

# **Empowering Schools and Improving Learning: A Joint Organizational Statement on the Federal Role in Public Schooling**

## **Vision of Public Education**

All children deserve the opportunity to succeed in high quality public schools. High quality public schools are schools where students and adults form active communities of learners, evidenced by a culture that is both supportive and challenging. They attend to the whole child and meet the individual needs and support the strengths of each child, including English language learners, students with disabilities, and students of diverse racial, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. They are well-resourced and well-staffed by qualified professionals, provide classes of a size that ensures individualized instruction and attention to each child's learning needs, and are safe, healthy and modern. Students attending these schools demonstrate ongoing progress toward important learning outcomes as indicated by a variety of sources and kinds of evidence, including classroom work, different types of assessments of progress and mastery, and grade promotion and graduation rates.

Important learning outcomes must include basic and higher order content knowledge and thinking skills in and across subject areas. Schools must have programs to provide all students with a coherent and intellectually challenging curriculum that includes 21<sup>st</sup> century critical thinking, problem solving, and high-level communication skills, and that ensures deep understanding of content. To achieve these outcomes, schools must be culturally sensitive and address different learning styles and interests through curriculum and instruction that fosters student engagement, promotes creativity, and addresses diverse experiences and needs. Schools also will collaborate with families and communities to meet the needs of the whole child -- cognitive/intellectual, social, civic, emotional, psychological, ethical, and physical -- while preparing them for successful citizenship in a multi-cultural world.

The federal government has a limited but important role to play in realizing this vision of high quality schooling for all. It should help provide the tools and resources to empower schools where students are underserved by partnering with schools, districts, states, communities, and organizations to ensure all schools are of higher quality. To ensure successful learning outcomes, the federal government also must take a strong role in addressing issues complementary to education, including health care, housing, employment, income, and community fragmentation.

## **Key Components of the Federal Role**

To effectively assist in empowering schools and improving learning, the federal government must overhaul the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, currently authorized as the No Child Left Behind Act, NCLB), especially Title I. The new law should be consistent with the *Joint Organizational Statement on No Child Left Behind* and this document. In particular, rather than making accountability the central component of ESEA, the law must make capacity-building central, with accountability as one component that serves the improvement process. In making this change, the federal government must provide assistance and develop guidelines, but not manage the details of implementation, as it does under NCLB.

Major changes in the federal role in public education are needed in three areas: empowering schools so they can better ensure strong learning outcomes for all students; providing more adequate and equitable resources for all students; and developing an accountability system that focuses evaluation on students' opportunities to learn, processes of systemic school improvement, and student learning outcomes based on multiple forms of evidence. Adopting these changes will reshape federal, state and local relationships. The following are key components of the federal role in ensuring high-quality learning outcomes for all students.

## **Empowerment for Improvement**

**1. *Improvement plans and actions:*** Every ESEA Title I school and district shall engage in a planning process with the participation of school personnel, parents, and the community the school serves. Planning will result in strategies to provide equitable, high quality education, including implementation of the systemic changes in school practices detailed below. Plans shall address cultural diversity and the specific needs of any special populations, such as English language learners, students with disabilities, and students with gifts and talents. Schools and districts will implement the plans, and districts will monitor plan implementation, provide support as needed, and intervene should implementation falter. States, in turn, will monitor school districts.

**2. *Collaboration:*** Funds for Titles I and II shall be used to enable school-based educators, with support from districts and the state, to work collaboratively to improve curriculum, instructional practices, and assessments; better meet the needs of individuals and groups of students and address barriers to learning; and ensure the continuing professional development of all education personnel.

**3. *Professional learning:*** As an integral component of educational improvement and ongoing school practice, professional development funds shall be used to meet local educational needs through professional collaboration, mentoring, career ladders, and appropriate professional activities and strategies to work with families and communities. Schools may use a portion of these funds to engage outside expertise and other agencies to assist their staff. To adequately support professional learning, a funding stream in an amount equal to 20% of Title I funds shall be used for this purpose, with states providing a matching amount. State and local education agencies shall jointly identify appropriate sources of funding and work with schools to determine the best uses for those funds.

**4. *Parental and family engagement and support:*** Because parental and family engagement in schools and parental and family support of student learning at home are vitally important to school quality and student success, a funding stream in an amount equal to five percent of Title I funds shall be provided for these purposes. These funds, determined jointly by state and local education agencies in consultation with schools, shall be used to strengthen parent involvement in schools, including translation services and transportation and child care, so that parents can meaningfully participate in school improvement activities. Equally, these funds must be used to build parents' capacity to assist their children's learning through adult literacy, English as a

second language, and culturally sensitive parenting skills programs. These funds also shall be used to mentor students whose parents are unable to provide adequate support.

**5. *Assessment:*** ESEA shall provide funds to enable schools, districts, and states to develop high quality formative and summative assessments in the various subjects, as well as other indicators to provide evidence of improved student learning and school quality. These assessments must be based on state standards and the local curriculum, assess higher order thinking and other 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, and provide multiple approaches for students to demonstrate their learning. The primary use of these assessments is to improve instruction and enable teachers to better address each student's strengths and needs. These funds may be used jointly with the funds authorized for collaborative activities and professional development in the school and school district, provided those activities include developing assessments and indicators and improving educators' skills in using them. Since the federal government has previously provided substantial funds for the improvement of statewide standardized tests, Congress should continue modest funding for those activities, which also may include the development of tasks and projects (performance tasks) that states, districts, and schools can use. In addition, Congress shall provide funds for the use of universal design principles to create large-scale and classroom-based assessments that are appropriate for all students, including English language learners and students with disabilities.

**6. *Research and dissemination:*** ESEA shall increase support for research and dissemination. Such support shall include gathering information about successful approaches to ensuring high quality learning outcomes and evaluating the conditions under which such programs are likely to succeed. Information also shall be gathered about high-quality curriculum and assessments that can be utilized locally, on a voluntary basis, and made available on electronic networks or in print. ESEA shall create a new national sample within the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) or another appropriate process that will employ extended performance tasks (including electronic variations) based on up-to-date evidence of how individuals learn. These tasks shall be designed to indicate students' ability to understand and apply knowledge and higher order thinking in and across subject areas. Knowledge gained through this program shall support development of performance tasks that may be incorporated into state, district, and classroom assessments.

### **Improved Funding to Enhance Equity and Adequacy**

**7. *Equity and adequacy:*** The goal of the federal government shall be to ensure that all children have equitable access to a high-quality education and achieve high-quality learning outcomes. The federal government shall substantially increase education funding and ensure fair distribution of federal funds across the states; enforce the requirement that states use Title I funds to supplement, not supplant, state and local funding; ensure collection of data that can identify, within schools and communities, any key inequities that affect learning outcomes; and, work with states to help them move quickly toward greater equity and adequacy of resources. Federal, state, and local governments together must contribute to meeting this goal. While each step poses complex issues to resolve, rapid progress toward the goal must be achieved. It is a state responsibility to ensure that resources adequate to produce high-quality learning outcomes for all students are available to each school and are used appropriately. The federal government shall conduct studies to determine the costs of providing a high-quality education to all students.

**8. Federal funding:** Through the ESEA and the appropriations process, Congress shall continue to provide assistance by supplementing the local and state funds available to schools and districts with concentrations of low-income and diverse students. Congress shall fully fund ESEA Title I and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B, in accord with current formulas, and shall make both ESEA Title I and IDEA Part B mandatory federal budget items. The increased mandatory allocations would more than double the amounts now provided by these laws. The federal government shall fund a significant portion of the cost of implementing the systemic school improvement changes described in this document and in the *Joint Organizational Statement on NCLB*. Congress also shall appropriate substantially increased sums to better meet the needs of students served under the other Titles and Parts of ESEA and IDEA. In addition, funding shall be provided for school modernization programs.

**9. Comprehensive indicator systems:** ESEA shall provide for the development of comprehensive statewide indicator systems to provide evidence on such school factors as the equitable and sufficient distribution of qualified staff, including but not limited to teachers and supervisory staff; class size; buildings, libraries, technology, and other material resources; school climate; parental engagement; and family and community support for learning. Such indicator systems will also provide evidence about learning outcomes, such as high school graduation; college readiness, enrollment, and progress; employment; and civic participation. In addition, the system shall collect information on out-of-school factors including comprehensive health care, housing, employment and income, and community safety. Collection of these indicators will be a collaborative activity involving relevant state and federal departments and agencies. This evidence will help improve opportunities to learn and support school improvement efforts.

**10. Opportunity to learn:** Each state shall develop strategies for providing resources to overcome inequities and inadequacies identified by the indicators. The goal is to provide resources sufficient to ensure every child can participate in high quality learning experiences. Each state shall report biannually on the indicators, strategies, and progress to the public. The federal government shall provide a biannual report to the public as to status and progress on these indicators across the states.

### **Accountability for Improvement and Learning Outcomes**

**11. Information systems:** To improve schools and student learning outcomes, states shall construct information systems that incorporate the indicators and assessments described in this document. States may use a federally designed model or their own. These systems will enable schools, districts, and states to utilize information and evidence for improvement activities. Such information also can be used for monitoring and publicly reporting on schools.

**12. Accountability for school improvement and learning outcomes:** With the primary focus on empowering schools and improving learning, ESEA shall establish several forms of accountability with identified consequences. Evidence on the learning progress of all students, using multiple sources and types of evidence in the various subjects, including district and school-based information, must be gathered and reported on a disaggregated basis. Equally important, data on implementation of systemic school improvement changes (as described in

preceding paragraphs), obstacles encountered and steps taken to overcome them, outcomes, and proposed steps for further improvement must be gathered and publicly reported. Each school will provide an opportunity for its teachers and other staff, parents, and the community to review, discuss, and provide advice on the reports.

**13. Rate of improvement:** Evidence of a school's learning outcomes shall be evaluated in light of expected statewide rates of improvement. The expected rates of improvement, to be specified by a formula in ESEA, must be rooted in actual levels and rates of improvement that are attained by the more successful Title I schools and for which evidence indicates that these rates can be sustained over time. Aspects of improvement can be combined into a comprehensive indicator system with a composite expected rate of improvement.

**14. Assistance and intervention:** ESEA shall not mandate an explicit set of school or district "governance" changes, nor shall it overturn contract provisions for local personnel. ESEA will provide a funding stream to states in an amount equal to two percent of Title I funds to assist districts in systemic change. However, districts and states are responsible for providing assistance where evidence of school quality--including the level of learning outcomes, rate of improvement in outcomes, or success in implementing systemic changes--demonstrate that a school needs assistance and interventions. The nature and extent of assistance should respond to clearly identified needs. In determining the nature and extent of assistance, funding and resources, including teachers and administrators as well as the instructional program, must be addressed. Should a school be deemed chronically inadequate and unable to improve, the district and then the state are obligated to provide additional intensive interventions.

## Conclusion

Incremental changes will not fix NCLB's serious flaws and will not enable all students to succeed. To ensure high-quality learning outcomes, Congress must overhaul ESEA, particularly Title I, to empower schools to improve, focus on improved assistance, help ensure funding equity and adequacy, redefine accountability, and reshape the federal relationship with states and districts.

The federal government must provide strong leadership through supportive policies and sufficient funding. The systemic school improvement and accountability changes outlined in this document are interrelated changes that reinforce each other and must be implemented together. They are not a menu from which to pick and choose. Experience and research show that these are among the most critical changes that states and localities can make to improve learning. The federal government therefore must provide strong financial support to these efforts and more broadly work to ensure all schools have adequate resources to educate all their students well.

We therefore call on Congress and the President to follow the guidance found in the *Joint Organizational Statement on NCLB* and the initiatives described above.

• Released June 2009, signed by 84 national education, civil rights, religious, disability, parent and civic organizations. For a complete, up-to-date list of signers, go to [www.edaccountability.org](http://www.edaccountability.org) and click on "Empowering Schools."

- We welcome additional signers; signers of this document automatically also sign "Joint Organizational Statement on NCLB." Send a message to monty (at) fairtest (dot) org; include name of organization, contact person, phone and email, and a statement of endorsement.