

NCLB: A Parent Perspective

March 31, 2010

ASK ANY PARENT what their hope is for the education of their child and they will tell you "a good education is one that provides my child with a broad range of opportunities and experiences to gain the knowledge and skills to be successful in life." Parents, especially those in disadvantaged communities and parents of color, whose children attend underperforming schools, want accountability. They want specific information to measure their child's and their school's performance and they want to be engaged in meaningful ways to support their child's education.

In 2001, the fanfare of the signing of the *No Child Left Behind Act* was greeted with mixed reviews from parents and education activists. While there seemed to be consensus around the intent of the law — to create a national education agenda that equalizes the opportunity to learn for all children — the debate then and now focuses on implementation. At the center of the debates is testing, the formula for determining annual yearly progress, "scientifically based" reading programs and funding for the full implementation of NCLB. Engaged in the debates are lawmakers, education scholars and activists, educators, and the most important stakeholder of all, parents.

What Parents Get

RESEARCH OVER THE last few decades has found that parent engagement is a major factor impacting student achievement. In response to that research, NCLB has made parent engagement one of the cornerstones of the legislation. What that means for parents is the schoolhouse door is open for meaningful engagement and accountability that is public and measurable, especially for parents of students in disadvantaged, struggling urban and rural schools receiving Title I resources and supports for their schools. (Title I provides additional funding to schools with significant population of low-income students.)

The parental "right to know" provision of NCLB gives parents access to more information than ever sharing specifics around the performance status of their child and their school.

NCLB mandates a minimum requirement for "highly qualified" teachers and parent notification when their child is being taught a core subject by a teacher who has not met the state requirements for "highly qualified" teacher. Parents also receive notification any time their child's school does not meet its annual yearly progress goals. Schools designated "in need of improvement" that receive Title I funding must also involve parents in the development of action plans for improving school performance.

Additionally, Title I schools that are "in need of improvement" for more than two years, or in "corrective action" must notify parents and offer the option to transfer to a higher-performing school. If parents decide not to transfer, they are eligible for supplemental services from the provider of their choice.

These NCLB mandates give parents information, choices, support, and an opportunity to participate, but it is the broader implementation of NCLB that raises many concerns among parents.

What Concerns Parents

WHILE MANY PARENTS view NCLB as a move in the right direction, concerns abound, especially for parents of students in Title I schools. Most NCLB sanctions are focused on these schools, which have historically been low-performing, struggling schools with high numbers of under-qualified, inexperienced staff often teaching in substandard conditions with little or no resources for books and supplies. While these schools receive additional dollars through Title I, the infusion of that funding does not fully fill the funding gap that exists between the "haves" and "have nots," resulting in an inequitable system in which poor children, children of color, and immigrant children and their schools are held to a higher standard without the resources to support their success. Furthermore, NCLB does not adequately address the disparities between school needs and state funding formulas that result in poorer urban and rural districts having fewer resources to create educational opportunities that are on the same level as their richer suburban counterparts in many states.

AYP, or adequate yearly progress, has become a common term for parents these days, as it is the determining factor for school success. How AYP is determined is a source of both concern and confusion among parents. Under NCLB, every state is required to set academic goals for performance of all schools based on state content and achievement standards aimed at the ultimate goal of moving all children to proficiency in language arts and math by 2014. Schools are required to demonstrate "continuous progress" towards that goal by meeting an annual benchmark for all subgroups within the school that is referred to as adequate yearly progress (AYP). The AYP benchmarks include test scores, graduation rates, attendance, and other indicators determined by the state. Schools that fail to meet AYP for any subgroup or other benchmark are designated "in need of improvement."

For example, School A, a diverse, Title I school with 16 subgroups that include five racial groupings, English language learners and special education students, has made AYP on all of its subgroups except for the school's already high performing Asian students. School A will be designated "in need of improvement." Parents in School A receive the report of how well their school has done to improve the achievement of African Americans, Latinos, English language learners, and special education students but are told their school has failed to meet AYP and has been designated "in need of improvement" leaving parents confused and questioning the AYP process. The major concern is that AYP does not always provide an accurate picture of school performance.

To further compound the disparities between poor and affluent schools, there are NCLB mandated differences in how schools are subjected to sanctions for not meeting AYP benchmarks. Schools and districts receiving Title I funding, which tend to be more diverse and include high populations of English language learners and special education students, that fail to meet AYP benchmarks are subject to mandated sanctions which could possibly include school restructuring by the state or local education authority. In contrast, affluent, non-Title I schools, which tend to be less diverse, are exempt from NCLB sanctions but are subject to measures developed by the state.

Testing is one of the major determining factors for AYP under NCLB. Parents have now joined the ongoing debate around testing, weighing in on both sides of the debate. Many parents believe that testing is necessary to determine whether students have mastered the skills at grade level, while other parents fear that dependency on test results does not provide a full picture of student and school performance, and encourages "teaching to the test" instead of high quality instruction. The high stakes nature of testing in many states has also raised concerns among parents and education activists around the increase in drop-out and push-out rates of low performing students at the middle and high school levels. While many states report no increase and in some cases decreases in the dropout rate, further investigation reveals increases in push-outs, students who are moved into alternative GED type programs and off of the school rolls. With making AYP essential for the success of every school, teachers and administrators are feeling pressured to meet AYP, often by any means necessary.

Other NCLB parental concerns include the transfer option and delivery of supplemental services for students in Title I schools. Major challenges exist for the transfer option. Parents in urban districts, where often over half of the schools have been designated "in need of improvement," face the challenge of finding space at higher performing schools. If a parent decides to keep their child at the current school they are eligible for supplemental services (e.g., tutoring) from the provider of their choice, but the services are accessed on a first-come, first-served basis, leaving some parents on their own to find support for their children. After-school and youth development programming that provided much needed out of school programming, including academic supports, have been subject to deep cuts over the past four years, leaving many parents with even fewer options.

Equality and Opportunity

WHILE THE PROPOSED INTENT of NCLB is supposedly equitable opportunities for all children it has meant that low-income, low-performing schools disproportionately are the focus of harsh sanctions. Incentives and supports for teacher development and retention are needed to provide the expertise and stability that underperforming schools require to improve.

State education funding formulas need to be assessed and adjusted to provide equity to ensure that low-income students in disenfranchised communities are afforded the same opportunities and experiences as their more affluent counterparts. Even with Title I funding most low-performing schools do not have access to the resources required to adequately provide students with the educational experiences that will move them to proficiency by 2014.

The parent engagement provisions under NCLB are strong when implemented in good faith. The law provides parent notification in a uniform and timely manner, in a language that parents can understand "to the extent practical." Schools and districts must be encouraged to address the challenge of communicating with all parents in a way that engages them more meaningfully. It is critical that information and achievement data be shared in ways that are understandable for parents allowing them to be engaged in the process and make informed decisions regarding their children's education.

The process for determining AYP given the high stakes of the punitive sanctions is flawed. There must be a balance in achieving accountability for the continuous progress of all subgroups that acknowledges the challenges of educating more diverse populations in Title I schools.

From a parent perspective, the bottom line is equitable access to educational opportunities that lead to successful outcomes for all children. Making school and district achievement data public has promoted dialogue and engagement of parents and the broader community in the improvement of schools. While NCLB provides a framework for standards and accountability with the goal of equalizing educational opportunities and outcomes for all students, current implementation strategies are still leaving children behind.

Footnotes