

POSITION PAPER

“NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND”

THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL’S PERSPECTIVE

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“NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND” THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL’S PERSPECTIVE

Connecticut’s school leaders concur with the major goals of the “No Child Left Behind” legislation. All children can learn, all schools can improve, and schools should be accountable for their results. We believe, however, that it takes more than **testing and sanctions** to accomplish and measure such important goals.

Connecticut’s public school principals join Connecticut’s Commissioner of Education, the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents and teacher organizations in skepticism that the law’s mandates and sanctions will lead to the accomplishment of NCLB’s lofty goals. Like them, we do not believe that most of this state’s schools and districts need to be labeled **“failing”** in order to bring about that improvement. We believe that NCLB takes too narrow a view of school performance, relying solely upon test scores as the means for assessing all students.

KEY ASPECTS OF NCLB THAT NEED REVISION FROM OUR PERSPECTIVES AS SCHOOL LEADERS

ACCOUNTABILITY – We take no issue with NCLB’s renewed calls for schools to be accountable for their students’ achievement. It is NCLB’s simplistic reliance on test scores that concerns us. Testing measures only a small portion of the outcomes society expects from schools. One of the goals of the legislation is to “improve overall student performance and close the achievement gap between rich and poor students.” **This is a societal goal** that will take more than mandates and sanctions to accomplish.

Accountability needs to be consistent with a school’s responsibilities. NCLB pretends that all schools have the same job to do. But we know that schools with the lowest NCLB scores tend to have greater responsibilities for children’s lives (providing health care, social work interventions, family counseling) than schools that are able to focus on children’s academic progress. NCLB sanctions individual schools that do not make AYP, but it doesn’t take each school’s **mission, capacities or resources** into account.

If the federal government is going to reduce the rating of a school’s effectiveness to a single, widely reported number, that number should reflect the school’s true responsibilities. It should account for the social realities – poverty or wealth, access to pre-school programs and quality child care, family commitment to education, family stability, hunger, physical handicaps, medical interventions, etc. – with which schools grapple every day. These factors influence all children’s success; **these are the factors that leave children behind.**

The “Adequate Yearly Progress” standards, as defined in the legislation, rise each year until 2014 when **100% of students are expected to meet all academic standards**. Do the rising annual standards correspond with **rising federal responsibility** for meeting the basic human needs that underlie students’ success in school? The indicators that consistently correlate to students’ success in school – parents’ educational levels, parents’ income, intact families – are beyond the schools’ control. To claim to measure a school’s impact on a child or a community without taking these factors into consideration is unrealistic. The AYP standards are also unrealistic since the progress of different cohorts of students is tracked. A school’s growth should be measured by the progress of the **same students over time**.

CREATING LASTING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENTS. Underlying the notion of AYP is a simplistic belief that **progress is linear** and easily measured. This ignores research on school improvement that shows that the pattern of progress is marked by plateaus in student achievement gains while new practices are consolidated and refined prior to significant, lasting gains in performance. We recommend that efforts to improve schools proceed from an understanding of life within schools. If NCLB is committed to research-based improvements, there is ample research devoted to school improvement.

ADEQUATE YEARLY PROGRESS (AYP)

Under NCLB, the adequate yearly progress of a school reflects only its test scores. NCLB reduces each school to an easily reported – but poorly understood – number. The AYP provision assures a series of media events each testing cycle as schools must show that their students are better test takers than the class that preceded them. This process generates facile sound bytes, but, as stated earlier, overlooks the reality that comparisons are being made between different groups of children. (There may be significant differences between last year’s sixth grade and this year’s sixth grade.)

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF NCLB’S PROVISIONS FOR ADEQUATE YEARLY PROGRESS

LIMIT THE AMOUNT OF TIME SPENT TESTING STUDENTS. Connecticut Commissioner of Education Dr. Betty Sternberg has recommended a return to testing students **every other year**, as long as the state can show high performance on the NAEP. Following this recommendation would help to refocus schools on instruction instead of test results.

REALLOCATE RESOURCES. Realizing that schools and districts have varying missions and associated needs, we recommend that NCLB funds be reallocated. Instead of funding the currently required annual tests, change to alternate year testing. NCLB funds would be better spent addressing locally identified **needs linked to school improvement**. A more reasonable testing program and local assessments of needs would help schools meet targeted student progress goals.

TRACK THE PROGRESS OF INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS AND COHORTS. Comparison of one year’s eighth grade to that of another year only yields speculation about root causes. Progress is better observed in tracking the achievement of **individuals and cohorts** of students over time.

SHIFT FROM SANCTIONS TO INCENTIVES BASED ON REAL SCHOOL PROGRESS. We believe that the time and energy that NCLB is draining from schools now would be better placed in **incentives for improved instructional practices** and comprehensive assessment of a school's effectiveness and real progress. Incentives could include but not be limited to rewards for demonstrated student growth to help schools implement more and better initiatives or grants for special or pilot programs. **Resources placed at key leverage points in the social and economic sectors that impact school readiness and success are also needed.** We would rather be implementing those changes that directly impact learning than distributing test booklets.

OMIT LABELING OF SCHOOLS BASED ON SUB-GROUP PERFORMANCE. NCLB's labels often obscure the actual performance of schools. Schools with fewer than 40 students in a sub-group are not reported as "failing" simply because the margin of error is too great in such a small data sample. The result is that smaller schools are far less likely than larger schools to be labeled "failing." Schools with minority populations under 40 will not "fail" due to the scores of that sub-group, regardless of what those scores actually are.

Smaller schools tend not to make the list, simply because they don't have enough students in any sub-group for their numbers to be reported. It would be better to **look at a school as a whole**, rather than to make such a show of labeling schools as "inadequate" based on the performance of a sub-group.

OMIT LABELING OF SCHOOLS BASED ON STUDENTS' SPECIAL NEEDS. Because special education students are one of the sub-groups whose scores are reported separately, any school with more than 40 special education students is likely to fail. By definition, special education students are not performing on a par with their classmates. Because of their special needs, they each have an **Individualized Educational Plan (IEP)**, which spells out the accommodations that the school must make to help these students to achieve to their greatest potential.

Not only does NCLB label a school as a "failure" if its special education students fail as a sub-group, the law revokes a crucial accommodation – testing a student at the appropriate grade level. Until now, this accommodation had been called for in several students' IEP's as the most realistic way to measure their performance. NCLB overrode this practice; the result is that in each school there are **at least** several students who face a week of testing that they **cannot even read and that covers curriculum they are not yet ready to master.**

SCENARIO. The following scenario might illustrate the frustration about labeling based on sub-groups. A school as a whole (including its special education students) scores well above the NCLB testing criteria. But, looking at its special education students alone, we see that they perform at a level below the standard. This would seem to be easy to predict, but under the current law, the school is identified as "failing." Don't these results really confirm that the school has identified the right students who need IEP's and their particular special education services? Why should this school have to face sanctions for failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress two years in a row? The school has already developed an Individualized Educational Plan for each of its special education students in the "failing" sub-group.

CONCLUSION

Motivation is at the heart of schooling. Within schools, NCLB negatively affects morale resulting in **reduced motivation**. As an under funded mandate, NCLB makes its impact by labeling schools, districts, and states as “failures.” It has provisions that pointedly label as failures our most vulnerable sub-groups – special education students and ethnic minorities. In many cases, because of the “failure” of a single sub-group, an entire school is deemed a “failing school.”

There are so many ways to fail that many analysts predict that there isn’t a public school in America that will emerge from NCLB requirements **unlabeled**. We are certain that even more of our schools will be identified as “failing” this year. NCLB will then mandate school improvement plans and hold out the **empty promise** of school choice for families in “failing” schools.

School leaders are **optimists**, committed to excellence in their schools. We find that NCLB has a **hopeless and punitive** tone, as if its design were predicated upon the inevitable failure of administrators, teachers, students and/or families. We do appreciate some recent efforts to modify regulations and offer a more reasonable approach to testing LEP students, special education testing requirements and participation rates. However, these changes represent only a beginning. **More** are needed.

From our positions within schools, we see NCLB limiting instructional time and diverting resources from instruction. **We would rather see change efforts and assessments that account for the complexity of learning and achievement.**

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