

Citing the federal law's little publicized successes, one leading education reformer urges lawmakers to "stay the course."

PHOTO: RAY STANARD



What to do with the "No Child" Law

A renowned national leader in pushing for reforms in how American schoolchildren are taught to read says that the "No Child Left Behind" law passed by Congress in 2002—and up for renewal in 2007—has proven itself to be a valuable weapon in the nation's fight to save its flagging educational system and deserves, albeit with some fine-tuning, to be reauthorized.

Barbara Foorman, an outspoken critic of a national K-12 educational system that has been unable to shake a reputation for being *inept and dysfunctional despite more than two decades of reform efforts*, said policymakers should "stay the course" with the "No Child" legislation but tweak it to allow schools more flexibility to deal with a host of problems that have prevented the law's full implementation in many school districts.

Last May, Foorman joined Florida State's faculty as Francis Eppes Professor of Education and associate director of the Florida Center for Reading Research. The center, created by Gov. Jeb Bush in 2002 to serve as the state's chief developer and disseminator of science-based reading reform efforts, is housed near central campus. All of the center's researchers have their academic homes in either FSU's College of Education or psychology department.

Foorman came to Florida State from the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston where she served as professor

of pediatrics and director of the state's Center for Academic and Reading Skills, an entity analogous to the Florida reading center. Before that she served a year-long stint as the country's first commissioner for education research at the Institute of Education Sciences in Washington, D.C.

A Missouri native, Foorman initially was trained as an English teacher. Her road toward a career in reading research began in a Boston junior high school where she found her 7th grade students unable to read the required textbooks.

"I realized that I needed to know more about how to teach reading," she told *Research in Review*. "I knew we had to do a better job of that from the beginning, but I didn't know how."

Foorman went on to train under the late Jeanne Chall at Harvard, an educational psychologist credited with pioneering much of the fundamental science underlying the heavy emphasis on reading reform mandated in the "No Child" law. The legislation refers to "scientifically based reading research" no less than 110 times throughout its 1,200 pages.

It is precisely the controversial law's endorsement of reading instruction based on the best science available—combined with its real teeth in holding schools accountable for their performance—that sets "No Child" apart from all other educa-

Foorman commiserates with teachers who feel burned out and besieged by the pressures of being held accountable for their students' performances...

PHOTO: RAY STANFORD

tional reform efforts in history. For the same reasons, the law also has become the biggest target of critics who argue vehemently that it's not working and in fact is making things worse.

Foorman, who now has been at the front line of the debate over reading reform for more than 30 years, has heard all the complaints about "No Child." Given the colossal challenges facing the nation's diverse public school system, she believes that the large portion of the "No Child" act known as "Reading First"—which literally lays down the law on how to teach kids to read—is making substantial progress in elevating literacy levels despite what critics are saying.

A report entitled "Keeping Watch on Reading First," released last October by the Washington D.C.-based, nonpartisan Center for Education Policy, concluded that the reading portion of the "No Child" law is "having a significant impact." The center's survey showed that most of the 35 states reporting recent improvement in reading scores credit "Reading First" for those gains.

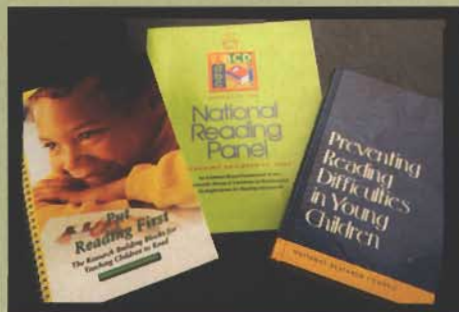
"From my perspective, having worked in high-poverty schools for almost 20 years, what 'Reading First' has meant is a couple of things," Foorman said. "First, that high expectations are demanded where previously they never or rarely were, and secondly, that there are materials now available in every classroom. Before, that wasn't always the case."

Foorman has done research in schools that never started on time, where students often were deprived of even the basics of classroom materials and competent reading instruction. She witnessed the acute frustration of trying to teach in such dysfunctional environments.

"It's very frustrating. You want to be a content area (e.g. math, science, English) teacher and you don't think of yourself as a reading teacher; you're not trained in that. But your kids just can't access the text material."

Foorman commiserates with teachers who feel burned out and besieged by the pressures of being held accountable for their students' performances, as measured by a battery of benchmarks and standardized tests mandated by the "No Child" law. The emphasis on accountability means that teachers, in many cases, must spend a lot of their classroom times "teaching to the test" or focusing on specific topics such as reading comprehension and math covered by most standardized tests, a practice that ostensibly reduces the time teachers have to teach science and other disciplines.

When Texas implemented its first state-wide standardized testing program in the



1980s, Foorman said the same objections were raised by teachers and their unions who blamed "test prep"—i.e. "teaching to the test"—for a variety of ills. Regardless, Foorman said that Texas went on to win national acclaim, along with North Carolina, for reducing the achievement gap between majority and minority students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the so-called "national report card" that tracks U.S.

educational progress.

"The reality is that as soon as schools start doing better and they get confident with their own abilities to educate students, they drop the test prep," Foorman said. "Test prep isn't necessarily a bad thing if the test is worthwhile, but it can take a few years for a school to get turned around enough to have confidence in their own instruction to do what most private schools do, which is to teach, but not to the test."

Much of the stress teachers feel comes from having to work day after day in a climate of low standards, Foorman believes. "Frustration (among teachers) over low standards is common. My heart goes out to those dedicated teachers who work their tails off but have students coming to them with little or no preschool education and from homes with little or no (environment of) literacy," she said.

"The poor teachers may be making gains but have kids coming in years behind for societal reasons, which they can't address. So they really do have a reason to be discouraged if they aren't appreciated."

"No Child" is the first reform act ever passed that imposes sanctions on schools that continue to fail, defined by the law as not demonstrating "annual yearly progress." While Foorman applauds this revolutionary measure, she also argues that this may be too rigid a requirement for some schools. Schools in high-poverty communities often face immense challenges just to reach the first rung of measurable progress in multiple areas, she said, and should be given some leeway on punitive sanctions.

Two federally authorized pilot programs recently begun in Tennessee and in North Carolina are aimed specifically at developing new growth models for struggling schools that are making substantial strides even if these are short of the bar set by "No Child." Instead of getting penalized, these schools will be rewarded for making demonstrable gains.

Foorman says this is but one of the ways that "No Child" reform can be made more flexible and thus more effective in the long run.

"We definitely should stay the course but fine tune along the way." —F.S.

For more on the Florida Center for Reading Research, visit www.fcrr.org.