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Help seek changes to NCLB

Tom Gillett, Regional Staff Director, New York State United Teachers

The recently reissued “Joint Organizational Statement on the No Child Left Behind Act” reflects an unprecedented public agreement among the most diverse grouping of education, civil rights, religious, children’s and civic organizations—from the National School Boards Association, the National Education Association and the National PTA to the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, the Coalition for Essential Schools and the National Council of Black Mayors to Episcopal, Presbyterian, Jewish and other church-related organizations—over 100 in all.

This coalition of groups emphasizes its commitment to the NCLB objectives of “strong academic achievement for all children and the closing of the achievement gap,” and the implementation of accountability systems which would help “ensure all children, including children of color, from low-income families, with disabilities, and of limited English proficiency, are prepared to be successful, participating members of our society.”

It is striking that, despite differences on some aspects of the NCLB, this joint statement sets forth recommendations in five key areas: progress measurement, assessments, building capacity, sanctions and funding. While the full report bears attention, some of the more critical of the recommendations are specified here:

Progress measurements— Allow states to measure progress by using students’ growth in achievement as well as their performance in relation to pre-determined levels of academic proficiency; provide a comprehensive picture of students’ and schools’ performance by moving from an overwhelming reliance on standardized tests to using multiple indicators of student achievement in addition to these tests.

Assessments—Decrease the testing burden by allowing states to assess students annually in selected grades; strengthen enforcement of NCLB provisions requiring that assessments must:

- be aligned with state content and achievement standards;
- be used for purposes for which they are valid and reliable;
- be consistent with nationally recognized professional and technical standards;
- be of adequate technical quality for each purpose required under the Act;
- provide multiple, up-to-date measures of student performance including measures that assess higher order thinking skills and understanding; and
- provide useful diagnostic information to improve teaching and learning.

Building Capacity—Ensure changes in teacher and administrator preparation and continuing professional development that research and experience indicate improve educational quality and student achievement; enhance state and local capacity to effectively implement the comprehensive changes required to increase the knowledge and skills of administrators, teachers, families, and communities to support high student achievement.

Sanctions—Ensure that improvement plans are allowed sufficient time to take hold before applying sanctions; sanctions should not be applied if they undermine existing effective reform efforts; replace sanctions that do not have a consistent record of success with interventions that enable schools to make changes that result in improved student achievement.

Funding—Raise authorized levels of NCLB funding to cover a substantial percentage of the costs that states and districts will incur to carry out these recommendations, and fully fund the law at those levels without reducing expenditures for other education programs; fully fund Title I to ensure that 100 percent of eligible children are served.

To read the complete statement or access the list of groups who signed the statement, go to <http://www.nea.org/presscenter/nclbjointstatement.html>.

The Monroe County Education Coalition supports the adoption of these recommendations as essential to improving NCLB.

Parents, school board members, and district personnel are encouraged to contact their federal lawmakers to promote the changes proposed in the “Joint Organizational Statement on the No Child Left Behind Act.”



Barbara Shapiro

Charter schools not the answer

by Barbara Shapiro, President, Pittsford Teachers Association; At-Large Member, Monroe County Federation of Teachers Board of Directors

In December 1998, the New York Legislature adopted and Governor George Pataki signed into law the New York State Charter Schools Act, which said the purpose of the new schools would be to improve student learning and achievement. This would be accomplished by encouraging the use of different and innovative teaching methods, creating new professional opportunities for teachers, administrators and other school personnel, and providing parents and students with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available within the public school system. Charter schools would be performance-based, accountable for meeting measurable student achievement results.

The most powerful evidence available – student scores on state tests – clearly demonstrates that charter schools are falling short of the purposes the Legislature intended. The failed promise of the charter school experience too often has been overlooked because of widespread misperceptions that charter schools perform better

than their public school counterparts. This is not true.

When each charter school's performance is compared with a comparable public school from their home district – when the schools are matched in terms of student poverty – fully 86.4% of the comparable public schools perform as well as or better than the charters.

Based on the State Education Department's *Annual Report on Charter Schools*, these schools are not offering expanded learning opportunities to at-risk students and, in fact, tend to serve students who are more advantaged than the population of their district. Charter schools are using educational approaches that are readily available to public schools. Most important, charter schools are not being held accountable to the same extent as public schools for student performance. Many charter schools have operated under the accountability radar by offering grades where state tests are not required. Public schools are performing better and are more accountable than charter schools.

Sometimes lost in the debate over charter schools is the fact that the overwhelming majority of K-12 students in our state are still educated in traditional public schools. Meanwhile, charter schools drain several thousand dollars per student from the school district from which they come. Because school districts' fixed costs do not fall by much when a student leaves, budget shortfalls are created, property taxes increase and programs and services in the traditional schools are jeopardized.

The result, too often, is that every time a charter school opens, the local district suffers. The school district's ability to properly serve the majority of the students and their families in that community is diminished. There is no evidence to declare charter schools a panacea for the problems of public education. Instead, the focus needs to be on strengthening free and universal public education. Traditional public schools have a rich history of opening the door of opportunity to every one of our state's children. That is where we need to concentrate our efforts.

Monroe County Education Coalition

.....Representing 60,000 Members
.....A force in our community

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