

Kelly Brownell:

Hello and welcome. You're listening to Policy 360. I am Kelly Brownell, the Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke university. There's much talk in the United States about how to best determine whether children are actually learning in our schools. In recent years under the federal guidelines called No Child Left Behind, states were required to hold schools accountable for children's test scores. We are going to talk about that strategy and discuss why now might be a good time to reevaluate it.

Today, my guest is someone who knows a lot about this subject. She is Helen, better known as Sunny Ladd. Sunny is professor of public policy and professor of economics at Duke university. Welcome to Policy 360, Sunny.

Sunny Ladd:

Thanks, delighted to be here.

Kelly Brownell:

Sunny has researched the test-based accountability of schools for 20 years. No Child Left Behind was legislation signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2002. So Sunny, what changes came about as a result of that legislation?

Sunny Ladd:

So the main change was testing, testing, testing. So under that law, every state was required to test annually every child in grades three through eight, and once in high school, in math and reading. Some states had already been doing that, including North Carolina, but this required every state to test all of its students annually.

Kelly Brownell:

And were the tests the same across the country?

Sunny Ladd:

No, each state could set its own tests and set its own proficiency cut points. These proficiency cut points are important because part of the No Child Left Behind legislation required every school in the country, every individual school to move toward 100% proficiency.

Kelly Brownell:

It seems at first glance like a reasonable idea that you'd want to have schools performing up to some standard and you want to be evaluating how children are doing, but I know that you've written that testing under No Child Left Behind had some troublesome consequences because the tests themselves were too narrow. What do you mean by that?

Sunny Ladd:

Its focus on just math and reading test scores is far narrower than it should be. And by the way, these tests are multiple choice tests. So when we hold schools accountable for the children's scores on these tests, we're sending a signal that what we want our children to know is how to take multiple choice tests. Clearly we have broader aspirations for our education system. We want children to learn the skills,

the knowledge and skills they need to participate in the labor market, but also to be good citizens and to lead a fulfilled life.

Kelly Brownell:

Do you think it makes sense, ultimately, to test for things like creativity or ingenuity or ability to work with others? Or when you talk about ability to survive in the workplace, how does one define what skills are important?

Sunny Ladd:

I'd love schools to promote skills, but boy, I do not want to test them and I do not want to include them in an accountability system. Psychologists, public managers, anybody who writes in this area is very well aware that once you measure something for accountability purposes, it's going to be gained and people are going to modify their behavior to look good by that particular measure.

Kelly Brownell:

Thank you. You've also noted that the testing culture has brought about some unintended consequences. Many parents who are listening to this podcast might be familiar with these. Can you talk about what you found?

Sunny Ladd:

Sure. If you focus on math and reading, think about what happens to focus on science and social studies and art and music and recess. We cut way back on recess in many of our schools. That couldn't be good for children. So once again, when you hold schools accountable for a few things that they're doing, and math and reading scores are not irrelevant, you're going to squeeze out other things. You're also going to put pressure on teachers to teach narrowly to the test, even though they might like to do a variety of broader things that would engage children. And you might force them to cheat in some way, put pressure on them to cheat. And there have been some examples in both Atlanta and Washington DC about cheating.

Kelly Brownell:

So what form did this cheating take?

Sunny Ladd:

It took different forms in different places, but it's administrators and teachers may be changing test scores. I don't want to overdo the cheating because once cheating has been found, and it clearly was found in Atlanta and in Washington and a couple of other places, but that doesn't mean that most teachers were cheating. But there's tremendous pressure. If you're under pressure to have your students do better on these tests and you don't have the capacity to do that, or if the children come from disadvantaged backgrounds and bring serious challenges with them to the classroom, it's going to be hard for the teacher to offset all of those challenges. So then what's their option? Lose their job or find some other way to make it look like test scores have gone up. But the system is the problem, not necessarily the individual teachers.

Kelly Brownell:

So it's a pretty troubling phenomenon if children who are already disadvantaged get even further so by the nature of the testing requirements. And what sort of things might be done about that?

Sunny Ladd:

Well, I'd like to change the system completely and focus attention on the internal, the quality of internal school policies and practices. We want every school to be a good school. We want teachers to respect children and children to respect each other. We want them all be engaged in learning. And other countries have followed a different approach. It's called an inspection and review approach. Professional inspectors visit schools on a periodic basis, say once every three or four years. Go in, talk to the teachers, visit some classes, talk to leaders, read the school report. They may survey parents as well. And then they write a report, and this is a publicly available reports, so parents can see it. They can understand what's going on in the schools. The school officials can see it and can make changes. And then higher level policy makers can look at this as well and say, look, there's some systemic problems across a number of schools. Maybe we need more funding. Maybe we need more coaching of teachers. Maybe we need to pay more attention to the quality of school leadership.

Kelly Brownell:

So the idea then is that you're focused on the process that produces the outcomes rather than the outcomes themselves.

Sunny Ladd:

And the reason that's important to me is those outcomes are a function not only of what happens in the schools, but they're a function of the backgrounds of these children. And I'm not saying these children cannot learn. They certainly can, but they bring challenges to the schools. So unless we have more early childhood education, unless we have more health facilities within schools to deal with problems that many children have, such as not being able to see the board or having asthma, how can they learn, or if they're hungry, how can they learn? So I want to acknowledge that we need to address a lot of those challenges. And then I want to make sure that the schools themselves are high quality environments in which children can learn.

Kelly Brownell:

Is there enough known about what those practices should be to put in something systematic like you're talking about?

Sunny Ladd:

That's a complicated question, and the danger of this inspection type approach is that it too might become a checklist. This school A, you need to do this, and they'll check it off. And what we need to do is have trained professionals, people who perhaps were superintendents, school principals, former teachers, and we need to have them use judgment and good judgment in evaluating this so it doesn't become too mechanistic.

Kelly Brownell:

So new, relatively new on the scene is the Every Student Succeeds Act. Can you explain what that is about and how that corresponds with some of the changes you're recommending?

Sunny Ladd:

So this is ESSA. That's the new acronym. We'll be hearing a lot about that in the next few years. The federal government is in the process of writing regulations for that. But a couple of key elements of this, this legislation ends No Child Left Behind, but it leaves in some of the requirements. So under ESSA, all states are still required to have all their students tested, all students in grades three through eight tested every year, but no longer are schools held accountable by the Federal government for those test scores. Now states themselves will need to decide what their accountability system is going to look like.

My guess is a lot of states will continue using test scores. They'll just define it, and they may add in another few elements because the ESSA requires them to add in some more elements. But it's also an opportunity, a great opportunity for states to experiment with completely new methods, new to the US, but not new to other countries. Many other countries do use inspection system. So I'd really like some states to experiment.

And we don't know exactly the best way to set up these other systems, but we've got a laboratory out there. Lots of states doing different things. Maybe the Federal government could put up some money for research to figure out which approaches work best. So I'm excited about the potential and I just hope states are bold and move away from the reliance on test scores to a more judgment-based system that focuses on the quality of the internal school policies and practices.

Kelly Brownell:

And who were the key people within a state who might determine whether that's going to happen? Is it the governor or the commissioner of education?

Sunny Ladd:

Superintendent of education, state boards of education. State department of education superintendents have been in a compliance mode for the last 15 years or so because they've had to comply with all the requirements of No Child Left Behind. So now governors could play a role. We need some leadership. We could have some governors saying, "Let's move forward and try some bold new things at this time." How that happens, or whether that happens, remains to be seen. And the Federal government is putting regulations together, so my hope is they don't put so much regulation on the states that the states lose this opportunity.

By the way, in the past, some districts have moved in this direction. New York City has had some inspection system to go along with its testing. Charlotte, North Carolina has had this. There's one downside. It's more costly to have these trained inspectors. It's more costly than just saying, let's have all the kids take tests and judge the school that way. This is a richer, more robust accountability system, and it's more costly. But my own view, having looked at it in other countries, is that it be worthwhile experimenting with in this country.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, thank you. This has been extremely interesting. And you give a vivid sense of why this is so important with so many millions of children affected and the vitality of their families and the country to be competitive in the world. So it would be great if we got this right as a country. And I thank you for your pioneering work on this.

Sunny Ladd:

Thank you.

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Kelly Brownell:

I have been speaking with Helen, Sunny Ladd, a faculty member at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke university. Policy 360 is a regular series of conversations. We are produced in Durham, North Carolina on the Duke campus. You can subscribe to the series on iTunes or on SoundCloud. Thank you very much for listening. I'm Kelly Brownell.