



What Public School Parents Want in a New Federal Education Law

A Parents Across America Position Paper on the Reauthorization of the Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) – No Child Left Behind

April, 2011

Introduction

“What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child,
that must the community want for all its children.
Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely;
acted upon, it destroys our democracy.”

John Dewey, *The School and Social Progress*

Public school parents are increasingly concerned that the current direction of education reform in this nation is dangerously eroding our children's opportunity to realize their individual potential and experience an excellent, fulfilling education.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has dramatically harmed our local schools with its over-emphasis on high-stakes testing, narrowing of the curriculum, and punitive unfunded mandates that have been especially harmful to schools with high-needs student populations. What it has not done is improve achievement.

Unfortunately, these same destructive policies, and more, are featured in the Obama administration's "Blueprint" for reauthorization of this law, despite the fact that they are not based on solid research or supported by most public school parents.

Our top federal officials seem to be too busy listening to venture philanthropists and corporate reformers to hear our concerns. We are offered dubious sales pitches for "merit pay," more testing, and school privatization instead of thoughtful efforts at consensus-building around what actually works in education.

As our lawmakers consider the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

(ESEA, aka NCLB), it is time they listened to those with the most at stake in education, the parents of the nation's public school children. We know that some of our schools need help, but we also know that there are approaches and strategies that are far more successful than those currently being promoted under NCLB and the "Blueprint." It's time we stop doing things that don't work, and start doing more of the things that do work. We demand a responsible education law that will strengthen our nation's public schools and provide a high-quality education for *all* of our children.

We look forward to a productive dialogue with Congress and other officials in the upcoming days and weeks regarding Parents Across America's recommendations for ESEA/NCLB reauthorization.

Parents Across America opposes:

- Policies that use standardized test scores as the most important accountability measure for schools, teachers or students, and/or expand the use of standardized testing in our schools.
- Competition for federal funds; a quality education is not a race but a right.
- "Parent trigger" laws, vouchers, charter takeovers or other forms of school privatization that take resources from the schools attended by most students and put them into private hands, with less oversight.
- Limiting federally-mandated school improvement models to a narrow set of strategies, including charter schools and privatization, which are favored by corporate reformers but which have had little verified success.

A new ESEA/NCLB must include:

- Sufficient and equitable resources in all public schools, so that every child receives a high-quality education.
- Improving schools rather than closing them, by means of evidence-based solutions backed by parents and other stakeholders.
- Less standardized testing and more reliable accountability and assessment practices.
- Programs that encourage the retention of professional, experienced teachers.
- A full range of parent involvement opportunities including a stronger parent voice in decision making at the school, district, state, and national levels.
- The right of parents to opt their children out of standardized tests.

Recommendations from Parents Across America for a new ESEA/NCLB

Specifically, we believe that ESEA/NCLB should be revised to include:

Improved conditions and stronger support for schools

- Resources and monitoring to insure that all children have a **safe, attractive, healthy school environment** with preK programs, full-day Kindergarten, small class sizes that allow teachers to provide individual attention, adequate opportunity for physical activity, socializing, and nutrition, and non-discriminatory, positive discipline procedures.

- **Poverty and other challenging life conditions must also be addressed** with additional funding for the extra help needed by at-risk children, such as early learning opportunities, summer school, and reduced class sizes of 18 or less.
- Quality bilingual programs, adequate screening and services for special needs students; Congress must fulfill its promise of funding **40 percent of special education programs** mandated under the IDEA Act.
- Monitoring and enforcement of **equitable distribution of educational resources**.
- Assurance of a **rich, well-rounded curriculum** so that all students receive full instruction in the arts, history, civics, science, foreign languages, health, and physical education with programs that relate to students' own lives, cultures, and languages. These enriching subject areas bring schooling to life, but have been deemphasized or abandoned under NCLB's narrow focus on those subjects measured by state standardized tests.
- Charters and all other schools receiving public funds must be **equally transparent and accountable** in their spending, enrollment, discipline, transfer and other policies and practices, and be prevented from discriminating against special needs, homeless or low-income students, children of color or English-language learners, or any other protected class.

Sound, effective school improvement strategies

- A requirement that programs used to support struggling schools must be **research-based and supported by parents, teachers, and other members of the school community**, who must be meaningfully involved in each step of the evaluation, planning, implementation, monitoring, and re-evaluation of these programs.
- **Flexibility** in the choice of school improvement strategies based on school and community strengths and needs.
- Support for development and expansion of programs that encourage and enable successful schools to **collaborate and share what they have learned** with comparable schools that are struggling.

High-quality accountability measures and reliable assessments including true multiple measures

- **Use of multiple factors in the evaluation of schools, teachers and students.** This should include a variety of evidence of learning gathered at different points in time, within and across subject areas. A major component of this evidence should be actual student work and assessments designed at the classroom level. Teacher peer review of classroom work, shared tasks/projects, and other collaborative strategies are superior to large-scale standardized tests in providing a check and balance on local assessments.
- Any evaluation system must have **meaningful input from administrators, teachers and parents**.

- **Assessment transparency** – require that all standardized tests be made public and available for review in a timely manner after they have been given.
- **Less standardized testing overall.** Utilizing tests as diagnostic tools, not as a way to punish students, teachers and schools.
- **Right of parents to opt their child out of any standardized test.**

Strong, effective support for teachers

- Funds and incentives to provide all teachers with strong **mentoring support** in at least their first year, and **time for professional development and joint planning** on curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Money for these programs can be found by redirecting funds away from programs that are designed to recruit and train candidates who do not intend to stay in the profession for more than a few years.
- Resources to assure that the most at-risk schools are able to **attract and retain excellent, experienced teachers.**
- **An end to strategies that blame teachers and school administrators** for the challenges of at-risk students, including such unproven, harmful practices as using student test scores in teacher evaluation and tenure decisions, and firing and replacing teachers, principals, and other staff in schools with low test scores.

Meaningful parent involvement: *in addition to the involvement of parents as detailed above, ESEA/NCLB should include:*

- A full range of parent involvement opportunities including support for **site-based school governance** with significant parent representation and real, not just advisory, authority.
- **The same parent involvement requirements for all schools** including charter and any other schools receiving public funds.
- **No child may be retained in grade without the parents' permission.**

Parents Across America (PAA) is a grassroots organization that connects parents and activists from across the U.S. to share ideas and work together on improving our nation's public schools. We advocate for proven, progressive measures such as reducing class size and increasing parent involvement, and oppose high-stakes testing and corporate-style efforts to privatize our schools. PAA is committed to bringing the voice of public school parents – and common sense – to local, state, and national education debates.

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