

Forum on Educational Accountability

<http://www.edaccountability.org>

November 5, 2007

Dear Member of Congress:

Ensuring equal opportunity for all public school students to attain a high-quality education is a valuable and appropriate use of federal authority, much like protecting civil rights and equal treatment under law. As it currently works, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) attempts to hold struggling schools accountable through sanctions based on test-score results, but the results of that approach have had harmful consequences a new law must overcome.

In the real world, schools can't just turn on success like a light switch. Instead, the next authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) must help schools make the systemic changes needed to improve learning outcomes for all students. By helping schools implement practices known to build school capacity and assist families, this is exactly what the Forum on Educational Accountability's (FEA) approach toward ESEA will do.

FEA proposes balanced accountability. Its approach includes both responsibility for taking steps toward real improvement and enhanced learning outcomes. FEA provides for regular assessments of student performance, including but not limited to standardized tests, disaggregated for low income, minority, English language learners and students with disabilities. It uses additional indicators of student learning and school improvement. FEA supports helpful interventions, including by the states, for schools and districts that are not able to implement the key systemic changes. Assistance would also be available for school districts that have implemented changes, but still have not achieved a positive trend in learning outcomes similar to that achieved by states' most effective Title I schools. FEA also calls for the federal government to be responsible for expanding educational opportunity by fully funding the law and substantially underwriting the costs of new improvement efforts.

In the attached chart, we present a side by side comparison of the current NCLB with FEA's proposed changes. Low-income and minority-group students deserve far more than the inequitable opportunities was NCLB intended to address or the kinds of schooling NCLB is fostering. An education agenda grounded in civil rights would aim to ensure a well-rounded education for all children. If adopted, the FEA proposals will move us strongly in that direction.

We look forward to working with you on the reauthorization of NCLB.



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Chair

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Comparison of FEA Reauthorization Proposals with Current NCLB

	NCLB	FEA
Central Goals	Bringing virtually all children to proficiency on challenging academic standards, while closing the achievement gap between minority or disadvantaged children and their peers.	Same.
Overall Assessment and Accountability Approach	Title I schools required to continuously increase percentage of students scoring "proficient" on annual standardized tests only in reading and math in grades 3-8, and one grade 10-12, until 100% "proficient" by 2014. Schools failing to make such Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) subject to escalating sanctions, including governance changes such as state takeovers and privatization.	Title I schools required to implement systemic changes to improve student learning. Systemic changes include professional development, family involvement/support, interventions, reporting and funding. Multiple measures may include standardized tests and valid and reliable local assessments in all core subjects, graduation and grade promotion rates, and other academic indicators. Standardized tests not required in all grades 3-8. Interventions required for schools that fail, after five years, to implement the changes or to show a positive trend in learning outcomes on multiple measures.
Assumptions Underlying Overall Approach	Schools already have the knowledge and skills, i.e., "capacity," to effectively educate all children at challenging level or to make the changes necessary to do so, but not trying hard enough; publicity and pressure from failing to make AYP and sanctions will cause schools to work harder and make any operating changes necessary to effectively educate all students.	Many schools currently lack the capacity to effectively educate all students at a challenging level or to make the necessary changes to do so on their own; ESEA must assist schools to improve knowledge and skills of teachers to teach effectively, principals to lead school improvement and parents/mentors to support learning at home.
Effects of Overall Approach	To avoid sanction for failing test scores in reading and math, induces many schools to: narrow the curriculum, reducing study of science, social studies, arts; focus on "drill and kill" test preparation	Redirects schools' attention away from manipulating test scores to avoid sanctions toward actually making the fundamental changes in policy and practice that build staff capacity and improve student

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	and scripted programs, rather than high level analysis and problem solving; deny attention to children well below/above “proficiency;” and push out very low scoring students.	learning.
Differences on Major Components		
Assessment	Technically allows multiple forms of assessment, but in practice supports only standardized state exams. Requires annual testing in grades 3-8, once in high school.	Calls for multiple forms of assessment, local and state, to provide more detailed and useful information for school improvement and student learning. Testing may be in fewer grades.
Indicators	Only test results in reading and math must count, though graduation rates and one other indicator are to be considered.	Calls for weighted, multiple indicators, including assessments in additional subjects, graduation and grade promotion rates, and other educational relevant factors.
Teacher Quality, including Professional Development	Requires all teachers of academic subjects to be certified by states as “highly qualified;” allows schools failing AYP discretion to implement any of a laundry list of professional development practices.	Requires all Title I schools to implement key professional development practices, focused on collaboration, designed and implemented with staff participation, to actually equip teachers to effectively teach diverse learners. Makes professional development central to what all Title I schools do. “High needs”, i.e., highest poverty/lowest achievement, schools also to adopt mentoring, career ladders, instructional leadership, family engagement training and other specific professional development activities.
Family Involvement and Support	Requires schools and districts to take various steps to increase parent knowledge about, and involvement in, school policies and activities, and encourages offering family literacy programs.	Further requires, in all “high needs” schools, provision of family literacy and parenting skills programs for parents, and adult mentoring or similar programs for children without parents available, as well as technical assistance and enforcement of all family related requirements.
Sanctions/interventions/reporting	Requires imposition of escalating, piecemeal sanctions each year after the second year a school remains in violation of AYP, including, transfers, tutoring,	Requires schools implement the “systemic changes” from the outset of the reauthorization, including publicly reporting the steps taken to do so, obstacles

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	curriculum replacement, principal replacement, private management and state takeovers	faced, steps taken to overcome the obstacles, and results; states responsible for intervening in schools and districts that fail, after 5 years from initial implementation, to implement the “changes” or attain a positive trend in learning outcomes, based on rates of improvement actually achieved by successful Title I schools.
Funding	Requires: 20% of Title I funds be spent on transfers and tutoring; at least 10% for professional development for schools repeatedly violating AYP; at least 5% for professional development to help teachers become “highly qualified by 2006; and 1% for parental involvement.	Eliminates requirement that localities spend 20% of Title I funds on transfers and tutoring; requires spending at least 20% of Title I on professional development, along with an equal 20% match from each state; and that at least 5% of Title I be spent on increasing family involvement, divided evenly between increasing family participation with schools and parental/mentor support for student learning at home.
Objections Raised To Each Approach, Answers and Reply		
	<p>Objection – Emphasis on sanctioning schools for failing test scores induces schools to manipulate teaching, curriculum, standards, testing and scoring to avoid sanctions rather than making the major changes necessary to dramatically improve teaching and learning in the classroom and at home,</p> <p>Answers – Recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) proves NCLB is “working;” anything less than strict annual standardized testing in all covered grades and sanctions for schools failing AYP will remove the pressure essential to force schools to improve education for disadvantaged and minority students.</p> <p>Reply – NAEP improvements not caused by NCLB: improvements</p>	<p>Objections – Since education principally state/local responsibility, not proper federal role to require schools implement specific improvements in professional development and family support; anyway, will not work because schools won't do it and government couldn't enforce it.</p> <p>Answers – NCLB already asserts a strong federal role in education, imposing rigid testing, AYP and sanctions mandates on localities/states. FEA not seeking greater federal role - only redirect it toward helping schools make key “systemic changes.” Since experience and research show these changes effective in improving teaching and learning for minority and disadvantaged children, school staff would have a strong professional and self-</p>

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	<p>greater before NCLB than during; regardless, improvements far too limited: at NCLB rates (about ¼ of 1%/yr. increase in percentage of students “proficient” in reading and 1-1/8 %/yr. increase in math), would take about 340 years for all black and Hispanic students to become “proficient” in reading and 75 years to be “proficient” in math, as defined by NAEP. Moreover, major improvements in classrooms cannot be forced just by federal pressure: they depend on identifying key priorities, technical assistance, funding and active staff involvement.</p>	<p>interest in implementing them. Moreover, professional development, etc., will be under local control, within guidelines.</p>
Predictable Results From Each Approach		
	<p>Reauthorized “as is” would continue to induce schools to focus on gaming AYP system to avoid sanctions, rather than making the important, but difficult, changes needed to enhance their capacity. Studies predict that by 2014, 70-90% of American public schools will fail to make AYP. This dire result could seriously undermine public support for public education, generate strong pressure for privatization, and thereby risk destruction of American public education, a critical source of advancement for disadvantaged and minority students. Many of these schools are in fact improving. States and districts will not have capacity to work with more than a few high needs schools that are not improving, leaving the rest with sanctions in name and little real assistance.</p>	<p>Title I schools’ emphasis would shift from boosting test scores to actually implementing the key educational improvements essential to enhance teaching and overall learning. The use of multiple forms of assessment and multiple indicators will provide a more fair and helpful approach toward using data for improvement. Only if law redirected toward implementing necessary educational improvements is there any chance of achieving its vital civil rights goal.</p>