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More Soldiers, Fewer Geography Students: Thanks to the No Child Left Behind Act

By James F. Marran, 1/7/2008 9:03:17 AM

From the outset, many have argued that the No Child Left Behind Act is flawed on a number of levels. The omission of funding for geography and the intensification of the military's access to public high schools for enlistment purposes are two glaring cases in point.

Even though geography is identified as an essential discipline, it is the only one of the nine core subjects named in the act to have received no funding. That is bad enough; however, geography educators, so concerned about the resulting marginalization of their subject, have overlooked Section 9528, a provision quietly braided into the legislation's thick content when it was crafted early in the Bush administration.

This controversial provision requires that all public high schools accepting Title I funds grant military recruiters access to student information (i.e., names, addresses, phone numbers) unless parents sign a form authorizing school authorities to withhold it from the Pentagon. Otherwise, the information is included in a directory of a school's juniors and seniors and given to military recruiters. Surprisingly, since the act's passage in 2001, fewer than twelve percent of parents nationwide have withheld permission to have their children included in contact lists for recruiters.

Although most school officials bristle at the provision because of privacy issues, few have been willing to oppose it, largely because the law specifically requires that schools grant access to military recruiters. It also threatens the loss of federal funding under NCLB's Title I if they turn them away. Further, recruiters must be admitted to school activities where they may conduct enlistment promotions.

One recent exception is the reaction of administrators in the Chicago Public schools. Principals will soon be requiring written notice from military recruiters forty-eight hours in advance of their school visits. They also plan to restrict the recruiters' conference space to prescribed areas in the high schools making hallways, cafeterias, gyms, and other common areas off-limits. Because of concerns over the frequency of visits and their duration, the actions of the Chicago schools are typical of many urban districts across the country trying to restrain the military's reach into the everyday schedules of the schools.

The law requires high schools to allow military recruiters the same campus privileges as college and job recruiters. Many school personnel and students complain that the military are often aggressive in their pursuit of potential enlistees with unwanted phone calls, unwelcome home visits, and offers of rides to events off school grounds. Some recruiters even want to pull students out of classes for counseling, video presentations, and aptitude testing.

Even though a military recruiting mandate was a part of the first educational assistance act in 1965, congressional insiders indicate that Pentagon officials have been trying for years to insert stronger recruitment provisions into education legislation to counter what they argued was a lack of cooperation from some high schools. When NCLB was being negotiated, the bill was so thick with controversial issues that lawmakers, who might otherwise have fought the new recruitment rules, missed some of the devilish details. Enhanced military recruitment requirements simply were not on anybody's radar screen.

The prospects for an improved law are not promising. Congress is in the process of reauthorizing NCLB, but the proposed changes are so controversial that compromise in either chamber seems unlikely this session. In addition, the President threatens a veto should any significant modification be sent to his desk. The result means the current NCLB Act will limp into the next administration with all the other unfinished business that has accrued since 2001.

The ultimate irony is that recruiters could send students off to serve in places about which they have been

taught little. As one veteran NCLB watcher commented on the consequences of the status quo, "Not only will the present legislation continue to leave geography behind, it will also leave no child unrecruited."

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