

Forum on Educational Accountability

www.edaccountability.org

January 7, 2008

Dear Member of Congress:

On the sixth anniversary of the January 8, 2002 signing of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law, the message is loud and clear from education, civil rights, religious, disability, parent, civic and labor groups, and from the American public: the law is not working to substantially improve learning for the students Congress most intended to help. The concerns identified by the 142 organizations -- representing more than 50 million Americans -- that have signed the *Joint Organizational Statement on NCLB* have come to pass.

The *Statement* warns against "over-emphasizing standardized testing, narrowing curriculum and instruction to focus on test preparation rather than richer academic learning; over-identifying schools in need of improvement; using sanctions that do not help improve schools; inappropriately excluding low-scoring children in order to boost test results; and inadequate funding." These problems have only intensified over the years since the law's signing:

- Dozens of reports have shown narrowed curriculum and instruction as schools focus on boosting test scores to avoid sanctions.
- Studies in more than 10 states project most or all of their schools will fail to make "adequate yearly progress" by 2014 and face escalating sanctions.
- Pushing low-scoring children out of school and its close corollary, focusing on "bubble kids" (those close to the test cut-off scores), has also been extensively documented.
- Federal funding remains far too low, resulting in schools facing sanctions without having the resources to meet the educational needs of their students. Funding is equally inadequate to address the social needs that support strong learning.

Since the signing of NCLB (the most recent version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or ESEA), reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have stagnated, and the rate of improvement in math has slowed. The neediest children in our nation continue to receive an unequal and inadequate education. Incremental changes will not fix the law's structural flaws of unrealistic mandates, high-stakes testing and punitive sanctions.

The *Joint Statement* proposes a major overhaul of the federal law. These changes would:

- Replace the law's arbitrary proficiency targets with outcome and improvement goals based on rates of success actually achieved by the most effective public schools.
- Overhaul assessments to reduce testing, support multiple indicators of student learning, including state and local assessments, and utilize growth models, while funding development of a new accountability system.
- Focus on improvement, not punishment; eliminate sanctions that do not have a record of success and allow improvement efforts sufficient time to succeed.
- Support continuing high-quality professional development and other actions necessary for schools to ensure strong learning outcomes for all students.
- Fully fund Title I and supply the additional resources needed to ensure all schools can develop the capacity to serve their children well.

The Forum on Educational Accountability (FEA), a coalition that grew out of the *Joint Statement* effort, has further developed these ideas in a series of reports and comprehensive legislative recommendations.* These recommendations:

- focus on how to improve school capacity through professional development, parental involvement, and support for families;
- propose a model of "balanced accountability" that factors in both capacity-building efforts and improved outcomes as shown through multiple measures; and
- explain how to construct a sound and educationally beneficial assessment system.

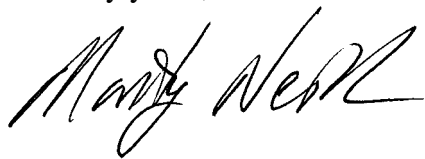
The federal government must actively work for equitable learning opportunities for all children. By adopting the concrete changes and funding increases specified in the *Joint Statement* and further developed by FEA, the federal government can help ensure the educational progress that NCLB promised but has not delivered.

Congress has apparently stalled in its reauthorization of NCLB. Whether Congress moves new legislation in 2008 or later, it must get the next version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act right. If Congress does not, we risk producing a generation of students whose main skill is test-taking and a public that concludes the federal government cannot play a constructive role in improving education -- or worse, that public schools are incapable of effectively educating low income and minority students, thereby jeopardizing continued support for public education.

The *Joint Statement* and FEA recommendations provide the basis for creating a new vision for federal support for public schools. FEA calls on Congress to take the bold step of comprehensively overhauling NCLB by implementing the *Joint Statement* and FEA proposals.

The participants in FEA look forward to working with you to adopt a federal law that is educationally sound and that promotes equitable learning opportunities for all children.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Monty Neill". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Monty" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Neill".

Monty Neill
Chair

*All *Joint Statement* signers agree to the goals of the *Joint Statement* and seek to implement its recommendations. Additional statements made by FEA reflect this commitment, but may not reflect all individual positions taken by signatories.

The *Joint Statement* and all FEA reports are on the web at www.edaccountability.org.