

Testimony of Elizabeth W. Schott before the  
Committee on Education and Labor at the  
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education hearing entitled  
*Improving the No Child Left Behind Act's Accountability System*  
San Rafael, CA  
April 27, 2007

Thank you Chairman Kildee, Representative Woolsey, and Members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify today about the Accountability System of the No Child Left Behind Act and how it might be improved in its reauthorization.

As a third year principal of McDowell Elementary School in Petaluma, California, about 30 miles north of here, I hope to provide you with a representative view of the No Child Left Behind Act's effect on schools like ours.

McDowell Elementary School is home to 340 students; roughly 71% of our students are English Learners and 73% of our students receive free or reduced price meals. These percentages exceed the district's and county's levels by a minimum of 35-40%. A small number of schools in our county are in a demographically comparable situation, and one other elementary school in the Petaluma City School District has a similar profile to McDowell's. Most of these schools that are not in Petaluma, however, benefit from being in districts that qualify for Reading First funding, which is helping them make a real difference in their students' achievement. Petaluma City Schools does not qualify for a Reading First Grant due to its relatively isolated pockets of high risk students. McDowell and schools like ours, therefore, fall between the cracks in terms of being able to access resources available to more homogeneous districts.

Before McDowell entered Program Improvement Year II in the fall of 2005, I regret to say that the mindset of attributing our poor results to the test, and to the learner, and to the changing families, and to the fact that we have children just 12% of their time between Kindergarten and 12<sup>th</sup> grade, still had a stranglehold on the staff at McDowell. Sadly, I include myself in that category. What has been described as the "soft bigotry of low expectations" was our way of thinking, although I would characterize it more as a perpetuation of the "self-esteem before anything else" thinking of the 90s. We had a bunch of kids in our school who couldn't read proficiently, but they didn't necessarily *feel bad* about it, and that was what was important. There was also a measure of thinking "this too shall pass", whereby teachers felt they could just wait out NCLB, and continue doing what they'd always done which "the test" just wasn't capable of measuring the success of.

Being labeled Program Improvement Year II was the slap in the face our school needed to begin serious work on changing our practices in curriculum and instruction. Our staff realized that continuing to do things the same way -- only harder -- was not making our students successful by a measure that, while still not embraced by all, clearly wasn't going anywhere. It was then, and still is, my philosophy that we cannot wait for people's minds to change when something as critical as student success is at stake. We must change behavior first and the subsequent increased successes will cause minds to follow.

Foreseeing that Year III of Program Improvement was going to bring mandated changes in curriculum and instruction should we continue not to meet our targets, our staff decided to take control of the process of making those changes. Upon being shown proof that schools with even more challenging populations than ours were bringing more than twice the number of students to proficiency that we were, our teachers said, "If they can do it, so can we." So we initiated a reform of our reading program in November of 2005 that mimics Reading First as closely as our site funding (with district contributions) allows. With the help of a consultant who donated much of her time in that first year, we received training in research-based methods for delivering the adopted series, established an assessment calendar that tracked student progress at minimum three times per year, and began regrouping for reading instruction so as to better target instruction.

We did not, however, make our AYP targets for certain subgroups in last Spring's testing, and so we are in Program Improvement Year III. When we met early this year with our external consultant from the county as required, we outlined the changes we made last year, and showed her the progress we were seeing on our assessments. We have been allowed to continue with the reforms as designed last year. This year's Kindergarten class will be the first to have received the direct, explicit instruction in the fundamentals of reading as outlined in the National Reading Panel's 2000 publication *Teaching Children to Read*, for an entire school year. Since second graders will no longer be tested after this year, it will be three years before the fruits of our labor will show up in this Kindergarten class's test results. In the meantime, we hold on to the fact that schools receiving Title I High Achieving Schools awards in our state who are in Reading First districts are predominantly in their third, fourth or fifth year of Reading First. We know that we must stay the course in order to realize lasting gains for our students.

Time, however, is not on our side. We could have, and *should* have, taken the radical steps of last year at least two years sooner. But now we are up against it, probably making most of our AYP targets this year, thereby halting the decline into Year IV of Program Improvement. But we may fail to meet the 2008 target increase, and the district would have the right to:

- Reopen the school as a charter
- Replace all or most staff including the principal
- Contract with an outside entity to manage the school
- Recommend State takeover
- Undertake any other major restructuring

It is the second of these options that is the most disturbing, and one of the areas where the accountability structure of No Child Left Behind may have room for improvement.

In the case of Petaluma, which I doubt is unique in California or the country, McDowell is the only school that has undertaken the training and instructional reform described earlier in this testimony. We are implementing research-based reading strategies that are known to be effective with students like ours, and we are seeing progress. No other school in the district has done anything like this. And, as Garden Grove Superintendent Laura Schwalm says, now "...our teachers believe the kids can do it." If there were to be a wholesale replacement of staff and administration at our site, students would be being instructed by teachers who were actually less qualified, and less well trained, than those already in place. Additionally, the teachers at McDowell want to make this reform work for our students. They are deeply committed to

turning the tide at our school, while other teachers throughout the district have no interest in teaching our students. Such an intervention by the district would be disastrous for our students.

An accountability structure that takes into account the progress and changes being made at a school, with benchmarks that demand a set amount of growth each year, more like the Title III accountability model, would be far more motivational and statistically reasonable than the current absolutist scheme. The “100% proficiency” goal has undermined the credibility of NCLB’s accountability system from the start. Starting from where you are and establishing growth targets that are psychometrically attainable and that end at a rational proficiency threshold is worth the committee’s careful consideration.

This factoring in of the time it takes to accomplish any major reform needs also to be applied to a school’s English Learner population. The current accountability model in NCLB doesn’t seem to take into account the research on the time it takes to learn a second language, particularly the academic vocabulary of that language. Schools with English Learner subgroups are being held to a double whammy of a standard due to the neighborhoods they serve. I’m not a lobbyist for Title III, but again, their level of accountability – the district – effectively neutralizes the location factor of a school and holds the district accountable for making sure all students in the district are learning. Best practices research tells us that reform at the school level is only partially effective, and that true change happens when there is articulation of curriculum, instruction, professional development and resource allocation originating at the district level.

District level accountability for Special Education programs housed at individual schools would also be a more fair way to assess the effectiveness of such classes. We have a Special Day class at my school, which currently houses Kindergarten through second grade students. This year, I don’t expect Students with Disabilities to even constitute a significant subgroup at my school. Last year, however, there was another Special Day Class at my site, one with third through sixth graders in it. Up until last year, districts were allowed to report site-based programs as “district programs,” aggregating accountability at the district level. Last year, however, the reporting rules changed, and individual sites were held accountable for their Day Class results, even if many of the students were not from one’s own attendance area. This, and the school choice provision starting in Year I of Program Improvement, caused our district to move our intermediate Special Day Class to another site this year, one not in Program Improvement. This was a loss for our site in all ways *not* related to NCLB’s accountability system. We lost valued staff and students who were part of our family. Children who had always walked to school were now having to ride a bus across town to a school their parents had no idea even how to get to.

I understand that an extreme throwing down of the gauntlet is an effective way to begin a reform process. The first iteration of No Child Left Behind certainly has served its purpose of getting people’s attention and mandating that they attend to the foremost goal of schooling – student learning. The variability in how states have operationalized “proficiency”, however, needs to be addressed. It simply isn’t fair for some states to call grade level proficiency 85% correct, and others to call it something less. Additionally, the required growth targets and timeline needs to be restructured – but not abandoned! People are only human after all, and we will backslide into old practices that are bad for students if the bottoms of our feet aren’t kept a bit warm.

Furthermore, while I am not an expert on the issues surrounding students with disabilities, there seems to be something mean about the current law's dismissal of many such students' learning challenges in its assumption that they can attain proficiency at the same rate and level as typically learning students. I try to imagine what that must feel like to students and parents, and it seems unempathic at best. Yes, all students must show progress, but in the case of students with disabilities, this progress is outlined in and guaranteed by the IEP process.

This is but one example of where NCLB and IDEA clash to the detriment of students and schools. The other is in the arena of the modifications to the testing protocol written into students' IEPs. If those modifications are used during testing, the student isn't counted in one's participation rate, and is automatically given a performance rating of "Far Below Basic." Allowing NCLB to supersede IDEA is confusing to families and punitive to schools.

Another area that deserves serious reconsideration is Supplemental Educational Services. In our area, where several of the families have one car at the most, and parents aren't proficient English speakers, and home computers are the exception, we have one SES provider within walking distance of the school. Their level of service is disappointing, but they are the only game in town. Their tutors are not trained in Reading First methodology, and so one would have to question their effectiveness at supplementing classroom instruction for our struggling learners. The level of sophistication (and language) needed to access the online providers is beyond most parents, and my concern about our local provider is the same regarding the expertise of those on the other end of the modem.

The funding we receive as a schoolwide program of Title I is clearly circumscribed and monitored by the state, as well it should be. But SES doesn't seem to be so scrupulously tracked. The set aside for this consequence of being in Program Improvement costs our school's Title I budget approximately \$20,000 per year. At minimum, we will have to commit these dollars to an ineffective intervention for another two years. In total, that will represent nearly \$80,000 that could have been used to provide our school with a Reading Coach, the one piece of the Reading First model we have not yet found a way to fund.

In conclusion, I would like to talk about what motivates me as a principal to get out of Program Improvement, and to stop being affected by the consequence end of the NCLB accountability system. One of the first parent letters I wrote as the new principal of McDowell School in September of 2004 was the school choice letter. I found it deeply embarrassing to have to tell people that their child's school was inadequate, and that they had the right to go find a better education across the freeway. Paradoxically, since that time, our enrollment has increased steadily, with this year finding us the fastest growing school in the district. In certain populations, federal accountability measures aren't what matter most about their child's school. Apparently having a bilingual school secretary, many bilingual classified and certificated staff members, a free after school Boys & Girls club program (thanks to Prop 49), and being within walking distance of home all mitigate our poor showing on state testing.

Nevertheless, beyond my personal shame at having to facilitate transfers and see our name in the newspaper as an underperforming school, the scores told a far more somber story: we were failing to educate our students. I feel we have now effectively stopped the hemorrhaging and are

working diligently to sustain our progress. I find silver linings constantly to keep teachers motivated – pointing out that we moved from a Similar Schools ranking of one last year to two this year, for instance. There does loom, however, an impending sense of doom at my school about not being able to turn the ship fast enough, and travel far enough, to outrun the final sanctions of Program Improvement Years IV and V. A more progressive, psychometrically reasonable, growth-based model of accountability in the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind would go a long way toward guaranteeing that McDowell’s reform efforts are sustained and energized long enough to sweep up all of our students into a wave of success.