




Forum on
Educational
Accountability
February 2007

REDEFINING ACCOUNTABILITY:

Improving Student Learning by Building Capacity



The Forum on Educational Accountability (FEA) is a working group of some of the national education, civil rights, religious, disability and civic organizations that have endorsed the Joint Organizational Statement on No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. The FEA has prepared the following report to promote the ideas in the Joint Statement, to provide concrete policy recommendations for implementing the principles of the Joint Statement, and to contribute to discussions about the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The Joint Statement itself has been signed by more than 100 national organizations.

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Published February 2007

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Contents

1	Introduction and Executive Summary
6	I. Professional Development
11	II. Family Involvement
16	III. Accountability
21	Appendix: Joint Organizational Statement on No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act

Introduction and Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the most recent version of the longstanding Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), offers a powerful goal for the nation: “to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards.”

NCLB contains important, positive components: its goals of strong academic achievement for all children and closing the achievement gap, periodic assessment of student learning, and public reporting of achievement results (including reporting by subgroups). But its punitive approach must be changed. As stated in the Joint Organizational Statement on NCLB: *“Overall, the law’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.”*

This would enable schools, districts and states to focus on implementing the key changes needed throughout the educational system to improve teaching and learning rather than focusing, as now, on avoiding sanctions.

Broad consensus on the changes that are needed during reauthorization is starting to emerge. In October 2004, 27 organizations signed on to the Joint Statement; today that number has grown to more than 100 national education, civil rights, disability, religious and civic organizations that have agreed on the Statement’s fundamental principles for restructuring the federal role in K-12 education. Building the capacity of schools to effectively educate all children and the capacity of families to support their children’s academic learning should be the primary focus of a reauthorized ESEA. The new law should hold schools, districts and states accountable for implementing the essential systemic changes rather than continuing to hold them accountable for failing to reach arbitrary Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) testing targets.

Over the last two years, many of the organizations that signed on to the Joint Statement have been crafting more detailed recommendations that build on the general principles, and they have now forged agreement on specific policies to be incorporated into the ESEA reauthorization. These policies fall into three distinct areas: professional development, family involvement, and accountability.

Note: The recommended policies and the changes they represent often are referred to collectively in this report as “the systemic changes.” All of the recommendations are described in detail in the body of the report, but the most central ones are summarized in this Executive Summary.

Before getting to specifics, it is important to note four threshold concepts that underlie our recommendations for restructuring federal education law:

- (1) Critical changes are needed in teacher and administrator preparation, and the Forum on Educational Accountability has identified those changes and submitted them to Congress. However, since educator preparation is governed by the Higher Education Act and this report is limited to the ESEA, those proposals are not discussed here.
- (2) All students graduating from high school should be prepared to be active participants in our democracy, lifelong learners, and successful whether they are moving into the workforce or continuing in their education. To meet these goals, schools must provide all students with a coherent and intellectually challenging curriculum that includes critical thinking, problem-solving and high-level communication skills, and that ensures deep understanding of content.
- (3) The systemic changes that we are proposing will require changes in how Title I funds are allocated and how districts use their own time and money, but the issue of resources goes farther than that. For states and districts to be able to implement the systemic changes, Congress must significantly raise NCLB’s authorization levels and fully fund the law, without reducing expenditures for other education programs.
- (4) To more fairly address the special educational needs of all low-income children, Title I funding needs to be provided for 100 percent of eligible children.

Finally, please note that this report complements another report the Forum on Educational Accountability is releasing on assessment this spring.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I. Professional Development

To improve the capacity of teachers, administrators and parents to support student learning, the following seven recommendations must be implemented in Title I-funded schools nationwide:

1. Design and conduct district- and/or school-wide professional development that addresses the student learning needs identified by school staffs, so that all teachers will have the subject matter knowledge and pedagogical skills to effectively teach a challenging curriculum to diverse learners and foster a supportive learning climate.
2. Provide time for staff discussion and collaboration during the school day. Staff will be able to better address student needs if they have time for regular discussion about professional, instructional, curricular, and assessment-related issues.
3. Provide intensive induction and mentoring support for beginning teachers and provide mentoring for experienced teachers as well, to meet their individual professional development needs and promote their success.
4. Create and fill positions as mentor teachers/coaches, professional development specialists, curriculum developers, subject matter coordinators, literacy coaches, and other positions requiring specialized skill sets.
5. Provide intensive training for school staff on engaging and supporting families and communities so all can contribute to their children's behavioral development and academic achievement. Involve parents in designing and providing this training.
6. Provide training in instructional leadership skills for school administrators, teachers, and pupil services personnel so they can create supportive learning communities that will improve instruction, produce effective professional development activities, and engage families in their children's education.
7. Relieve districts of the requirement to spend any Title I funds on transfers or tutoring. Instead, require districts to spend at least 20 percent of their Title I funds on implementing the six professional development recommendations above, and require states to match that 20 percent amount for the same purpose.

II. Family Involvement

Strengthening parent and community involvement in school improvement and the ability of parents to help their children succeed in schools is a second essential component of building capacity. To build upon, strengthen, and expand ESEA's current family involvement and support provisions, the following seven recommendations must be implemented:

1. Require schools and districts to engage parents and families in meaningful ways in school policymaking and reform, and promote attendance at other school-related activities.
2. Require every Title I-funded "high needs school" to provide literacy, family skills and other programs to families that will empower them to assist children's learning at home.
3. Require Title I "high needs schools" to provide adult mentors to assist low performing students if family members are not available.
4. Require public reports of school progress in implementing parent involvement and support policies.
5. Require the states and federal government to provide technical assistance to schools and districts in implementing ESEA's parent involvement and support policies.
6. Allocate 5 percent of Title I funding for schools and districts to implement fully the parent involvement and support provisions.
7. Provide for effective federal enforcement of ESEA parent involvement and support requirements at the state and local levels.

III. Accountability

To change NCLB's emphasis from a punitive model to one that supports systemic change that will lead to school improvement, Congress must:

1. Replace the current NCLB system of AYP and escalating sanctions for schools, districts, and states that receive Title I money with required implementation of the specific systemic changes identified in this report.
2. Require Title I-funded schools and districts to plan for systemic change by involving all stakeholders in the process of gathering information, conducting evaluations, and preparing brief implementation plans.
3. Require districts to assist all schools having particular difficulty implementing the systemic changes. Further, require districts to intervene in any school that fails to establish within a reasonable time frame (e.g., three to five years) a positive trend in learning outcomes. Trends will be identified using multiple assessment measures and will be based on rates of improvement attained by a substantial portion of current Title I schools.

4. Require annual public reports at the district, state, and federal levels of all major actions taken to implement the systemic changes. Reports should note both obstacles encountered as well as steps taken to overcome them. In addition, require public reporting of disaggregated student assessment results that come from multiple sources of evidence.
5. Require provision of meaningful technical assistance and sufficient resources to implement the systemic changes.
6. Require states to be responsible for improving any Title I-funded schools that after five years fail to establish a positive trend in learning outcomes. State specialists or other means may be used.
7. Provide federal evaluations and monitoring to ensure proper state and local use of Title I and other ESEA funds.