

“What’s Wrong with NCLB and What Should Replace It?”*

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Introduction

Good afternoon! I very much appreciate SOS inviting me and am glad to be with you.

Currently, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization process is stymied between the Senate and the House on Capitol Hill. Waivers are only a temporary alternative to NCLB and for those states that get them. Thus, we believe that this is an opportune time to look at what’s wrong with NCLB and what should replace it.

Following up what Vicki Young was describing as the historical background to NCLB, let me explain why I see NCLB as the “federalization” of the states’ testing and accountability movement. The implicit strategy of that movement was that the best way to increase student learning was to pressure the students to do better - with sanctions, especially loss of high school graduation, if they did not pass the state test. What NCLB did was to take the strategy of “tests and sanctions” to a new level by applying the sanctions for low test scores against the schools, rather than against students, as a condition for schools receiving federal Title I funds under ESEA. So, NCLB adopted the states’ basic punitive strategy for educational accountability, but applied it in a different way, i.e., NCLB “federalized” the states’ high-stakes testing accountability movement.

I. The Key Elements of NCLB

You’re probably familiar with the key elements of NCLB:

A) Testing is mandated every grade 3-8 and once in high school, in reading and math, with scores disaggregated for subgroups of low income, minority, students with disabilities and English language learners;

B) Schools must continually increase the percentage of students who score “proficient” on state tests from 2002-2014, called “Adequate Yearly Progress” (“AYP”), so that by 2014 virtually 100% of students must be “proficient;”

C) If schools do not satisfy the percentage goals for Annual Measurable Objectives for two years in a row, or more, Title I-funded schools are subjected to escalating sanctions. These sanctions include

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replacement of teachers, principals or curriculum. They culminate in fundamental changes in governance, including conversion to charter schools or other private management, replacement of most or all staff, and state takeovers.

II. Why NCLB Hasn't Succeeded in Dramatically Improving Student Learning - NCLB's False Assumptions

A good way to get a handle on this is to look at the assumptions on which NCLB's school improvement and accountability strategy is based. We're going to rely heavily on three documents.

The first document is a full page ad in Capitol Hill's *Roll Call* newspaper, which Citizens for Effective Schools (CES) placed in 2007. www.citizenseffectiveschools.org/rollcall2.pdf. At the outset, it's striking that NCLB repeatedly demands that failing schools must use "strategies based on scientifically based research." But, in fact, the key strategy embodied in NCLB - "Adequate Yearly Progress" - is patently unscientific! There's no scientific evidence that mandating continual increases in the percentages of students becoming academically proficient to reach 100%, at pain of sanctions, will dramatically increase student learning.

This whole strategy is fundamentally premised on a three-step assumption: i) principals and teachers in low-achieving schools already have the knowledge and skills, i.e., the "capacity", to be effective in educating all students, especially the disadvantaged, to a high level; ii) the staff are just not trying hard enough; and iii) pressure will induce them to make the necessary changes.

But this is not the case. While there are typically some outstanding individual teachers, even in low-achieving schools, these schools are widely lacking in the knowledge and skills needed for the whole schools to be effective. Their staffs currently do not have the capacity to turn these schools around.

And the falseness of the premise that a tests and sanctions, pressure-driven strategy will dramatically improve student learning is proven by experience. Instead of raising all children to "proficiency" in reading and math, during NCLB, the percentage of students "proficient" on the National Assessment of Educational Progress ("NAEP") has been essentially flat in reading, with only a modest increase in math. Nationwide, in 2011, about 66% of our public school students were below "proficiency" in reading and 62% below in math, as measured by NAEP. And the number of schools violating AYP has continually increased every year. In 2011, the percentages of schools violating AYP reached as high as 89% in Florida, 87% in New Mexico, 76% in South Carolina and 72% in New Hampshire.

III. Harms Caused by NCLB

Since the low-achieving schools do not currently have the knowledge and skills to greatly increase students' learning, they respond as human beings predictably do to try to avoid being sanctioned when they're not able to meet new demands directly: they manipulate whatever they can control to try to avoid the sanctions. Because NCLB relies on pressure and sanctions as its central strategy, and its assumption of school capacity is false, NCLB has produced harmful manipulations, not only in teaching, but also in setting standards and reporting test results.

Harms NCLB has caused in teaching include: 1) “narrowing the curriculum” to concentrate on reading and math, thereby severely reducing social studies, history, music, arts and other necessary courses, sometimes including physical education; 2) “teaching to the test” through spending huge amounts of time in preparing students to take standardized tests and rote memorization, instead of teaching the necessary higher level thinking skills and understanding; and 3) concentrating teaching on those students close to “proficiency,” at the expense of those students at the lowest end.

In addition, NCLB has caused states to lower their standards of “proficiency” and postpone when standards are to be met. Moreover, NCLB has caused multiple forms of cheating by schools and districts, most dramatically revealed in Atlanta and Washington, D.C. And these harms are happening all across the country.

IV. What Improvement Strategy Should Be Adopted Instead? Implement the “Common Elements of Successful School Turnarounds”

Since NCLB’s “test and sanctions” improvement strategy is a disaster, do we know what *does* need to be done to transform low-achieving schools? The answer is emphatically: “Yes”! We already know a great deal. There are “common elements of successful school turnarounds” and common practices within each of the elements. That is, the common elements and practices are what low-achieving schools “do” to turn themselves around.

These elements and practices enable the schools to increase their own knowledge and skills, their own human capacity. Implementing these crucial practices is what genuine “school reform” should be about - not “tests and sanctions,” but helping low-achieving schools do what works to improve themselves and students’ learning.

The common elements and practices are described in a far-reaching paper, “Common Elements of Successful School Turnarounds: Research and Experience,” G. Ratner with M. Neill, (May 13, 2010), <http://www.citizenseffectiveschools.org/successfulschoolturnarounds.pdf> . This paper was written at the invitation of a then staff member of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education & Labor to help prepare the Committee for an upcoming hearing in May 2010, “Research & Best Practices on Successful School Turnaround.” (The “Common Elements” paper was distributed to the House members prior to the hearing and to staff of the Senate education committee as well.)

The paper draws heavily on a path-breaking book by Anthony Bryk and others at the University of Chicago - Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago (2010). (This is believed to be the most intensive and extensive research ever done to identify the factors responsible for school improvement.) One caveat: the book makes clear that a school cannot pick and choose among the elements: you must do all the elements together, or vastly decrease the possibility of success.

In thinking about what it takes to transform a low-achieving school, several factors need to be recognized. A school is a complex organism, typically with hundreds or thousands of stakeholders - principal, teachers, other staff, students, parents and involved community members. These people extensively interact with, and influence, each other. To greatly raise the quality of education a low-

achieving school provides requires changing the expectations, beliefs and practices of the many different stakeholders collectively.

To create such transformation, someone needs to: have a vision of what the school would look like if it were effective; take the lead in bringing stakeholders together to discuss, develop and buy into a new vision; and then lead the complex process of making the necessary changes over multiple years. Typically that person is the principal. So, the first “common element” is *leadership*.

Experience and research has shown that a skilled, strong and committed leader is necessary to act as the “catalyst for change.” Unfortunately, far too few principals currently have the requisite knowledge and skills to perform this difficult role. Further, even a skilled principal cannot do it alone. Leadership authority and responsibility must be distributed and shared with other key teachers, administrators, staff, parents and community members to induce all the stakeholders to work together to make the necessary changes.

Second, to greatly improve students’ learning, fundamental improvements must be made in what happens in the classroom: in teaching. So, the second common element is *instructional improvement*. Schools that successfully turn around focus on breaking down the traditional isolation of teachers in their classrooms. Instead, these schools induce the teachers to work together on such things as analyzing students’ work, developing lesson plans, and aligning the curriculum. In addition to providing for such peer collaboration, these schools provide mentoring or coaching by accomplished teachers to help struggling teachers, whether new or experienced, gain the knowledge and skills they need to be effective teachers.

To improve instruction, the schools implement a cohesive school-wide system of effective teaching practices that engage students in higher-order thinking. The schools move away from traditional reliance on teacher-centered lecturing to teachers facilitating class discussions and other student-centered projects, such as writing essays and making class presentations. And they equip teachers to effectively assess students’ work and adjust their teaching to address what students do not understand. Where, after intensive assistance, individual teachers are not willing or able to improve and are persistently ineffective, they must be removed.

Third, students can only learn what they are taught. For students to learn problem-solving and high-level thinking and communications skills, they must be taught a curriculum at that level. Thus, schools that successfully turn around share a third common element: an *intellectually challenging, rich, culturally relevant and aligned curriculum*. Such a curriculum includes art, music, physical fitness, history and science, as well as reading and math. It is relevant to the children’s culture and experiences and engages their interests. And it is coordinated as to degree of difficulty and content, both within grades and between grades, so that children learn a coherent body of knowledge and skills that becomes progressively more challenging the higher the grade level.

Fourth, students behave in response to their schools’ expectations of them. Schools that turn around establish a school-wide climate of high expectations for all students’ academic success and proper behavior. These schools’ teachers take shared responsibility that all their students will learn. And they

continually upgrade their own instructional capability and provide a mutually supportive and collegial atmosphere. Establishing such a *school climate* is the fourth common element.

Fifth, and finally, to be most effective, school staff cannot do it on their own. They need *parent and community involvement and support* - the fifth common element. Schools that turn around reach out to parents to develop a trusting relationship with them. On the academic side, these schools promote programs to strengthen parents' capacity to support their children's learning at home, such as those enhancing parenting skills, and reach out to engage parents to become involved with, and in, the schools. And they actively enlist community members as volunteer tutors, adult mentors for at-risk students, and providers of after-school enrichment programs.

Further, these schools recognize that, to succeed, they must also be able to address non-academic obstacles to learning. Accordingly, they help students overcome behavioral, emotional, physical and other non-academic obstacles to learning through their own staff of pupil services professionals, such as school social workers, counselors and nurses. And, importantly, they reach beyond the school to closely coordinate provision of services with community health, recreation, youth, police and other local institutions to overcome student and family obstacles to students' learning.

Thus, while the people and details involved in transforming any low-achieving school may vary vastly from school to school, we already know a great deal about the basic elements of what needs to be done to turn around a low-achieving school. Moreover, we know specific concrete practices that work to implement each element.

V. How Can the "Common Elements" be Translated into Federal Policy?

As to what should replace NCLB, I believe the critical question is: what federal policies and funding would best enable the public schools to develop the human capacity - the knowledge and skills - to be able to successfully perform the complex and difficult task of transforming low-achieving schools into good schools? That is, what federal policies and funding would most effectively guide the states, districts and schools to implement the "common elements" and help them do so?

A third document deals with exactly that question: "Key Changes Required in ESEA/NCLB," www.citizenseffectiveschools.org/_____.pdf . For this workshop, "Key Changes" is probably the most important of the three documents because it describes specific policies that should replace NCLB. Let's look at each of these eight policies in turn.

- **Adequate Yearly Progress and Escalating Sanctions.** As to the first legislative policy recommendation - abolishing AYP, 2014 and the escalating sanctions in NCLB - that is straightforward. This is the core of NCLB's ineffective and harmful high-stakes testing strategy for school improvement and accountability, and therefore must be replaced.
- **Common Elements/Practices as Central Strategy.** Instead, Congress needs to direct the attention of the States, districts, schools, media and the public to the importance of

doing what works: implementing the common elements and practices of success. This would include having ESEA make statutory findings as to what the common elements and practices of success are and provide that having schools adopt the common elements and practices is the central school improvement goal and strategy of Title I.

- **School Leadership Academy.** As we've seen, it's essential to have a skilled, strong and committed leader as a "catalyst," and continuing guide, for the turnaround process. However, there are vastly too few principals who already have the requisite turnaround knowledge and skills to serve the thousands of low-achieving schools that need them.

Addressing such a pressing national need for specialized leadership training is a traditional and appropriate role for the federal government - it should establish a national academy to train turnaround leaders for our lowest-achieving schools. This school leadership academy would be analogous to, but of smaller scale and of shorter duration than, the national military academies to train military leaders. It would pull together the most successful turnaround leaders, academics who study turnarounds and other knowledgeable stakeholders, to develop a state-of-the-art program for training experienced principals as turnaround leaders. Then, it would train committed principals in an intensive training program, cooperate with states and school districts to place them in low-achieving schools which wanted them, provide ongoing mentoring for the principals, and bring the program to scale through establishing regional centers.

CES initiated and began advocating this idea for a special federal program to train experienced principals as school turnaround leaders in 2007. The idea was largely adopted by U.S. Senator Michael Bennet (Colo.), and others on Capitol Hill, in 2010. Fortunately, the basic components of this idea were accepted by the bi-partisan Senate education committee and incorporated in its Elementary & Secondary Education Reauthorization Act of 2011, S. 3578, 112th Cong. (Report No. 112-221), Title II, Part A, Subpart 5, Sect. 2151, "Principal Recruitment and Training Grant Program," pp. 319-335, www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-112s3578pcs/pdf/BILLS-112s3578pcs.pdf. Now, the school leadership training program needs to be retained by the full Congress when it finalizes the ESEA reauthorization.

- **Teacher Preparation.** Teachers are the most important in-school factor affecting the level of student learning. Yet, a vast number of our schools of education have not been doing a good job of preparing teachers to effectively teach a high level curriculum,

especially to students in high-poverty schools. At the same time, some schools of education are repeatedly successful at preparing teachers well; these schools are distinguished, most significantly, by having at least a one year, intensively supervised clinical placement, integrating methods and theory courses into the candidates' teaching practice.

Fortunately, Congress required schools of education to provide such a one year intensive clinical program as a condition of its Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) grants program in the 2008 Higher Education Act.. (This idea of including a requirement for a one year intensive clinical program in TQP was initiated and advocated by the Forum on Educational Accountability (FEA), an alliance of national organizations in which CES has been very active generally, and took a leading role on this issue.) Congress has provided more than \$140 million funding for TQP, including the one year clinical requirement, from FY 2008 - 2012. But, in its FY 2013 budget, the Obama administration is proposing to stop funding TQP; this would automatically eliminate the requirement for future grantees to provide intensive one year clinical programs. Instead, the budget proposes to create a new initiative that would give states and localities discretion to use grant funds for a broad variety of teacher and principal improvement-related activities.

To build the capacity of our new teachers to effectively teach, especially in low-achieving schools, it's essential that schools of education dramatically change their teacher preparation programs toward longer and more intensive, supervised clinical experience. To continue to induce these schools to do so, it's essential that Congress retain the TQP program or a similar program to continue to provide grant funds specifically for this purpose.

- **Support for Parents.** The extent of parent expectations and support for student learning at home has a profound effect on how much their children learn. Today, many parents, especially of children in high-poverty schools, lack the knowledge and skills to effectively support their children's academic learning at home. Thus, to build the parents' capacity to support their children's learning, especially for the lowest achieving students, it's vital that Congress fund programs to teach parenting skills, as well as intensive adult mentoring programs for such children without parents available. As FEA agrees, an amount equal to 5% of Title I funding should be allocated for this purpose and to increase parental involvement in schools.

- **Common Elements in Lowest-Achieving Schools: Implementation & Reporting.**

Whereas NCLB subjected to escalating sanctions all Title I-funded schools that repeatedly failed to make AYP, in its Race To The Top (RTTT) program and Blueprint for ESEA, the Administration focused on the bottom 5% of schools for intensive, mandatory interventions. RTTT requires, without supporting evidence and often in the face of contrary evidence, see G. Ratner, "Where's the Evidence? Serious Inadequacy of 'Race To The Top' School Turnaround Models," (May 24, 2011), www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-m-ratner/wheres-the-evidence-serio_b_865955.html , that the lowest-achieving schools engage in one of four so-called "turnaround models." (These unproven models unjustifiably and harmfully compel firing principals, staff, converting to charters/other private management or closing schools.)

Instead of requiring the lowest-achieving schools to implement such unproven and harmful models, the schools should be required to implement the common elements and practices of successful turnarounds - what *has* been shown to work. See G. Ratner, "How to Overhaul NCLB to Help Schools Improve: Implement Common Elements of Success" (March 23, 2011), www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-m-ratner/how-to-overhaul-nclb-to-h_b_839130.html . Further, ESEA should require such schools to implement a sound turnaround process. This would include establishing a new vision, evaluating a school's needs, collaborative planning with representatives of all stakeholder groups, and full implementation, expected to take about five years. This process should follow the steps described in FEA's paper, "A Research - and Experience - Based Turnaround Process," (June 17, 2010), www.edaccountability.org/pdf/FEA-TurnaroundStatementJune2010.pdf

Measures of School Improvement. Nor should ESEA continue to require the approximately bottom 5% of schools to report only on test scores and other measures of student performance, such as graduation rates. Since we know people focus on what gets measured, ESEA should also require these schools to publicly report on statistical measures of how much they're implementing key common practices. For example, such measures could include the average time /week teachers spend in peer collaboration. This would help to induce these schools to concentrate on making key systemic improvements - not just raising test scores as an end in itself. Further, it would give the public valuable information about whether, and, if so, to what extent, the schools were actually making important systemic improvements. And it would assist states determine where their own technical assistance was needed and when, if necessary, to intervene more aggressively.

School Quality Reviews. In addition, Congress should authorize and fund, on a pilot basis, a program to give the lowest-achieving schools an informed, independent and comprehensive assessment of their needs and recommendations for improvement, consistent with the common elements. Such assessments should be done by state-level school quality review teams - specially trained teams of accomplished educators and lay members that would conduct, and publicly report on, in-depth, on-site observations and make improvement recommendations. Preferably, such independent evaluations should be done both before the turnaround process has begun and periodically during the process itself, so that the schools have an independent check on how they're doing and guide for continuing to improve. See "States Helping Schools Improve Act: One Page Summary," www.citizenseffectiveschools.org/_____.pdf; "Proposed Outline for 'States Helping Schools Improve Act,'" www.citizenseffectiveschools.org/_____.pdf.

- **Common Elements in Other Title I Schools.** All other Title I-funded schools that are not required to implement the common elements and given special federal funding to do so, should be required to publicly report the same school improvement metrics as the approximately bottom 5%. While these schools may not have sufficient resources to implement all the common practices, being required to report on whether they're making progress in these areas would also be a major incentive for them: to focus on implementing key school improvement strategies, rather than raising test scores *per se*.
- **State Capacity.** It is widely agreed that the United States has a national interest in the quality and effectiveness of its public schools. Yet, in our federal system, public education has historically been chiefly a state and local responsibility. Accepting this division of responsibility, Congress has long recognized that it has an important role in assisting states and localities to improve schooling, especially for disadvantaged children.

Today, even the states acknowledge that they do not currently have the human capacity to effectively assist the huge number of schools that need major help to turn around, nor to effectively take over and transform the lowest-achieving schools with the deepest and most prolonged needs. Given this serious deficiency, as FEA has also recognized, it is essential that Congress allocate an amount equal to 2% of Title I funding to states to build their knowledge and skills to help schools and districts implement improvements.

Conclusion

I hope this presentation has shed some light on why NCLB's high-stakes testing strategy has failed and why federal strategy needs to focus instead on helping low-achieving schools improve by adopting the common elements and practices of successful school turnarounds. Moreover, I hope that this provides a roadmap: concrete ESEA policies and funding Congress needs to enact to promote this critical goal. Thank you.

