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Richard D. Deniston
Twin Lakes School Corporation

Kevin W. Gerrity
Ball State University

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Elementary School Teachers' Perceptions of *No Child Left Behind* and Its Effect on Morale

Richard D. Deniston, *Twin Lakes School Corporation*, and
Kevin W. Gerrity, *Ball State University*

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine elementary school teachers' perceptions of *No Child Left Behind* and its effect on teachers' morale. Teachers from four elementary schools within the same educational corporation of a Midwestern state ($N = 39$) were surveyed. The mean perception score among the participants was 44.7 ($SD = 6.4$), indicating that the teachers have unfavorable perceptions of *No Child Left Behind*. Results also revealed a relationship between teachers' years of experience and their perceptions ($r = -.342$). School climate also appeared to be related to teachers' perceptions. Forty-six percent of the participants agreed, to some extent, that ramifications of *No Child Left Behind* had negatively affected their morale, while nearly 80 percent of the participants indicated that they considered leaving the profession because of ramifications brought about by the act. Implications for the profession may include establishing ways in which teachers can encourage and support fellow colleagues, recognizing and addressing students' most basic needs, and developing and implementing authentic experiences that may ensure curricula are not limited by the testing requirements of *No Child Left Behind*.

Introduction

Since 2001, *No Child Left Behind* has seemed to affect teachers' and administrators' views toward school curricula. Broad and inclusive curricula that facilitate the development of well-rounded students have been abandoned in favor of narrow, exclusive models that specifically prepare students for standardized assessments (Zastrow & Janc, 2004). Teachers, often sensing great pressure to prepare students for these assessments, are continuously reacting and adjusting to curricular changes. Some teachers feel too much emphasis is placed on test preparation, essentially limiting teachers' ability to capitalize on teachable moments that might enhance student learning (Russell & McCombs, 2006). Other teachers feel pressure to organize curricula and base instructional plans and strategies on test scores rather than personal experience or best practice. Although teachers believe they know what is best for students, they often feel their hands are tied because of a responsibility to prepare students for successful performance on mandated tests (Snow-Gerono & Franklin, 2007).

A common curricular adjustment among many school officials in the wake of *No Child Left Behind* has been to reallocate instructional time to the benefit of tested subjects like reading language arts and mathematics, especially when

students do not meet minimum requirements in these areas (McMurrer, 2007). Consequently, instructional time for other subjects like the fine arts, social studies, and science has been reduced. This has been especially noticeable at the elementary level. In a nationally representative sample study, 71 percent of districts reported to have reduced the time spent on other nontested subjects in elementary schools (Jennings & Rentner, 2006). On average, the amount of time spent on these other subjects was reduced by 75 minutes or more per week (McMurrer, 2008). State-level assessment directors have also indicated that teachers of nontested subjects are more often being asked to incorporate core content into their daily instruction and subject matter (Pederson, 2007).

In addition to the reallocation of instructional time, research also suggests that *No Child Left Behind* may be having an effect on teacher morale and attitude (Russell & McCombs, 2006). In this era of accountability, more educators seem to wonder whether they should continue in the teaching profession. Such thoughts have been shared by both preservice and in-service teachers. Snow-Gerono & Franklin (2007) describe a mentor teacher and 13-year veteran who felt that her job was becoming less enjoyable because of the long-term effects of standardized testing. Among her concerns were the emphasis placed on memorizing facts and test strategies rather than authentic, hands-on learning and a general lack of variety in educational experiences (Snow-Gerono & Franklin, 2007). In light of such circumstances, teachers and researchers alike have raised concerns about how to recruit and retain quality teachers within the profession (Snow-Gerono & Franklin, 2007).

The authors of this study, in their respective roles as teacher and researcher, have similar concerns as those expressed above. In his teaching career, Richard Deniston has seen a decline in his colleagues' attitudes and morale since the passage of *No Child Left Behind*. In preparation for this study, Deniston stated that "more and more of my colleagues are looking for alternative career options, including jobs outside of education" (personal

communication, February 16, 2009). By virtue of teaching at both elementary and middle levels, Deniston wondered if his elementary school colleagues experienced the effects of *No Child Left Behind* to a greater degree than his middle-level colleagues. While coauthor Kevin Gerrity and other researchers have conducted inquiries that investigate the perceptions of secondary educators in specific content areas, few researchers have explored the perception of *No Child Left Behind* among elementary school teachers. This gap in knowledge represented a significant concern to both of the authors, and therefore became a catalyst to this collaboration. Indeed, elementary teachers like Deniston and his colleagues are charged with teaching "the basics," providing students with a foundation that may ensure success on all mandated assessments until students' completion of the 12th grade. The purpose of this collaborative study, then, was to determine elementary teachers' perceptions of *No Child Left Behind* and its effect on teachers' morale. The following research questions were used to carry out this study:

- 1) What is the perception of *No Child Left Behind* among elementary school teachers?
- 2) Which teachers are likely to have more favorable perceptions of *No Child Left Behind*?
- 3) What is the relationship between teachers' perceptions and years of teaching experience?
- 4) How, if at all, has *No Child Left Behind* affected teachers' morale?

Review of Literature

The implementation of *No Child Left Behind* has changed education in myriad ways. For example, Flinders (2007) reported that education officials in Maryland and Maine abandoned comprehensive, performance-based assessment systems in lieu of the testing requirements mandated by *No Child Left Behind*. Many school officials and teachers question whether the standardized tests mandated by *No Child Left Behind* can accurately assess higher-level thinking and critical evaluation skills (Garcia, Mathis & Wiley, 2005). Standardized tests, however, are

often cheaper to administer and evaluate. Furthermore, many would argue that standardized tests provide data that are objective rather than subjective. Considering that federal funding is often determined from these data, objectivity may remain especially important.

Gerrity (2007) attempted to determine the impact of *No Child Left Behind* on Ohio's music education programs. A representative sample of public school principals from Ohio were asked to provide input on the status of music in their schools as well as their attitudes toward music. Relevant to this study, the principals cited an inability to avoid many of the reported effects of *No Child Left Behind*, specifically a narrowing of the curriculum and the reallocation of instructional time. In fact, 60 percent of Ohio's principals reported that they expected music teachers to devote a portion of their instructional time to the teaching of other core subjects (Gerrity, 2007), further corroborating the findings of Pederson (2007).

In a study completed by the Ohio Department of Education (2005), it was found that Ohio teachers in high-poverty and urban schools tend to leave the profession more often than their peers. Schools labeled as "academic emergency" or "academic watch" were most affected by teacher attrition. Attrition of Ohio teachers remained constant at about seven percent from the year 1998 through 2002, but significantly increased at the end of the 2003–04 school year (ODE, 2005).

In another study, Ingersoll (2003) concluded that approximately 50 percent of all teachers leave the profession before the sixth year of teaching. Of the 50 percent leaving the profession, half of the teachers indicated reasons of job dissatisfaction or wanting to find what they perceived as a better job. Job dissatisfaction was related to several factors, including lack of administrative support, low salaries, student discipline problems, and the exclusion from decision making (Ingersoll, 2003).

A study with mentor-teachers indicated a strong relationship between job dissatisfaction and increased pressure and stress in one's life (Snow-Gerono & Franklin, 2007). Unsurprising, then, that an emphasis on test

preparation and additional content, coupled with less instructional time, might negatively influence teachers' job satisfaction. Although teachers acknowledged the benefits of standardized testing and the need for accountability in teaching and learning, they were often reluctant to accept a teaching position in a high-stress environment, characterized by a narrowed curriculum and skill-based teaching and learning. (Snow-Gerono & Franklin, 2007).

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is another phenomenon that researchers have explored with regard to *No Child Left Behind*. For purposes of AYP, standardized test scores in the basic academic subjects serve as the primary indicators of success. Schools in the Great Lakes Region of the United States are particularly in jeopardy of failing the AYP requirement established by *No Child Left Behind*. According to Garcia, Mathis, & Wiley (2005), 23 percent of Indiana's public schools did not achieve their AYP goals in both 2003 and 2004. It is projected that more and more Indiana schools will fail to meet their AYP goals, with as many as 85 percent of schools failing to meet AYP goals in 2014 (Garcia, Mathis, & Wiley, 2005). This is due in part to the lack of funding for *No Child Left Behind*. In a meta-analysis of 46 studies exploring state education funding, Mathis (2005) revealed that a 27.5 percent increase in spending would be necessary to bring all students up to standard. Little evidence exists to suggest that growth assumptions necessary to achieve and maintain AYP year after year can be achieved with current funding. As a result, additional schools are likely to fall short of meeting AYP goals (Garcia, Mathis, & Wiley, 2005).

Another issue regarding AYP explored by Garcia, Mathis, & Wiley (2005) was the lack of responsiveness to poverty in education. Schools that have more diversity (several student subgroups) are generally identified as needing improvement at greater rates than schools with less diverse populations. AYP requires that all students achieve the same standards regardless of student background and socioeconomic status. When considering achievement gaps, students from poorer backgrounds score lower than students from more affluent backgrounds. It is

believed that more funding and resources for housing, food, medical care, preschool programs, and afterschool programs must be in place before achievement gaps can be narrowed among student subgroups. Under current conditions, poorly funded schools servicing at-risk student populations may experience great improvement and still not meet AYP goals. Conversely, affluent schools need only make minimal gains to meet AYP goals (Garcia, Mathis, & Wiley, 2005).

A study by Sunderman, Tracey, Kim, & Orfield (2004) set out to gain an understanding of teachers' reactions to accountability under *No Child Left Behind*. A questionnaire was completed by teachers from two different districts on opposite sides of the country: Fresno, Calif., and Richmond, Va. While supplemental services offered to improve student performance on tests were received favorably, participants still felt that identifying schools that did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress would not lead to school improvement. It was felt that sanctions placed on schools not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress would result in teachers transferring to other, higher-performing schools. Teachers believed that public recognition and rewards were more effective for improving student performance than sanctions (Sunderman, Tracey, Kim, & Orfield, 2004).

Research Procedures

This research is descriptive in nature. Data about elementary school teachers' perceptions of *No Child Left Behind* were sought from a convenience sample of elementary teachers from four schools within the same educational corporation of a Midwestern state. Thirty-nine K–5 and special area teachers participated in the study. To ensure anonymity for the participants and the educational corporation, pseudonyms are appropriately used throughout the report in place of actual school names.

The primary variable considered was elementary school teachers' perceptions of *No Child Left Behind*. As such, the researchers created a measurement instrument that incorporated both Likert-type items meant to quantify the respondents' perceptions and demographic items

that were utilized to determine more distinct differences among the participants. Ultimately, elementary teachers' perceptions of *No Child Left Behind* were operationally reflected in the summated score of 15 Likert-type items. Responses for each item ranged from 1, very strongly disagree, to 6, very strongly agree. Possible perception scores ranged from 15 to 90, with higher scores indicating a more favorable perception of *No Child Left Behind*. A mixture of positively and negatively phrased items appeared in the instrument. Negatively phrased items were reversed scored in order to avoid any distortion of respondents' perception scores. The range of possible perception scores was divided by six, for each of the Likert response options, to create the follow classification rubric:

<i>Perception Score</i>	<i>Classification</i>
15–26	Extremely Unfavorable
27–39	Very Unfavorable
40–52	Unfavorable
53–65	Favorable
66–78	Very Favorable
79–90	Extremely Favorable

Content validity for the measurement instrument was established with the help of a panel of experts. Four university professors completed a content validation form for the questionnaire items. The panel reported the overall clarity and appropriateness of each item in determining respondents' perceptions. Suggestions for questionnaire improvement were also requested from the panel. Based on their responses, items were reworded in an attempt to increase clarity.

A pilot test was conducted with teachers from an elementary school that was not part of the educational corporation where the study took place, but was within the same geographical area. As pilot test participants, these teachers were asked to complete the questionnaire and report on its readability. No changes to the questionnaire resulted from this effort. A Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .74 was calculated from the data provided by the pilot test

participants. Since the participants in the pilot test are similar to the true research participants, this coefficient of internal consistency should remain a good indication of reliability.

Considering the conduct of the study, questionnaires were sent to each of the participating elementary schools and distributed to the teachers identified for participation. Teachers were given a week to complete the questionnaire. Following the response period, completed questionnaires were collected by a chosen building representative and returned to the researchers. Thirty-nine usable questionnaires were subjected to data analysis. Item nonresponse was controlled using the mean replacement method. Considering that the researchers only sought to determine the perception of *No Child Left Behind* among the elementary school teachers of a specific educational corporation, the results of this inquiry will be true only for those who participated in the study.

Results

Data analysis revealed that the perception of *No Child Left Behind* among elementary school teachers (N=39) was unfavorable, with a mean of 44.7 and a standard deviation of 6.4. A breakdown of participants’ perceptions is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1 *Frequency distribution for participants’ perceptions*

Perception	Perception Score	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
Extremely Unfavorable	15–26	0	.0	.0
Very Unfavorable	27–39	8	20.5	20.5
Unfavorable	40–52	28	71.8	92.3
Favorable	53–65	3	7.7	100.0
Very Favorable	66–78	0	.0	100.0
Extremely Favorable	79–90	0	.0	100.0

To determine a clearer view of elementary teachers’ perceptions of *No Child Left Behind*, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was completed for each of the following variables: grade level taught, teaching

assignment, and highest degree earned. No significant differences among elementary teachers’ perceptions were revealed. However, another ANOVA illustrates significant differences of perception among the teachers of the various schools [$F(3,35) = 4.65, p = .008$]. The mean perception score for teachers at Blueview Elementary School (n = 5) was 48.5 with a standard deviation of 4.56. The mean perception score for the teachers of Redview Elementary School (n = 14) was 47.1 with a standard deviation of 4.53. The mean perception score for the teachers of Yellowview Elementary School (n = 5) was 47.0 with a standard deviation of 6.00. And the mean perception score for the teachers of Greenview Elementary School (n = 15) was 40.5 with a standard deviation of 6.64. Scheffe’s post hoc test in Table 2 illustrates that the perception of *No Child Left Behind* among the teachers of Greenview Elementary School is significantly less favorable than that of the teachers of Redview Elementary School.

Table 2a *ANOVA: perception score as dependent variable*

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	441.969	3	147.323	4.646	.008
Within Groups	1109.929	35	31.712		

Table 2b *Scheffe’s Post hoc test*

School (I)	School (J)	Diff. (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Yellowview	Blueview	-1.500	3.561	.981	-11.958	8.958
	Redview	-0.071	2.933	1.000	-8.687	8.544
	Greenview	6.500	2.908	.192	-2.039	15.039
Blueview	Yellowview	1.500	3.561	.981	-8.958	11.958
	Redview	1.429	2.933	.971	-7.187	10.044
	Greenview	8.000	2.908	.074	-0.539	16.539
Redview	Yellowview	0.071	2.933	1.000	-8.544	8.687
	Blueview	-1.429	2.933	.971	-10.044	7.187
	Greenview	6.571 ^a	2.093	.032	0.426	12.716
Greenview	Yellowview	-6.500	2.908	.192	-15.039	2.039
	Blueview	-8.000	2.908	.074	-16.539	0.539
	Redview	-6.571 ^a	2.093	.032	-12.716	-0.426

^aThe mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

When considering the relationship between years of teaching experience and teachers' perceptions, the Pearson Correlation ($r = -.342$) illustrated in Table 3 indicates a "moderate association" based on the *Conventions for Describing Magnitude of Relationship* by Bartz (1999). This is a negative association, meaning that as years of experience increase, teachers' perceptions of *No Child Left Behind* tend to decrease.

Table 3 Correlation between perception score and years of experience

		Perception Score	Years of Experience
Perception Score	Pearson Correlation	1.00	-.342 ^a
	Significance		.033
	N	39	39
Years of experience	Pearson Correlation	-.342 ^a	1.00
	Significance	.033	
	N	39	39

^acorrelation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

When considering item analysis, 46.2 percent of the participants agreed, to some extent, that ramifications of the *No Child Left Behind Act* had negatively affected their morale. Likewise, 79.5 percent of the participants indicated that they have considered leaving the profession because of ramifications brought about by the *No Child Left Behind Act*.

Discussion and Implications

The mean attitudinal score achieved by the participants ($M = 44.7$; $SD = 6.4$) indicates that these elementary school teachers have an unfavorable view of *No Child Left Behind*. While perceptions were not specifically measured, the participants in Sunderman, Tracey, Kim, & Orfield (2004) and Snow-Geroni & Franklin (2007) expressed similar views. What is most significant is that 92.3 percent of the participants in the present study expressed no more than an unfavorable view of *No Child Left Behind*.

Only 7.7 percent of the participants perceived the act favorably. In light of the overwhelmingly negative press that *No Child Left Behind* has received, it is not surprising that teachers will perceive it in a disapproving manner. However, a greater than 90 percent disapproval rate seems especially high. Future status studies that specifically explore teachers' perceptions of *No Child Left Behind* and can achieve greater generalizability may allow researchers to better determine if this population of elementary school teachers is unique in its tremendously negative perception of *No Child Left Behind*.

A finding that may support the assumption that this, and any population, will have a unique response to *No Child Left Behind* is the significant statistical difference among the perceptions of teachers at various schools. Results indicated that the perception of *No Child Left Behind* among the teachers at Greenview Elementary School ($M = 40.5$; $SD = 6.6$) was significantly lower than the perception of the teachers at Redview Elementary School ($M = 47.1$; $SD = 4.5$). In fact, the teachers at Greenview Elementary School recorded the lowest mean perception score of all four schools. In a follow-up exploration of this phenomenon, the researchers discovered that the teachers at Greenview Elementary School recorded the greatest amount of teaching experience ($M = 16.2$ years). On average, the teachers at Greenview Elementary School recorded six more years of teaching experience than the teachers at Redview Elementary School. The researchers believe it is plausible that teachers with greater experience may be more likely to have unfavorable perceptions of *No Child Left Behind*. Indeed, teachers with several years of experience have probably witnessed several educational reform movements. In this context, *No Child Left Behind* may be seen as one of many reform movements that seem to come and go on a whim. As a result, experienced teachers' reactions to *No Child Left Behind* may not be based on the legislation's merits, but rather on the simple fact that it is yet another mandate to which they must adjust.

Another result that seems to corroborate this belief is the relationship revealed between years of experience and teachers' perceptions of *No Child Left Behind*. Data

analysis showed that as years of teaching experience increase, perceptions of *No Child Left Behind* had a tendency to decrease ($r = -.342$). Although this is not a causal relationship, the researchers believe that if teachers' perceptions of *No Child Left Behind* decrease over time, teacher attrition may become an even greater problem within the education profession. Considering that those who have recently joined the teaching ranks will have always taught in the *No Child Left Behind* era, more research is needed to determine if this observation will persist over time.

In this study, 79.5 percent of the participants indicated that they have considered leaving the profession because of ramifications brought about by *No Child Left Behind*. Again, the researchers believe that other teachers beyond the researched population may experience similar thoughts of departure. Remembering the study results of the Ohio Department of Education (2005), teachers serving in high-poverty and/or urban schools tend to leave the profession at greater rates. And schools labeled "academic emergency" or "academic watch" were most affected by teacher attrition. The educational community represented in this study shares similar characteristics with high-poverty, urban, and lower-performing schools. Consequently, a large percentage of teachers who have considered leaving the teaching profession may be expected.

Finally, it is interesting to note that no significant differences, with regard to grade level, teaching assignment, and highest degree earned, were revealed within teachers' perceptions. This was especially surprising when considering highest degree earned, since this variable is often a reflection of years of experience. One explanation for this finding might be that all teachers share common issues and concerns with *No Child Left Behind*. However, it is just as likely that the mostly negative perceptions among teachers remained too homogenous. Without an appropriate amount of variance, statistically quantifying observable differences remains difficult.

Based on the results of this study, the researchers recommend that college and university teacher-

preparation programs take proactive steps to ensure that preservice teachers are well-informed and equipped to take on the challenges of *No Child Left Behind*. Deniston specifically suggested that "colleges and universities should consider creating courses that explore both the history and requirements of *No Child Left Behind*" (personal communication, November 18, 2009). Additionally, a solid, well-defined partnership between university and school-based education should be emphasized so that new teachers will be ready to work with and within a high-stakes testing environment (Snow-Gerono & Franklin, 2007).

Another recommendation for the profession would be to foster an environment in which teachers more regularly offer encouragement and support to fellow colleagues. In this study, 46.2 percent of the participants agreed, to some extent, that ramifications of the *No Child Left Behind Act* had negatively affected their morale, a finding that is echoed in other research studies (Russell & McCombs, 2006). As *No Child Left Behind* and testing are positioned to remain a part of American education, it is important for educators to encourage and support one another. After all, if teachers do not support each other, who will? Teachers need to feel like they are making a difference in the lives of their students and realize the positive impact they are capable of providing. Deniston believes "administrators should make it a priority to recognize teachers for all the good things they do to help their students and schools achieve greater academic success" (personal communication, November 18, 2009).

Meeting the most basic needs of students is another theme that should be explored. In follow-up conversations regarding this study, Gerrity reminds us that "we must realize that no matter how much pressure we as teachers and administrators perceive, the students who are taking the tests are under far more pressure" (personal communication, November 18, 2009). As such, we cannot blindly commit ourselves to our content more so than to our students. After all, students are not likely to do well in any content area unless they possess basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills. To this end,

Flinders (2007) states that teachers need to place priority on being accountable to students first. To do so, teachers might explore several school-related factors that help increase student achievement. Deniston suggests that teachers might “become more familiar with the economic and social challenges of the students and their families, build better relationships with students, and help create a safe learning environment for students” (personal communication, November 18, 2009). Gerrity further added that such efforts could also include “reducing the number of students in a class and providing teachers with more opportunities for curriculum enrichment” (personal communication, November 18, 2009).

Finally, teachers must be encouraged to develop and implement authentic experiences to ensure that elementary curricula are not limited by the testing requirements of *No Child Left Behind*. Deniston states plainly that “the ultimate goal of education should be student learning, not whether or not students can pass a test” (personal communication, November 18, 2009). Although teachers believe that testing is an important part of the teaching and learning process, many have called for greater balance in education. A singular emphasis on test preparation and test results affects students and teachers in negative ways. For example, “teaching to the test” is often boring and tedious for both students and teachers.

Furthermore, many teachers feel that the focus of raising test scores has led to an emphasis on test strategies and rote memorization rather than active learning. Instead of focusing solely on test scores, it is important to emphasize and celebrate the holistic development and academic progress of all children (Snow-Gerono and Franklin, 2007). “Teaching to the test” may also lead to other educational problems like teacher attrition. As noted, testing is causing schools to focus on making Adequate Yearly Progress over individual learning (Snow-Gerono and Franklin, 2007). Teachers feel pressured to raise student test scores, often at the expense of real learning. As educators, we cannot allow this to happen.

In an increasingly global society, the content assessed on standardized tests will not be as important as students’ ability to apply knowledge, solve problems, and think in both critical and creative ways. Yet in this era of accountability, such skills appear to be educational after-thoughts. If we as teachers perceive *No Child Left Behind* as a hindrance to these goals, we must find ways to work within the confines of the law to improve students’ educational experience. Indeed, teachers remain best-positioned to ensure that students experience a well-rounded, engaging curriculum that might offer students the best chance for future success.

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Appendix

A list of the Likert-type items as they appear in the survey:

1. Ramifications of the *No Child Left Behind Act* have negatively affected my morale.
2. As a result of NCLB, I voluntarily incorporate reading activities into the curriculum I teach.
3. I believe it is acceptable for instructional time to be taken away from music and reallocated to subjects covered on state standardized tests.
4. I have considered leaving the profession because of ramifications brought about by the *No Child Left Behind Act*.
5. I believe the skills and content covered on state-mandated tests are more important than other skills and content.
6. As a result of NCLB, I voluntarily incorporate mathematics activities into the curriculum I teach.
7. I believe that rewarding schools for improved student performance is more effective than placing sanctions on schools for poor student performance.
8. I believe that state-mandated tests are an effective means for measuring students' learning.
9. I believe the *No Child Left Behind Act* has compromised the development of well-rounded students.
10. My teaching morale has improved since the implementation of the *No Child Left Behind Act*.
11. I would prefer not to give up instructional time for the teaching of tested subjects mandated by NCLB.
12. Ramifications of the *No Child Left Behind Act* have influenced me to continue teaching.
13. I believe an equal emphasis should be placed on both the skills and content covered on state-mandated tests and the skills and content not covered on state-mandated tests.
14. I believe that state-mandated tests are not an accurate means of measuring students' learning.
15. I believe the *No Child Left Behind Act* has led to the development of well-rounded students.