

The NEA Is Fighting For NCLB Overhaul

Instead of calling for the repeal of NCLB, the NEA wants to use its reauthorization as an opportunity to finally remedy the persistent problem of inequity.



BY JOEL PACKER

A COMPLEX federal law that has been on the books since 1965 — upon which are based numerous beneficial programs that provide funding to our nation's education system through a range of complex mechanisms — cannot easily be cast aside as the Educator Roundtable recommends.

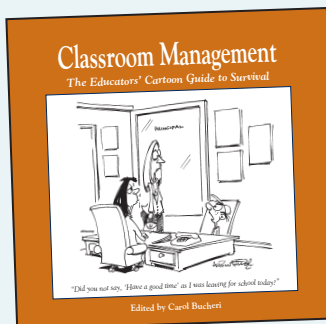
The decision by the NEA not to support the repeal of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is made on a practical and realistic basis. Repealing laws is a lot more complex and involved than the Educator Roundtable implies. As almost 10,000 NEA members decided at our 2006 representative assembly, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the latest version of which is NCLB, does not warrant repeal. The law re-

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quires significant attention to its shortcomings in order to make it work on the ground — in America's classrooms.

What the Educator Roundtable asserts is that NCLB is not working, and the NEA agrees wholeheartedly. Just because the NEA isn't advocating the impractical approach of repealing NCLB does not mean that we are standing on the sidelines. Indeed, I believe that the NEA and the Educator Roundtable want the same things from the federal government: a reduction in NCLB's single-minded, test-based, label-and-punish accountability system, coupled with the provision of funding for proven programs that make a difference, such as smaller class sizes and high-quality pre-K programs.

The NEA is aggressively addressing the problems with the law in the way our members expect us to do. We are using our knowledge of the legislative process and our members' grassroots influence and political strength to advocate before Congress the changes that are need-



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ed to make federal education policy work the right way: to help students and educators improve teaching and learning.

To this end, it has been the NEA's hope that this reauthorization of ESEA would finally offer an opportunity for a renewed, broad, and bold national discussion of how to improve and support public education. Simply put, this reauthorization is and should be about more than tweaking the NCLB portions of ESEA. It should be a comprehensive examination of whether federal policies follow what the research says about how children learn and what makes a successful school.

This is the opportunity for a major course correction.

Teachers care deeply about this process and its outcome because they will have lived for more than five years under a system that was crafted without enough of their input, that has proven to be unworkable, and that in too many cases has had negative, unintended consequences. They are counting on a thoughtful process this time and a bill that does not merely recognize the technical flaws of the statute but also addresses the conceptual and philosophical flaws of the entire current test-label-punish theory of education reform. To that end, the NEA is at the table, scrutinizing every pro-

posal being put forward by Congress to ensure that the reauthorization does not continue a one-size-fits-all prescription from the federal level.

Again, for us this reauthorization is about more than fixing the AYP (adequate yearly progress) requirements and other provisions of NCLB that have been problematic; it's about recognizing that providing a high-quality education to every student takes more than a measurement system. It's about sending a message to students that they are more than just test scores. We should care at least as much about whether a child graduates after receiving a comprehensive, high-quality education as we do about how he or she performs on a standardized test. We should be sending a message to educators that the art and practice of teaching must be about more than test preparation. If the only measures we really value are test scores, rather than some of the other indicators of a rich and challenging educational experience, then we will have missed the mark again about adequately serving and educating all children. We will have avoided yet again the more difficult discussion of what services *and* outcomes are important if all stakeholders are to be held accountable.

We should all keep in mind that the original purpose of ESEA was to attempt to remedy disparities in educational opportunities and resources for poor children. To that end, we have been hopeful that this reauthorization would finally address the fundamental truth that real educational accountability is about the shared responsibility to remedy intolerable opportunity gaps.

If one of our goals is to remedy achievement and skills gaps that exist between different groups of students in this country, we cannot do so without also addressing existing opportunity gaps. Why is it that 50 years after *Brown v. Board of Education* and despite 30 years of litigation in 44 states to address equitable and adequate educational opportunities and resources, policy makers at all levels still seem unwilling to do anything but point fingers and avoid the responsibility of tackling this insidious problem of equity, which continues to plague too many communities and students? This is about more than disparities in per-pupil spending across states, within states, and within districts; it's about disparities in the basics of a student's life — disparities in the learning environments that students experience, disparities in the age of textbooks and materials, disparities in course offerings, disparities in access to after-school help and enrichment, and, yes, disparities in access to qualified, caring educators.

Given the fact that so many Title I students are not fully served because of current funding levels and

haven't been well served historically, we remain hopeful that this reauthorization will mark an opportunity to address these inequities from a policy standpoint, not just an appropriations standpoint. It's time for stakeholders to stop pointing fingers at one another about whose responsibility it is to address opportunity gaps. It's time to force a dialogue about how we all share in that responsibility.

As our members asked us to do, we are urging Congress to focus on the elements of our "Positive Agenda" that would truly make a difference in student learning and success. These include early childhood education, class-size reduction, safe and modern facilities, and a real attempt to infuse 21st-century skills and innovation into our schools to ensure that public education in this country is relevant and engaging to students in the changing, interdependent world. There should be significant discussion of the fact that the conditions for teaching and learning constitute one of two main factors (low salaries being the other) that continue to create the problems of teacher recruitment and retention, particularly in hard-to-staff schools.

We won't stand for more mandates or prescriptive requirements, for these will only detract from the essential elements of public education: good teaching and learning. We know that more mandates aren't magically going to make kids read or perform math at grade level. Tweaks to the measurement system won't ensure that students perform any better on assessments. Good teaching practice, involved parents and communities, and engaged students will do that.

The NEA is open to innovative ideas that help students learn and that strengthen the teaching profession, but we will not support more federal mandates that tie educators' hands and disrespect their judgment in the classroom. We advocate for strategies to help close the gaps in student learning and attract and retain high-quality teachers in our public schools, but we will oppose efforts to siphon scarce funds away from proven strategies in favor of experimental and divisive initiatives. For example, we believe improved and competitive starting salaries — including a \$40,000 minimum salary for all teachers — and incentives to attract qualified teachers to hard-to-staff schools are better mechanisms for retaining high-quality teachers than schemes that would base teacher bonuses in whole or in part on student test scores.

As NEA President Reg Weaver said in his recent testimony before the House Education and Labor Committee, we must "emphasize that our members are not afraid of those who hurl accusations about what's in their hearts every day when they teach and care for our

nation's students. Our members are united and will stand firm in our advocacy for a bill that supports good teaching and learning and takes far greater steps toward creating great public schools for every child."

Make no mistake: NEA and its 3.2 million members are demanding an overhaul of the current law that must drastically improve students' and teachers' experiences in the classroom. We will not accept or support a bill that only offers tweaks and superficial changes, even if we lose some friends and allies in the process.

On a final note, we will not apologize for our decision to step up to the plate and actually do the hard and painstaking work of directly influencing the policy makers who will write the next version of ESEA. Anyone who believes students should have access to great public schools would do the same. The NEA knows that our students and members deserve no less. **K**

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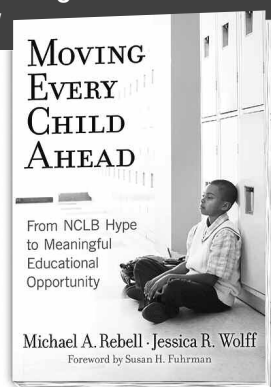
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File Name and Bibliographic Information

k0712pa1.pdf

Joel Packer, The NEA Is Fighting For NCLB Overhaul, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 89, No. 04, December 2007, pp. 275-277.

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