessments

States are making strides in aligning their standards and assessments. The America's Choice School Design uses its New Standards[®] Performance Standards to extend state standards by providing examples of student work that meets those standards. Students in America's Choice schools learn how to compare their own work to these examples and to figure out what they have to do to produce work that fully meets the standards. Their teachers learn what they have to do to provide instruction that enables their students to succeed against very demanding standards. In the end, the America's Choice team judges its own success by the degree to which students in America's Choice schools succeed in meeting their state standards as judged by state tests.

School programs and interventions must be grounded in research

The America's Choice design grew out of a thorough study of the research on effective educational systems and practices, both in this country and abroad. The worldwide published research studies on which the America's Choice program is based are summarized in a report prepared by NCEE and the University of Pennsylvania-based Consortium for Policy Research in Education. Please contact us at info@americaschoice.org to receive a copy of this report. In addition, the NCEE research team has visited 23 countries since NCEE's founding in 1988, benchmarking best practices in those nations that have been consistently successful in international comparisons of education achievement. The results of this research have been used to formulate the America's Choice School Design.

School programs and interventions must be proven effective

America's Choice believes that rigorous evaluations are critical to the program's success. Several third-party evaluations have compared student achievement in schools using the America's Choice School Design and in matched control schools. The results of such evaluations show that students in America's Choice schools are performing impressively on state assessments.

- A 2004 study of America's Choice elementary and middle schools in Rochester, New York, by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) found that students in 16 America's Choice schools learned "significantly more than students in other Rochester schools in both reading and mathematics." America's Choice students outperformed their counterparts by an average of 17 percent a year in reading in grades 4 through 8, and by an average of 26 percent a year in math, even though the America's Choice schools served greater percentages of disadvantaged students. African American and Hispanic students in America's Choice schools consistently out-gained white students, reducing the gaps in performance between white and minority students.
- Thirty-eight percent more students in the Plainfield, New Jersey Public Schools (where almost all the schools are America's Choice schools) met the state's proficiency standards in 2003 than did in 1999, compared to 23 percent statewide. The students in Plainfield are mainly from low-income, minority families.
- The proportion of elementary school students in New York State America's Choice Schools who met or exceeded the state standard for English language arts increased by 67 percent between 1999 and 2003. During the same four-year period, the proportion of students who met or exceeded the state standards in all New York State elementary schools increased by 33 percent. America's Choice schools in New York State serve primarily low-income, minority families.
- Nineteen percent more of the 3rd graders in the Illinois America's Choice schools met or exceeded state standards in writing in 2003, than met them in 2001. Over that same period, 2 percent fewer students met the standard in all Illinois schools. Similarly, 13 percent more of the 5th graders in the Illinois America's Choice schools met or exceeded state standards in writing in 2003 than met them in 2001. At the end of that same period, 5 percent fewer students met the writing standard in that grade statewide than did in 2001.
- A "meta-analysis" of 232 school reform studies by researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Johns Hopkins University found the effect size for America's Choice schools was nearly triple that of the average school reform model. On average, an America's Choice student at the 50th percentile would have moved to the 60th percentile on standardized tests in a single year.

Teachers and principals must be highly qualified

NCLB requires schools to have "highly qualified" teachers and principals. Many states have set specific requirements for teacher and principal professional development under this provision of the law. America's Choice is one of the leading providers of professional development among comprehensive school reform models in the areas of instructional leadership, literacy and mathematics.

Schools must implement reading assessments and reading programs based on five essential components to qualify for federal Reading First funding

Schools applying for K–3 Reading First grants must fit specific federal requirements. The America’s Choice design provides schools a reading framework that meets these requirements. Its reading framework is scientifically based, provides reading assessments using America’s Choice “Running Records” and other tools, and includes curriculum that provides “explicit and systematic instruction” in the essential components of reading specified in the legislation:

1. Phonemic Awareness
2. Phonics
3. Vocabulary Development
4. Reading Fluency (including oral reading skills)
5. Reading Comprehension Strategies

Schools must ensure that student subgroups make adequate yearly progress

The America’s Choice School Design is closing achievement gaps among NCLB subgroups. America’s Choice puts systems in place to quickly spot students who are having trouble. Those students immediately get extra attention, more time and a curriculum that is precisely pitched to their own learning level. The program includes special double period classes in literacy and mathematics that provide an opportunity for students who are years behind to catch up. It provides a classroom organization system that enables the teacher to work with single students and small groups of students intensively while the other students are actively engaged in productive work. It also provides a plan for its secondary schools to construct small learning communities of no more than 400 students, so that students who used to fall through the cracks in big, anonymous schools do so no longer. And it includes many other forms of extra assistance to students who need it to catch up with students who are meeting the standards.

Students that are English language learners face unique challenges. America’s Choice provides specialized training and targeted resources to help schools successfully adapt materials to the needs of ELL students.

Schools must use data-driven planning to achieve adequate yearly progress

The adequate yearly progress standards in the No Child Left Behind law require schools to analyze data to identify the underlying causes of low student achievement and to plan accordingly for improvement. America’s Choice has developed a data analysis tool that enables its schools to gather, store, collect, display, and analyze student performance data in precisely the way NCLB requires, so that teachers and school administrators can easily pinpoint those students who are not making adequate yearly progress. The program also includes a highly developed planning system that enables the faculty to construct, implement and monitor a plan to ensure that those students get exactly the instruction they need to make themselves and their school successful.

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