

Forum on Educational Accountability

www.edaccountability.org

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Dear Member of Congress,

The Forum on Educational Accountability recognizes the importance of accountability. In fact, we have proposed a comprehensive, balanced accountability system for Congress' consideration.

Unfortunately, NCLB's rigid, mechanistic, sanctions-based approach is doing more harm than good. The modest changes in the House Education Committee's discussion draft and those apparently under consideration in the Senate HELP Committee will not solve the problems. Minor tinkering won't fix the law's reliance on high-stakes testing, unrealistic achievement targets, and punitive mandates.

This brand of accountability sets up a majority of American schools for failure. Repeated studies have shown that most schools in most states will not make AYP (see link to report, below). Over the next few years, the result will be to weaken public support for public education. It could pave the way for privatization schemes that will leave increasing numbers of children behind. More generally, the chaos created by NCLB will intensify voters' cynicism about the federal government's ability to play a constructive or even competent role in social policy.

The American public has come to recognize that NCLB requires a major overhaul. The Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll reports that the more people know about the law, the less they like it. They are particularly concerned about the ways in which the testing mandates narrow curriculum and instruction, forcing far too much attention onto standardized tests. The public wants improved schools, but recognizes that NCLB will not get us there without major changes.

Members of Congress must step forward to address this looming crisis. Any legislation must solve the major problems in the law and meet the criteria established in the *Joint Organizational Statement on NCLB* and by FEA in its legislative recommendations.

The *Joint Statement* says, "Overall, the law's emphasis needs to shift from applying sanctions for failing to raise test scores to holding states and localities accountable for making the systemic changes that improve student achievement." To attain this, Congress must establish the balanced accountability that FEA recommends. The components of this improvement and accountability approach include:

- Replace the arbitrary adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements with ambitious achievement targets based on rates of success actually achieved by the most effective Title I schools. FEA has provided detailed guidance on implementing this approach.
- Shift from an overwhelming reliance on test scores in reading and math to using multiple indicators of student achievement in addition to these tests. The multiple indicators must be sufficiently powerful and attainable to make a difference, which is not the case with the House discussion draft. A composite indicator of multiple indicators would be the best way to go.
- Authorize federal resources to help states develop assessment systems that include district- and school-based measures. The House discussion draft took strong steps in this direction, but that progress is under attack; it must be preserved and improved. The Senate should follow suit.

- Decrease the amount of required testing.
- Make consequences and interventions helpful rather than punitive. Allow flexibility for states and districts to target assistance. Allow schools at least four years for new approaches to take effect, while monitoring their progress.
- Make well-funded, high quality professional development integral to what Title I schools do. All Title I schools should have strong, locally administered, collaborative programs for all teachers, with additional support for mentoring, career ladders, working with families, and leadership development.
- Strengthen parent involvement and provide for adult literacy and parenting skills programs to help parents nurture their children's learning at home, along with adult mentoring for children who do not have sufficient family support.
- Provide federal funding to help states develop appropriate curricula for English Language Learners; design and implement valid and reliable assessments for them; and ensure that academic assessments of ELLs are valid and reliable before using them to make judgments about schools.
- Ensure that all children with disabilities are included in all assessments in a balanced accountability system, including general assessments, assessments with accommodations, or alternate assessments. Ensure that individualized education program teams are empowered and trained to determine which assessments and accommodations are most appropriate for individual students with disabilities, provided that the IEP itself is not used for accountability.
- To expand and equalize educational opportunity, fully fund ESEA and fund a significant share of the improvements called for by FEA.

The balanced accountability and improvement system proposed by FEA would solve the serious problems caused by NCLB and would put the federal government in a position to provide powerful leadership and assistance to genuinely improve schools and student learning.

It is up to members of Congress to decide whether to continue a federal law that undermines public schools and the overall quality of education or whether to transform the law to use accountability to build public school capacity and support educators.

We are ready to work with you to ensure a new law helps all students, particularly our most needy and vulnerable.

Sincerely yours,



Chair, Forum on Educational Accountability

- The *Joint Statement* and FEA materials are at www.edaccountability.org
- On most schools being likely to fail, see <http://www.fairtest.org/AYPproblemAndSolution091807.pdf>
- The Forum on Educational Accountability (FEA) is a working group of the 140 national education, civil rights, religious, disability, parent, civic and labor organizations, representing 50 million Americans, that have signed the Joint Statement on NCLB. All 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.