A Future Science Teacher Sizes Up NCLB
By Aaron D. Currier

Some say teaching isn't what it used to be. I'd have to agree with that. Throughout my training to teach Science, I've found it isn't as much about how to instruct from a text book, rather how to create a positive learning environment, how to interact with students and encourage them to discover how they learn best, and how to be equitable to every student. This fits well with my own teaching philosophy of "discovery learning" – using one's imagination along with science to solve problems. Funny thing, though, that's what the teachers who inspired me twenty years ago were doing. Except, now we have the No Child Left Behind Act.

I listened to President George W. Bush's speech when he first described his plan to narrow the achievement gap and provide equitable education opportunities for all children. I liked what I heard. I agreed with the policies to be implemented to achieve these goals. I wondered at the time if they would work. I didn't wonder much, though, because I didn't know I was actually going to be a teacher.

NCLB was enacted on January 8, 2002. Among many issues, improving science instruction was a major focus, which now is obviously of particular interest to me. According to the policy, President Bush states that "among the underlying causes for the poor performance of U.S. students in the areas of math and science, three problems must be addressed -- too many teachers teaching out-of-field; too few students taking advanced coursework; and too few schools offering a challenging curriculum and textbooks."

Fast forward to 2007. The NCLB Act is up for reauthorization this Fall. President Bush already intends to continue his support of the policy. Many current teachers say the policy is not helping – it is perhaps making student learning worse. So now I'm wondering myself if the plan is truly effective and how will it affect me as a new teacher. Is the achievement gap narrowing? Is there more equity in the classroom now? Will I still be able to teach children to "discover" their passion?

After reading about President Bush's visit to Harlem Village Academy Charter School, a successful inner-city school in New York, I posed some questions to the Science Department chairs from each of our six Salem-Keizer high schools regarding NCLB and student achievement. I wanted to know if the success was occurring throughout the nation.

I asked about "teachers teaching out of their field of authorization" and apparently it is rare in the Salem-Keizer high schools. Following TSPC requirements, there are specific courses teachers are allowed to teach now. Many have taken additional tests to become "highly qualified." This can be good for students if their teachers know the content. However, what happens if a qualified teacher isn't

necessarily a quality teacher? It is possible to teach students the answers to a test to get high achievement marks, but at the same time indirectly lead students away from their own imagination and abilities to learn to solve problems on their own. If a student doesn't take a test well, doesn't that result in an inequitable learning environment?

Besides, measuring the status of qualified teachers from year to year can also be problematic as was the case when many "highly qualified" teachers transferred from South Salem High to West Salem High when it opened after NCLB was enacted. Right now there are more "qualified" teachers, but due to variables like teaching style and transfers, measurements from year to year can't really be compared equally.

I asked about providing students with advanced coursework and a challenging curriculum as was outlined in NCLB. Aside from each school already providing honors courses for each science subject, responses were varied regarding the impact of NCLB. I especially appreciated the point that a good teacher can make any science class challenging if they want it to be. That makes sense if you want to impact more of the student body than just "honor students." I also agree with the teachers who believe the higher standards you expect from a student, the greater results the student will achieve. Finally, variables, once again, change scores that make comparisons of performance superfluous.

So, perhaps the success of NCLB, although in spirit has its merits, in reality is reliant on standardized testing that is merely a form of measuring something that can't be measured. It's true that test scores go up as a result of studying for it, but as teachers lament, "no science goes on." If students can learn more from performance tasks than studying for a test as many teachers believe, perhaps we should reconsider whether the efforts of NCLB are encouraging the best educational opportunity for students. I would argue that performance on a test is not necessarily a good indicator of student learning in science, especially if the teacher's philosophy is "discovery learning."

In closing, Science has always been a passion of mine and I want an opportunity to share that passion and knowledge with children. I still don't know how NCLB will affect me as a teacher. I'd like to think I'll be endorsed as highly qualified. I'd also like to think I'll be able to inspire children to want to learn and find their own passions in the world. Perhaps then I'll be considered a quality teacher too.