

“Advocacy to Restructure the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and Working with Coalitions”*

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I. Introduction

Thank you to Myrna and LDA for inviting me. Myrna has asked me to talk about one of the general education coalitions that LDA is very actively involved with - the Forum on Educational Accountability (FEA) - and specifically about what we have been working on for the last 6 years: the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

Since the time I have is very brief, I want to try to give you the big picture. I will start with talking a little about how NCLB is structured, follow with FEA’s basic approach to changing it, then contrast that to the Obama-Duncan approach and describe our respective premises, and end with ESEA “advocacy” challenges facing us in FEA. Your leader has given us a limited time for our presentations, so inevitably what I say will be somewhat superficial, but I hope you’ll get a sense of what’s most important.

II. Working with Coalitions

Before I talk about ESEA, I’d like to give you a brief description of the two organizations I represent: Citizens for Effective Schools (CES) and the Forum on Educational Accountability (FEA).

Citizens for Effective Schools

CES is a non-profit, nonpartisan national school reform advocacy organization committed to the goal of helping to improve our public schools so that virtually all students become academically proficient. CES does a substantial amount of its advocacy work by writing articles, op eds, letters to the editor, full page ads, etc., on its own. But, since 2004, CES has put at least as much of its time into working with FEA so as to carry out CES’ own mission.

Forum on Educational Accountability

FEA is an alliance of national education, civil rights, disabilities, religious, children’s, labor and civic organizations which have signed the October 2004 “Joint Organizational Statement on No Child Left Behind Act.” The “Joint Statement” sets out 14 key principles for changing NCLB.

*Prepared text of talk, slightly revised.

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FEA gets together as a group through regular meetings, usually every 4-6 weeks, in Washington, D.C.

However, FEA, itself, has *no* paid staff and *no* money of its own, so it is totally dependent on the active volunteer participation of its members to do the work of the organization. This work gets done through various participants, each representing a national organization, doing the research, writing, planning, lobbying, press contacts, etc. of FEA between group meetings.

For all the time since I joined FEA six years ago, Myrna Mandlawitz has been one of its most central players: coming to virtually every general meeting, contributing invaluable ideas, helping with committees and projects in between meetings, consulting and providing insightful advice, strategy and information, and, of course, using her keen eye and sharp pen to edit some of our documents! Myrna is an absolutely core member of FEA and we deeply appreciate her work on behalf of LDA. I especially appreciate her participation in the major Capacity-building Committee, which I chair, and in helping to develop and finalize our important Committee report.

I also want to acknowledge the exceptional contribution that Justine Maloney has made for years, on behalf of LDA, to FEA's deliberations and decision-making, and say that I very much miss no longer having her at our meetings. I always looked forward to her keen, wise and practically grounded insights, her toughness and her warmth!

In addition to developing the "Joint Organizational Statement," FEA has: prepared a detailed report, "Redefining Accountability: Improving Student Learning by Building Capacity," which sets out specific policies to implement the Statement's general principles and a comprehensive set of legislative recommendations, largely to implement that report; actively staffed the preparation of a major expert panel report on assessments, "Assessment and Accountability for Improving Schools and Learning: Principles and Recommendations for Federal Law and State and Local Systems;" and has prepared and issued many other advocacy documents and advanced them on Capitol Hill. (All FEA documents are on our website: www.edaccountability.org.)

III. State of Play in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act Reauthorization

Now, I'd like to turn briefly to the ESEA reauthorization and give you a sense of: the "state of play," some progress that I think we have made in the last six years, and what the battles are that are facing us with the Obama Administration.

A. NCLB

The starting place is what we have now: the No Child Left Behind Act ("NCLB.") This is the name of the current version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, enacted into law early in 2002, at the initiative of President George W. Bush, with strong support from Senator Ted Kennedy, Congressman George Miller, and most Congressmen and Senators of both parties.

NCLB is essentially a "test and sanctions" law, in which schools must test their students annually in many grades in reading and math and have ever increasing percentages of their students score "Proficient" or

better on state standards, with 100% “Proficient” by 2014, or face escalating sanctions for each year they fail to meet the “proficiency” targets. This scheme is called “Adequate Yearly Progress” or “AYP.”

NCLB basically jumps over the critical middle step between “testing” and “sanctions,” i.e., helping the schools do something significantly different, so that their students learn substantially more. NCLB’s premise seems to be that the schools already know what to do to greatly increase students’ learning and that they just need to be pressured and embarrassed into doing better!

Not surprisingly, NCLB has led to: 1) widespread “teaching to the test;” 2) narrowing curriculum to focus on math and reading; 3) states lowering standards to seek to avoid, or postpone, having more Title I-funded schools sanctioned; 4) an ever increasing percentage of schools labeled “failing;” 5) undermining teacher morale; and 6) and many other harms.

B. FEA

FEA’s basic position has been that NCLB’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.”* (Emphasis in original) That is, the whole approach of ESEA must change from sanctioning schools for failing to sufficiently raise test scores to “helping them improve.”

The chief way to help schools improve is for the Government to: identify the “systemic changes” shown by experience and research to significantly help low-performing schools improve; have the schools implement those changes; provide schools technical assistance and funding to help them implement key reforms; and provide funding to enable states to beef up their own capacity to assist districts and schools to implement the vital changes.

The central “systemic changes” that FEA advocates are in the areas of “professional development” and “family involvement and support.” As to “professional development,” FEA particularly stresses the need for school-wide professional development to meet the specific needs for subject matter knowledge and pedagogical skills of teachers in individual schools, peer collaboration and career ladders. As to families and community, FEA stresses the need for: adult literacy and parenting skills programs to help children learn at home; adult mentors or intensive after-school programs to provide adult role models and support for children without parents available to do so; and programs to reach out to parents and get them more involved with the teachers and the schools.

Two recent studies in Chicago show the vital importance of: school leadership; professional development that meets the needs of individual teachers; peer collaboration; and engagement with parents and community to generate the organic changes required to turn around very low-performing schools.

FEA’s premise is essentially that to dramatically improve student learning, we must change what happens in the classroom and at home. To do that, we must help teachers enhance their knowledge and skills to engage students’ interest in a challenging curriculum, i.e., *improve instruction*, and enhance

parents' knowledge and skills to support students' learning at home, i.e., *strengthen parental support for high level student learning.*

C. Obama/Duncan

We seem to have made some progress in the last couple years. President Obama has called in his fiscal year 2011 budget for eliminating "Adequate Yearly Progress." Secretary Duncan has criticized NCLB's emphasis on standardized testing, "just teaching to the test," and narrowing curricula. And Congressman George Miller, the Chairman of the pivotal House Education & Labor Committee, has just said that he thinks: "[t]his is the best opportunity we have had to have really substantial changes in how we meet the educational needs of our kids[,] emphasizing the need to do so through use of student performance data.

Thus, it seems that we may have made some headway in changing the debate away from "tests and sanctions" to "helping schools improve," but there is still strong emphasis on tests from Miller, perhaps too strong. And the Administration has indicated that it intends to rely heavily on its approaches in the "Race to the Top" ("RTTT") program as the basis for the ESEA reauthorization.

While RTTT is not all bad, it has serious problems. Key priorities in RTTT include: 1) repealing state limits on the number of permissible charter schools; 2) supposedly turning around very low-performing schools by i) firing principals and staff, ii) closing schools, and iii) converting traditional public schools to privately managed charter schools and other private company management, so taxpayers pay but lose control; 3) "compensating and promoting educators at least partly on the basis of student performance;" and 4) tracking student test scores over time, grade to grade, through standardized testing.

IV. Conclusion

In short, in the Obama Administration there is great emphasis on: the collection of more data/test scores on student achievement; measuring student and teacher performance based on test scores; rewarding or punishing teaching based on test scores; firing of principals and large portions of teachers without knowing that schools can get, and often without being able to get, qualified replacements; and privatization of public schools through expanding charters and private management.

These preoccupations are misconceived. This is not what the emphasis needs to be on to improve teaching and family support. While the conversation seems to be changing at least somewhat in our direction, we have a huge way to go to shift the law and resources to support the kinds of systemic improvements broadly needed in Title I schools.

We need and greatly value LDA's support in this battle!

Thank you.

