



*Great Public Schools for Every Child*

**STATEMENT OF**

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**ON BEHALF OF**

**THE NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION**

**BEFORE THE**

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD, ELEMENTARY AND  
SECONDARY EDUCATION**

**ON**

**LOCAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT**

**April 12, 2007**

Chairman Kildee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before the subcommittee today on these very important issues. I am honored to be able to represent the United Teachers of Flint, the Michigan Education Association, and the 3.2 million members of the National Education Association.

I am here today to share my views, based on my personal experiences, on the impact of No Child Left Behind on public schools. I am a proud product of the Michigan school system. I have an Associate's degree from Mott Community College in Flint, a Bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan at Flint, and a Masters degree from Central Michigan University. I taught elementary school for 15 years in Flint public schools and I currently serve as president of United Teachers of Flint. My daughter went to Flint public schools and my five-year-old grandchild will soon follow in her footsteps.

In my experience, educators enter the profession for two reasons—because we love children and we appreciate the importance of education in our society. We want all students to succeed. We show up at school every day to nurture children, to bring out their full potential, to be anchors in children's lives, and to help prepare them for the 21<sup>st</sup> century world that awaits them.

To that end, we view reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as an opportunity for a renewed national discussion about public education. You, as our elected officials, have an opportunity to elevate this dialogue to a new level, to be bold, to embrace not only the call for equity in American education, but the demand for innovation as well. We hope that this debate will ultimately unite the nation as we strive to fulfill the promise of public education to prepare every student for success in a diverse, inter-dependent world.

### **What Do We Want From Public Education and What Role Should the Federal Government Play in Achieving These Goals?**

Public education is the gateway to opportunity. All students have the human and civil right to a quality public education and a great public school that develops their potential, independence, and character. Public education is vital to building respect for the worth, dignity, and equality of every individual in our diverse society and is the cornerstone of our republic. Public education provides individuals with the skills to be involved, informed, and engaged in our representative democracy.

The expertise and judgment of education professionals are critical to student success. Partnerships with parents, families, communities, and other stakeholders are also essential to quality public education and student success. Individuals are strengthened when they work together for the common good. As education professionals, we improve both our professional status and the quality of public education when we unite and advocate collectively. We maintain the highest professional standards, and we expect the status, compensation, and respect due all professionals.

### **How Should We Use Accountability Systems to Remedy Educational Disparities?**

If we agree that public education serves multiple purposes, then we know there must be a richer accountability system with shared responsibility by stakeholders at all levels for appropriate

school accountability. Such an accountability system must marry not only accountability for achievement and learning by students, but also shared accountability to remedy other gaps in our education system and flaws in the current accountability model.

### Opportunity Gaps

Before I address achievement and skills gaps, I would like to take a moment to discuss the opportunity gaps that hinder so many of our nation's children. I see these gaps first hand every day in Flint.

Let me give you a picture of the challenges facing the Flint public schools as they work to provide students with the great public education they so richly deserve. Some 85 to 90 percent of students in Flint public schools qualify for free lunch. The Flint school district is financially strapped and is currently running a \$13 million deficit. Violence is an everyday concern in most of our schools. Our class sizes can average 35 to 38 students per class. In addition, we have a difficult time attracting and retaining teachers in our most needy schools. Given the choice, many of our young teachers choose to leave Flint as soon as an opportunity presents itself to pursue careers in less stressful environments or those with better compensation.

Like many urban and rural school districts, Flint schools have gaps in access to after school programs and extended learning time programs and curriculum gaps preventing students from accessing a rich and broad curriculum. For example, many of our schools do not have access to arts, advanced placement, or physical education courses, nor do they have access to innovative curricula such as information literacy, environmental education, and financial literacy.

We also have significant infrastructure and school environment gaps that hamper learning. A report released in May 2005 by the Citizens Research Council of Michigan and the Education Policy Center at Michigan State University, pegged the total need for repairing old buildings or constructing new ones at about \$8.7 billion. In Michigan, there are schools built at the turn of the 20th century and there are state-of-the-art facilities where any parents would be proud to send their children in the 21st century. In 2004, the Saline school district opened an \$89 million high school. The facility features 13 science classrooms/laboratories, a television studio, and mobile computer labs that can move from classroom to classroom. Students also enjoy access to two gyms, an eight-lane swimming pool, and other amenities for athletes. Meanwhile, students in Flint, Detroit, Benton Harbor, and many other communities can only imagine the kind of facilities that Saline students have.

We simply must address these opportunity gaps if we have any hope of tackling achievement and skills gaps.

### Achievement and Skills Gaps

While one of the primary purposes and goals of NCLB is to close achievement gaps, that has not been the outcome. My colleagues and I are not afraid of accountability. We simply do not see the current system as fair or effective. If the NCLB accountability system were applied to other professions, eventually lawyers would have to win every case and doctors would have to cure every patient. We need to take a hard look at the current law and design a common-sense system designed to raise student achievement and close achievement gaps.

Such a system must include the following elements:

### **Improved methods to assess student learning, including improving the quality of assessments and giving real meaning to NCLB's "multiple measures" requirement**

The term "achievement gaps" has become synonymous with differences in scores on standardized tests between groups of students. And, given the poor quality of tests across the country, those test scores reflect little more than a student's ability to regurgitate facts. If we are truly committed to preparing our children to compete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy and world, we need to develop and assess a broader set of knowledge and skills.

NEA has been engaged for the last four or five years in a collaborative effort with businesses and other education groups to attempt to define "21<sup>st</sup> century skills." The Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills has issued several reports along these lines as well as a set of principles for ESEA reauthorization (<http://www.nea.org/esea/21stcenturynclb.html>). These principles state in part: "Standardized achievement assessments alone do not generate evidence of the skill sets that the business and education communities believe are necessary to ensure success in the 21st century."

We believe we should employ multiple measures in assessing both individual student learning and overall school effectiveness in improving student learning. For example, we believe a richer more accurate system that a state should be permitted to design could include statewide assessment results at 50 percent, high school graduation rates at 25 percent, and one other factor, such as local assessments, at 25 percent. Multiple measures systems would provide the public with a more complete picture of their local schools and their states' ability to provide great public schools for every child.

Frank Burger, a high school teacher and NEA member from Grand Blanc, Michigan, tells NEA:

*"For the past few years, I have taught eighth grade science. Each year, I have to give a test that will measure how well our school is doing with respect to NCLB. It does not take into account the other factors that could tell how well a school is achieving. One problem is that high-stakes testing is not the only way to measure a school's success. The other problem is that it feels as if teachers are now teaching to the test so students can pass it. Many factors should be used to help students achieve, not just one test."*

### **Systemic supports for schools and individual supports and interventions for students**

An accountability system should ensure that all subgroups of students are being served in a manner that will eliminate disparities in educational outcomes. Yet, doing so must begin with an explicit understanding that every child is unique and that the entire system should be accountable for serving each individual child's needs. The tension between approaches is no better illustrated than by comparing NCLB accountability, which is focused on student subgroup outcomes, to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which uses an individualized approach to accountability through Individualized Education Plans.

Consider the story told by Vella Trader, an elementary school teacher and NEA member from Delton, Michigan:

*"I had a third grade student who was far below grade level in all subjects. She needed extra help in order to have any chance of keeping up with our class.... I placed this child on [the Reading Recovery teacher's] list, but the teacher said that she could not accept this child into*

*her reading class because this student was so far behind that she didn't have a chance of catching up enough to pass any standardized test.... The goal was not to help those who needed the help, but to help only those who may be able to pass a test if given a little help.... Are we leaving students behind because of ESEA? I think so!"*

In order to close achievement and skills gaps between groups of children, we must acknowledge the need for two simultaneous approaches: changes in the way we provide supports and interventions to the school and changes in the way we provide supports and interventions to individual students who need help. NEA's *Positive Agenda for the ESEA Reauthorization* (<http://www.nea.org/esea/posagendaexecsum.html>) sets forth a variety of supports we hope will be included in the next reauthorization of ESEA.

## **What Other Roles Can the Federal Government Play in Ensuring a Great Public School for Every Child?**

### **Innovation and graduation for all**

In addition to accountability for student learning, the federal government should focus on less tangible, but no less important, differences in the development of students as well-rounded individuals prepared for life after high school graduation. Our schools need to reflect the world in which our children live: a world infused with a 21<sup>st</sup> century curriculum. They need to help students become well-rounded individuals with skills to compete in a changing world and contribute to the rich, diverse societal fabric that makes our country so impressive. Ultimately, an educational experience that is more relevant to a student is going to be more engaging and will lead to greater knowledge and skills. A rich, relevant, and challenging experience can help address all students' needs. It can captivate and challenge our gifted students, while also providing a positive influence for students at risk of dropping out or engaging in high-risk behaviors.

As NEA member Terese Fitzpatrick, a middle school teacher from Howell, Michigan, has told NEA:

*"I spend more time testing than I ever have, which means that students spend less time on learning tasks.... I'm testing all students with the same test as there is no distinction between kids or ability levels. I'm teaching to a limited number of benchmarks because that is what is on the test. Students get no time to pick out interest areas; students are never given the time to prove their knowledge through creative, self-chosen projects. So, does their education and testing truly reflect the kinds of tasks that will be required of them as adults? Are they being allowed to do the kinds of projects that will truly pique their interest and thus increase their motivation to learn? Schools are moving in the wrong direction."*

All of our schools, particularly high schools, should encourage as many students as possible to attend college and should provide coursework to reduce dramatically the need for remediation in college. At the same time, we also must acknowledge the continued need for a major investment in career and technical education programs. And, we need to ensure that high schools take into consideration the transition needs of all student populations, not just students with disabilities. In other words, we need to do whatever it takes to ensure that a student's next step after high school will be one he or she takes with the confidence that comes from being well-prepared.

Finally, we urge Congress to adopt a “graduation for all” proposal that combines the work of Representative Hinojosa and Senators Bingaman and Murray with NEA’s 12-point action plan to address the dropout crisis in America (<http://www.nea.org/presscenter/actionplan1.html>). Estimates put Flint’s graduation rate at below 50 percent – an unacceptable situation that must be remedied.

We believe Congress should provide funding for grants to states that agree to eliminate the concept of “dropping out” of school or that raise the compulsory attendance age. We need graduation centers for 19- and 20-year-olds and those who have dropped out of school—a concerted effort to prevent the loss of one more child and to help those who already have dropped out. This is not only in America’s self-interest to ensure future competitiveness, it is a moral imperative.

### **Quality educators in every classroom**

NEA’s *Positive Agenda* includes a number of proposals to ensure the highest quality educators. Beyond these proposals, we encourage Congress to think broadly about this important issue. For example, we believe Congress should reward states that set a reasonable minimum starting salary for teachers and a living wage for support professionals working in school districts that accept federal funds. We have asked our nation’s educators to take on the most important challenge in ensuring America’s future. Yet, we have denied these educators economic security and respect. It is time to end this untenable situation. Congress must take a bold step and set that minimum standard.

NEA would recommend that no teacher in America should make less than \$40,000 and no public school worker should make less than \$25,000 or a living wage. According to a recent study by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, the teaching profession has an average national starting salary of \$30,377. Meanwhile, computer programmers start at an average of \$43,635, public accounting professionals at \$44,668, and registered nurses at \$45,570.<sup>1</sup> Even more shocking is that the average salary for full-time paraprofessionals is only \$26,313, with a wide salary range across job duties. NEA has education support professional members who live in shelters, others who work two and three jobs to get by, and others who receive food stamps. This is an unacceptable and embarrassing way to treat public servants who educate, nurture, and inspire our children. I would encourage you to read their stories.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A recent report from the NEA Research Department (*Teacher Pay 1940 – 2000: Losing Ground, Losing Status*), based on U.S. census data, finds that annual pay for teachers has fallen sharply over the past 60 years in relation to the annual pay of other workers with college degrees. The report states: “Throughout the nation, the average earnings of workers with at least four years of college are now over 50 percent higher than the average earnings of a teacher.” Furthermore, an analysis of weekly wage trends by researchers at the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) shows that teachers’ wages have fallen behind those of other workers since 1996, with teachers’ inflation-adjusted weekly wages rising just 0.8 percent, far less than the 12 percent weekly wage growth of other college graduates and of all workers. Further, a comparison of teachers’ weekly wages to those of other workers with similar education and experience shows that, since 1993, female teacher wages have fallen behind 13 percent and male teacher wages 12.5 percent (11.5 percent among all teachers). Since 1979, teacher wages relative to those of other similar workers have dropped 18.5 percent among women, 9.3 percent among men, and 13.1 percent among both combined.

<sup>2</sup> “Why Money Matters,” NEA Today, November 2006, <http://www.nea.org/neatoday/0611/feature3.html> and <http://www.nea.org/pay/index.html>.

We also urge Congress to advance teacher quality at the highest poverty schools by providing \$10,000 federal salary supplements to National Board Certified Teachers. Congress also should fund grants to help teachers in high poverty schools pay the fees and access professional development supports to become National Board Certified Teachers. In addition, you should consider other financial incentives to attract and retain quality teachers in hard-to-staff schools including financial bonuses, college student loan forgiveness, and housing subsidies.

Finally, we believe that the equitable distribution of highly qualified teachers depends not just on decent wages, but more importantly upon the teaching and learning conditions in each school. In Flint, our extreme financial situation has made it impossible to reduce class sizes. Therefore, we strongly encourage Congress to restore a separate funding stream to help states reduce class sizes. We believe that ensuring the greatest possible individualized attention for each student should be as high a priority as ensuring that each student achieves at a certain level. In fact, the two goals are inextricably linked, as research clearly shows the positive impact of small class size on student learning.

### **Specific Changes to No Child Left Behind**

My testimony today has focused primarily on the big picture—the ideals and principles that should guide debate on the federal role in education and should frame the context for NCLB reauthorization. If, however, Congress should approach reauthorization by looking to tweak the law rather than consider broader policy changes, we would offer the following suggestions, which are of utmost concern to NEA’s members:

1. Allow states to use a “growth model” as part of the AYP definition (provided that state data systems are equipped with individual student identifiers) to track and give credit for student growth over time.
2. Clarify the language about assessments. Tests should be used for diagnostic purposes and educators should receive results in a timely manner to inform instructional strategies. Overall, assessment language should require a much more comprehensive look at the quality of assessments for all student populations and their true alignment with state content standards.
3. Encourage 21<sup>st</sup> century assessment that is web-based and provides timely results useful to teachers, parents, and students. Such assessments should be accessible to all student populations.
4. Replace current accountability labels (“in need of improvement,” “corrective action,” and “restructuring”) with a system that rewards success in closing achievement gaps and focuses on helping schools.<sup>3</sup> Semantics and policies should reflect the goal of targeting help where it is needed most. Therefore, schools in need of additional supports and interventions should be classified as: priority schools, high priority schools, and highest priority schools.
5. Mandate multiple measures in the AYP system. Current multiple measure language is not enforced in a way that gives schools and districts credit for success on factors other than state standardized assessments, including such measures as school district and school assessments,

attendance, graduation and drop-out rates, and the percent of students who take honors, AP, IB, or other advanced courses.

6. Extend from one year to a maximum of three years the time for newly arrived English Language Learners to master English before being tested in English in core content areas. This change would be consistent with research findings about the average pace for English language acquisition. Students who become proficient in English in fewer than three years should be tested in English. However, to expect a non-English speaker to take a math or reading test in a second language prior to achieving proficiency in that language sets that student up for failure. At the same time, Congress should exert pressure on the system to provide valid and reliable native language assessments, and should provide the necessary resources to ensure their availability.
7. Include students with disabilities in any accountability system, but allow states to use grade level appropriate authentic assessment for special education students based on their IEPs. Under IDEA '04, IEP teams are required to ensure that IEPs are aligned with state content standards and state achievement standards. Teams are also required to set annual measurable objectives for students with disabilities, so that growth in their learning is not only expected, but required.
8. Provide a separate funding stream for and target public school choice and supplemental services to those students who are not reaching proficiency in reading and math.
9. Improve the quality and oversight of supplemental services to ensure they meet the same standards as public schools.
10. Close two loopholes in the highly qualified teacher definition. NCLB itself exempts some teachers in charter schools from having to be fully licensed or certified. The Department of Education's regulations allow individuals going through alternate route to certification programs to be considered highly qualified for up to three years *before* completing their program. Each of these exemptions should be eliminated.

I thank you again for the opportunity to speak with the subcommittee today and would be pleased to answer any questions.