

Forum on Educational Accountability

www.edaccountability.org

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Dear Member of Congress:

The Forum on Educational Accountability strongly endorses the inclusion of multiple forms of assessment and multiple indicators of student and school achievement in any reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. We are well aware that these proposals have recently come under attacks, which misrepresent both the ideas and their breadth of support.

In fact, most civil rights organizations and leaders join education, religious and other groups in supporting multiple measures of academic performance. The Joint Organizational Statement on No Child Left Behind, signed by 140 national groups representing more than 50 million Americans, says the reauthorized law should:

"Provide a comprehensive picture of students' and schools' performance by moving from an overwhelming reliance on standardized tests to using multiple indicators of student achievement in addition to these tests. [and] Help states develop assessment systems that include district and school-based measures in order to provide better, more timely information about student learning."

Among the nearly two dozen major civil rights organizations that have signed the Joint Statement are ASPIRA, Children's Defense Fund, LULAC, NAACP, NAACP-LDF, National Alliance of Black School Educators, National Urban League, Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, and the National Conference of Black Mayors.

Moreover, twenty-five civil rights and disability organizations sent a letter to Congress on August 7, 2007, explicitly supporting the concept of multiple measures. That letter was endorsed in a separate letter from 118 prominent academics, including many leading academics of color.

The call to use multiple measures has broad public support. In the recent Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll on NCLB, a majority of respondents said that NCLB's emphasis on math and reading has reduced instructional time in other subjects. Ninety-three percent who held that view said it made them concerned or very concerned.

This public perception is rooted in reality: the Center on Educational Policy and the National Center on Educational Statistics have both recently released studies finding that curriculum is narrowing, with less science social studies, art and physical education. This narrowing is more severe in schools serving low-income students and other groups identified in NCLB as the focus of improvement efforts. To prevent narrowing, accountability systems must assess multiple subjects. However, the systems should be restructured so they do not simply add more tests.

The PDK/Gallup poll also reported that 69% of all respondents and 75% of parents believe the current emphasis causes "teaching to the test," and about 80% of those who believed it happens view it as "a bad thing." Clearly, the American people are tired of schools turning into test prep programs in two subjects. With diverse and rich state assessment systems that include locally-managed and locally-created assessments when they meet strong quality criteria, schools and

districts can counter the tendency to focus on test prep. FEA calls for reducing the proliferation of low-level tests and using fewer, but better high quality assessments.

As LaRuth Gray of the National Alliance of Black School Educators (a Joint Statement signer) explained in her September 10 testimony to the House Education Committee: "Multiple forms of assessment and multiple indicators together will provide more opportunities and meaningful success, as well as help ensure that all children receive a comprehensive schooling aimed at educating the whole child."

Using multiple measures will not undermine the priority teaching of reading and math, nor allow for different levels of challenge and expectation for different groups of students, nor lower standards. Indeed, using assessments that require students to think and apply knowledge, best done through local assessments, will raise real standards.

In virtually every business field and in academic research, multiple measures are accepted as a matter of course, a minimal requirement. Business groups regularly employ multiple indicators to determine progress. Researchers use multiple forms of evidence to test their hypotheses. All these sectors recognize that relying on one kind of measure in only one or two areas is dangerous. For education, the dangers are twofold: the indicators cease to be believable, as in inflated scores on state tests; and education is undermined, especially for low-income children.

It should not be acceptable for any child to have her education reduced to test preparation in two subjects. Yet this is the widespread effect of NCLB's over-reliance on standardized tests in math and reading. Congress can address the problem through vigorous support for combined state and local systems that use multiple forms of assessment, and a strong set of multiple, weighted indicators organized into a composite index used to chart progress.

We would be pleased to talk with you about the Joint Statement and the FEA legislative recommendations.

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- * The Statement and FEA recommendations and the letter from civil rights groups are all at www.edaccountability.org.
 - * The academics' letter: <http://www.forumforeducation.org/foruminaction/index.php?page=391>.
 - * The PDK/Kappan survey: <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kpollpdf.htm>.
 - * CEP's report *Choices, Changes, and Challenges: Curriculum and Instruction in the NCLB Era* is at www.cep-dc.org.
 - * NCES report "Changes in Instructional Hours in Four Subjects" is in May 2007 *Stats in Brief*.
- The Forum on Educational Accountability (FEA) is a working group of the Joint Statement signers. All signers agree to the Statement's goals and seek to implement its recommendations. Additional FEA statements reflect this commitment but may not reflect all individual positions taken by signatories.