

## **Arizona leaves "No Child Left Behind" in the Dust**

**By Anne Greenberg**

No Child Left Behind finally was left behind. In July of this year, the U.S. Department of Education granted Arizona a waiver that relieved the state of various requirements under the federal law. (At the time, Arizona became one of 32 states approved for waivers; as of this writing, it appears every state has at least applied for such flexibility.)

So 2014, the year in which all students in all states were supposed to be proficient in reading and math, will no longer feel quite like 1984 with Big Brother threatening retribution for not meeting its mandates.

When NCLB was first established 10 years ago, most of us looked at the name and became indignant that any child would be "left behind." Not in our schools, not in our district, not in our state, not in our country. Truth be told, though, we knew too many students were not keeping up and indeed falling behind. And so the country got behind NCLB.

The key word defining this act: accountability. And that became the rub. Not that educators abhorred accountability – most welcomed it with open arms – but the "how" began to overpower the "why." Test scores, not the learning needed to understand the questions, became the be all and end all.

Here, our students took the AIMS test, the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards. Over the years, the various tests have been reworked (some would say dummed down) as test creators realized certain questions may not resonant universally (take a look at some of the past writing prompts, for example) or quite honestly, too many students couldn't get the answers right.

Although NCLB may be leaving, accountability is not. The waiver means we no longer need worry about the federal standard of "adequate yearly progress." That in itself represents progress, as this was a standard divided into so many subgroups, such as special education students and English language learners, that meeting AYP proved practically impossible because it was all or nothing. If a single student in a single subgroup missed taking the test, the school could fail to make AYP.

Arizona will continue to hold students, teachers, schools, and districts accountable with its A-F grading system, which is based on student academic growth. For now, that's measured by the AIMS tests, although those, too, will be replaced in 2014-15 with assessments from Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). Arizona is one of 23 states involved in this consortium.

Will this prove to be an improvement over NCLB and AIMS? Only time will tell. No matter what the tests measure, if they continue to assume every student is a square peg fitting into a square hole, then they will fail our students. We all know that some students may be square pegs, but others are every other possible shape and size when it comes to learning and thinking. The tests designers should know that, too. If they do, we may actually get truly valid instruments to assess readiness. If not, we'll probably be back to square one – where only square pegs excel on a square peg test.

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