

## No Exaggeration Left Behind

“Exploring the Costs of Accountability” by James Peyser and Robert Costrell, in *Education Next* (Spring 2004), 226 Littauer North Yard, 1875 Cambridge St., Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act passed by Congress in 2001 requires states to bring virtually all their students up to academic snuff by 2014. Critics charge that, in implementing the law, the federal government left behind most of the billions of dollars needed to accomplish the task. But the financial shortfall is greatly exaggerated, contend Peyser, chairman of the Massachusetts Board of Education, and Costrell, an economist at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Even before NCLB, most states had committed themselves to “a standards-based reform strategy.” And between 2001 and 2004, federal spending on schools in extremely poor neighborhoods—the chief concern of NCLB—increased from nearly \$8.8 billion to \$12.3 billion.

Peyser and Costrell estimate that the \$391 million appropriated to the states for the new math and English tests mandated by NCLB this school year (in grades 3 to 8 and once in high school) is nearly enough. In contrast, the \$230 million in grants available to the 8,500 schools that failed last year is far from the needed minimum (\$430 million). But states can easily tap other federal sources (e.g., the more than \$380 million in grants for “innovative programs”) to

make up the difference. One recent critic, William J. Mathis, a Vermont school superintendent writing in *Phi Delta Kappan* (May 2003), contends that total public school spending would have to jump at least 20 percent—by \$85 billion a year—to meet the NCLB goals. But his claim, say Peyser and Costrell, makes no attempt “to tie the observed spending levels to actual student outcomes.”

Other critics base their estimates on the spending levels of schools whose students do well on the tests. But those schools’ success may be due less to their high spending than to their students’ family backgrounds, the best predictor of academic success.

The authors suggest looking instead at the spending levels in school districts that show the greatest *gains* in student scores over a period of years. They calculate that per pupil expenditures of about \$6,300 a year—less than the average already spent in Massachusetts—are needed for adequate progress under NCLB. Only 11 states fall below that level. That means that the real national shortfall is only about \$8 billion, and almost half of it is in California. Though “not trivial, [this] is only five to 10 percent of the projections claimed by critics.”

## The Rockets’ Red Glare

“Fireworking Down South” by Brooks Blevins in *Southern Cultures* (Spring 2004) Journals Dept., Univ. of North Carolina Press, P.O. Box 2288, Chapel Hill, N.C. 27515–2288.

“There is nothing inherently southern about fireworks—they were, after all, invented by the Chinese some 1,200 years ago,” writes Blevins, a professor of regional studies at Lyon College in Arkansas. But fireworks have had a special appeal for southerners ever since the end of the Civil War. Unwilling to celebrate the “Yankee holiday” of Independence Day, southerners chose instead to shoot off their fireworks during the Christmas season—a tradition that lingers still in parts

of the Deep South. The region has pretty much refused to yield to the American Medical Association’s campaign to ban fireworks. They’re legal—and loosely regulated—in two-thirds of the southern states, where laws allow citizens to ignite big, bright, and dangerous displays in the comfort of their own backyards: “Among the litany of rights cherished in the South is the right to endanger oneself and anyone else who happens to be in the vicinity.”