

**TO ACCOMPLISH “NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND” ACT
GOAL OF ACADEMIC COMPETENCE FOR ALL STUDENTS,
WE NEED TO MOVE BEYOND “ACCOUNTABILITY”**

Dear President Bush, Members of Congress, 2004 Candidates and the American Public:

The "No Child Left Behind Act" has focused the country on a vital goal: academic competence for all public school students. Substantially achieving it is essential to give all our children a fair opportunity to contribute to America's economic, political and civic well-being in the 21st century and to strengthen public education as the engine of our democracy. This letter recommends specific amendments to that Act and the Higher Education Act, related to schools and districts, teacher colleges, states and the U.S. Department of Education, needed to accomplish the goal.

The gap in student achievement is huge. Approximately 7 million black and 6 million Hispanic students (about 90 percent of each group) are below "Proficiency" in reading **and** math, based on a National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) sample. That is, they lack sufficient knowledge and skills in those subjects to satisfy the national goal at their grade levels. **About 8 million poor students (50 percent) lack even partial mastery at their respective grade levels, i.e., they are "below Basic."**

Now that all state plans have been approved and the Act is moving to implementation, the critical questions are: is the Act sufficient to actually accomplish its goal and, if not, what else needs to be done?

Drawing heavily on the states' decade-old standards movement, the Act requires states receiving federal K-12 funds to issue standards for academic proficiency for all public school students, annually test students to measure whether the standards are being met, and provide a "highly qualified teacher" in every core academic classroom by 2006. For implementation, it relies on requiring public reporting of test results and the imposition of sanctions on all schools that fail to meet improvement targets. Called "accountability," this strategy is intended to embarrass states into making whatever changes are needed to meet the goal.

Instead of inducing the states to institute the necessary systemic changes, the Act has caused many of them to severely lower their improvement goals to avoid having to sanction many schools for failing to make "Adequate Yearly Progress" (AYP). In recent months, Michigan reduced the percentage of students needed to pass a test for a school to satisfy AYP from 75% to 42%. Colorado deemed scores formerly "partially proficient" to be "proficient." Texas reduced the minimum "passing" score for its new third grade reading test from 24 to 20 correct answers out of 36 questions. And 20 states have greatly reduced the portion of students needed to be brought to proficiency in the early years, offsetting that with supposed sharp increases later.

As former Assistant Secretary of Education Chester E. Finn, Jr. observed, referring to these kinds of state actions: "That's a really cynical approach." The Act's accountability system is an invitation to manipulation, permitting states to postpone major reforms and perpetuate the failing status quo in the name of meaningless "compliance" on paper.

While "accountability" modestly increases learning for some students, at least initially, by pressuring schools to spend more time drilling certain information, in no state has it brought anything like the whole public school population close to academic proficiency. Even in Texas, accountability's flagship, the percentage of public school students at or above "Proficient" under NAEP only increased between 1990/1992 - 2000/2002 from about 15% to 26% in math and from about 24% to 29% in reading. From 1998 - 2002, the percentage of students "below Basic" in reading actually *increased* to 38% in grade 4 and 27% in grade 8.

These ten years of experience demonstrate that, by itself, "accountability" is inadequate to generate the fundamental changes needed to attain the goal.

The states generally either do not know how to vastly improve learning to achieve the goal or lack the political will to do so. However, experienced educators know and research confirms what does need to be done and how to do it. Create three conditions for virtually all students: challenging curriculum, effective teaching and family (or mentor) support for high student achievement.

These changes can be carried out largely by changing how teachers, administrators, teacher educators, parents and students spend their time.

Time must be refocused on improving teachers' instructional knowledge and skills, administrators' capacity to lead school and community transformations, families' capacity to provide motivation and assistance for high level student learning, and students' concentration on academic learning at school and at home. Federal policy's emphasis now needs to move beyond pressuring states and schools to improve student achievement to having them implement the specific changes essential to accomplish it.

Specifically, the NCLB Act and the Higher Education Act should be amended to require, as a condition of receiving future federal education grants, that:

DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS with less than 85% of their students performing comparably to NAEP "Proficiency" in reading and math at their grade levels

- Make improving instruction the central focus of management's time, as Anthony Alvarado successfully did in New York City's District 2. (The National Staff Development Council recommends that schools allocate at least 10% of their operating budgets and 25% of teachers' work hours to "learning and collaboration.") Create career ladders for accomplished teachers to become master teachers.
- End the widespread culture of teacher isolation and the many traditional staff development workshops/courses that are irrelevant to individual teacher's pedagogical needs and do not improve classroom teaching. Replace them with intensive peer collaboration and mentoring by accomplished teachers and principals that meet the specific pedagogical needs of each teacher. Provide mentoring and peer collaboration that meet the particular needs of individual principals and superintendents for how to lead transformations in their own schools and districts.

- Replace all "general" and "vocational" track and other course curriculum that is below grade level with curriculum at (or above) grade level, except for the small percentage of children with severe disabilities certified as incapable of learning at that level.
- Train teachers and administrators how to reach out and effectively engage families to support their children's high academic achievement.
- Assign business management responsibilities in large schools to other senior staff so principals can concentrate on improving instruction and community support.

TEACHER COLLEGES

- Replace short clinical training programs with extensive, closely supervised observation/assistance of regular teachers and student teaching. Integrate education theory and methods into helping the candidates solve the actual problems they encounter in their practice teaching. Include experience in how to effectively teach higher-order analytical, problem-solving and communications skills, children with disabilities and children with limited English proficiency, so all teachers know how to engage the interests of diverse students. (Research by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future has found that teacher colleges whose graduates effectively teach a challenging curriculum to diverse learners have in common intensive, academically integrated clinical programs of at least 30 weeks. Schools with such rigorous clinical programs also have much higher teacher retention, e.g. after five years, 77% retention at DePaul University's Urban Teacher Corps and 88% at the University of Connecticut, versus the nationwide average of only 54%. Dramatically increasing retention would greatly reduce the nation's cost in continuously recruiting and preparing vast numbers of new teachers and would improve the quality of the teacher force.)
- Reduce significantly the time often spent on "methods" and "theory" courses. Increase significantly the time spent on preparing candidates for the actual conditions they will meet in today's urban (and other) schools. Emphasize the need, in all subjects, for clear presentation of material, teacher modeling, students' using, organizing, understanding and communicating information, and teacher resolution of student confusion.
- Provide teacher and administrative candidates intensive training and experience in how to reach out and engage families to support their children's academic achievement.
- Replace post-graduate programs for principals/superintendents that emphasize how to manage stable "businesses" with intensive case-study and experiential programs working with accomplished principals and superintendents to learn how to transform their communities' expectations and students' achievement.

STATES

- Establish administrator certification standards and assessment devices, drawn from the applicable Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards or similar standards to ensure that all principals and superintendents have the knowledge and skills to effectively lead their communities' transformation to meet the Act's goal.
- Require that all new teachers of any core academic subject have a college major or equivalent in an academic field, even if they have an education major.
- Base "highly qualified teacher" certification standards and tests on the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium Model Standards for Beginning Teacher Licensing, Assessment and Development or similar standards to ensure that all teachers of reading, math and other core academic subjects have extensive content knowledge and pedagogical skills in the courses they teach.
- Provide higher salary/differential pay to teachers and administrators in hard-to-staff schools, especially in urban and rural areas, to attract the most experienced and highly competent staff to schools whose students have the greatest needs.

By the nature of many of the above changes, much of their cost can be paid with existing resources by changing how districts, schools, teacher colleges, parents and students spend their time. Additional costs need to be funded principally by the **U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**. The Department also needs to:

- Expand programs like the federal Family Literacy Program and other public/private programs to offer intensive parenting skills and adult literacy training to all families whose children's learning is comparable to "below Basic" on the NAEP, and make available trained adult surrogates to closely mentor such students where parents are unable to do so. (Currently, millions of parents need to develop the skills and/or values to motivate and support their children's learning at a high level. For many children, there are no parents or other caring adults in their lives who can give them the encouragement, motivation and disciplined structure for them to study and learn at a high academic level.)

The signers of this letter are experienced public school teachers, principals, superintendents, teacher educators, education researchers, state and local education officials, and concerned citizens and parents from around the country deeply committed to enabling virtually all public school students to become academically competent.

We urge the President and Congress to spell out now that these are the central changes needed to accomplish the goal. This is essential to avoid dashing the hopes of millions of parents and students and undermining government's credibility.

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