

Forum on Educational Accountability

www.edaccountability.org

December 19, 2007

Re: Changing the Education Debate in 2008

Dear Presidential Candidate:

Most recently authorized as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is slated for congressional reauthorization in 2007. However, the reauthorization process has stalled, at least temporarily, due to widespread criticism of the law from across the political spectrum.

Because the future of the federal role in school reform will be debated and decided when Congress resumes consideration of the reauthorization of ESEA, as a presidential candidate your campaign now has a unique opportunity to reframe that debate. We offer the recommendations of the Forum on Educational Accountability (FEA) for your consideration and would welcome the opportunity to meet with you or your staff to explore how these ideas might be integrated into your education platform.

The Forum on Educational Accountability is a working group of the 141 national education, civil rights, religious, disability, parent, civic and labor organizations that have signed the *Joint Organizational Statement on No Child Left Behind Act.*** These organizations collectively represent more than 50 million Americans. The *Joint Statement* includes principles for a major overhaul of the ESEA and of portions of the Higher Education Act, aimed at accomplishing the goals of NCLB

FEA believes that the law's emphasis must 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. As highest priorities, FEA urges you to incorporate the following four points into your education platform:

- 1) shifting from a near-exclusive reliance on state standardized tests to multiple forms of local and state assessment, coupled with other indicators of school quality, that will provide detailed, useful and timely information to facilitate improved student learning;
- 2) requiring the highest poverty/lowest achieving Title I-funded schools to provide time for regular collaboration among staff members, individualized mentoring for teachers, experienced specialists to support teacher development, and staff training in how to engage families in their children's learning;
- 3) preparing principals to lead school improvement efforts; and,
- 4) providing family literacy and parenting skills programs, and adult mentoring for children whose parents are not available, and supporting stronger family involvement in school improvement efforts.

FEA strongly supports NCLB's basic goals: "ensur[ing] that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high quality education"; strong academic achievement for all students, while closing the achievement gaps between minority and disadvantaged children, students with disabilities, and English language learners, and their peers; enhancing the knowledge and skills of professional educators; and, ensuring that American schools have the capacity to provide a challenging curriculum to all students. Unfortunately, the law as it is currently written is *not* working effectively to achieve those goals.

For example, the Administration contends that recent tests by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) demonstrate that NCLB is succeeding. This assertion does not withstand analysis. NAEP results show that, since the passage of NCLB (2003-2007), the percentage of minority students achieving "proficiency" in reading -- the most fundamental of academic skill -- has remained essentially flat in both 4th and 8th grades. Math proficiency has increased only modestly. In fact, the rate of improvement has slowed since enactment of NCLB. At the rates attained under NCLB, rather than meeting the law's requirement that all K-12 students score "proficient" in reading and math by 2014, it would take 75 more years -- until 2082 -- to do so in math and 340 more years -- until 2347 -- in reading. That can hardly be considered success.

Why is NCLB not working? NCLB's central strategy -- pressuring schools to continually raise students' test scores or be subjected to escalating sanctions -- is fundamentally defective. This strategy assumes that schools already have the capacity, i.e., resources, knowledge and skills, to effectively educate all children at challenging levels or to make the necessary changes to do so, but that they are simply not trying hard enough. In reality, many schools currently lack such capacity, regardless of the amount of pressure exerted on them.

Since many schools do not have the capacity to accomplish NCLB's goals, many have chosen to concentrate their limited resources on avoiding sanctions for failing scores in reading and math. They have narrowed the curriculum, including spending less time on coursework in science, social studies and the arts, making the educational experience much less engaging and informative. Schools have focused on "drill and kill" test preparation and scripted programs, rather than teaching high level analysis and problem-solving, thereby denying students the critical reasoning skills they will need to be competitive in the 21st century. In some instances, schools have also decreased attention paid to children who are well below or above "proficiency," while focusing on students who need just a little extra help to meet proficiency, and have pushed out very low scoring students.

State and local capacity to provide technical assistance to help schools improve must be significantly enhanced. School districts and states need to intervene when schools fail over a reasonable period of time to implement systemic changes or to show a positive trend in learning outcomes. In addition, the federal government needs to underwrite substantially the costs of the new improvement efforts, as well as fully fund Title I.

We have enclosed: a copy of the *Joint Statement*, with a list of signers; a one-page summary of key legislative changes for the ESEA reauthorization; and a chart comparing FEA's proposed changes with the current law. In addition, FEA has prepared detailed legislative

recommendations, which are available at our website, www.edaccountability.org, along with the *Joint Statement* and other materials.

We very much hope that you or your staff will be able to meet with FEA to explore these matters. We look forward to that dialogue and hope that these proposals will serve to inform and enhance the national education debate.

Sincerely yours,

Monty Neill, Ed.D., Chair
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*All *Joint Statement* signers agree to the goals of the *Joint Statement* and seek to implement its recommendations. Additional statements made by FEA reflect this commitment, but may not reflect all individual positions taken by signatories.