

“Next Phase of ESEA Reauthorization: Closing the Opportunity Gap”

By Arnold F. Fege

Director of Public Engagement and Advocacy, Public Education Network

Remarks at Hill Briefing, “**All Children Deserve the Opportunity To Learn**”

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Introductory statement:

As the US Department of Education readies its own ESEA blueprint, this certainly is an opportune time to have a public discussion about what really is and should be the engine of education reform: Opportunity To Learn. And as the focus of this discussion this morning suggests: All Kids Deserve the Opportunity To Learn.

I think this current period of NCLB, these last seven years-- is the predicate that sets the foundation for the next phase of ESEA. Without closing the opportunity gap, we will not close the achievement gap----the challenge is to develop policy where aim and aspiration is related to capacity; where common standards are related to common opportunity; where policy is related to instruction; and where possibility is related to public will and community engagement.

Standards-based reform will be with us for some time. But during this next phase of ESEA reauthorization, let's not impose standards until we are able to link standards to program and school opportunity and capacity. Instead of placing focus on educational deficits—that is intervening after a child has failed; let's commit ourselves to placing energies, resources and strategies on opportunities that assure that students and teachers succeed.

We can do this!!!

We know from what we have experienced about NCLB that if the next phase of ESEA does not address Opportunity To Learn, we will have lost yet another opportunity for real education reform. With such a focus on data and information—and rightly so—this next phase of education reform needs to address several major policy questions:

One: Now that we have the data, now what?

And the second question: Is it possible to have equal outcomes with unequal opportunities?

We hope that there is renewed understanding, as a result of what we learned from NCLB, that Opportunity To Learn is at the center of these questions.

Summary remarks:

I want to thank the audience and especially those who posed questions and got us thinking. There is a special part in my heart for the parents from New York who spent their own money and took their own time to attend this session.

When it comes to elevating parental involvement and community engagement as a priority of the new ESEA, we have our work cut out for us. While there is a lot of rhetoric about the importance of parental involvement, the parent remarks this morning about not understanding the data, not knowing where to get the data, and ultimately being shut out of reform in one of the most robust reform school districts in the country is troubling. In many school districts, family and parental involvement is not seen as one of the opportunities toward learning, but often as an obstruction to raising tests scores or to a superintendent's self-imposed program without engaging the public or parents. While it is important to intervene in schools that are low performing, it is not acceptable to fire whole teaching staffs, close schools or make fundamental changes—which in many cases may or may not be backed up by research—without engaging parents and the community in these initiatives. We have too much evidence to suggest that without family and community ownership, the most well intentioned reforms are not sustainable.

We need to restore once again the link between the academic aspirations we have for our students and the opportunities that are necessary to achieve those expectations. This time around, let's not set common standards without also setting common opportunities necessary for every student to achieve.

It's like baking bread—if some of the ingredients are necessary, and opportunity is the yeast that rises the whole loaf—without it we will get a very flat loaf of bread.

This is an agenda changer from what we have now—it seems like innovation—while important—should not preempt all of the research, brain development, and best practices that we already know work.