

No Child Left Behind in OHIO

But Communities Are Feeling Left Out

OHIO NCLB HEARING

Columbus Africentric Early College •
Columbus
December 5, 2005 • 2:00–4:00 PM
*Local hearing partner: KnowledgeWorks
Foundation, Columbus*

HEARING OFFICERS

Jim Kohlmoos, President, National Education Knowledge Industry Association, Washington, DC • **Emby Miller**, Director, Education & Technology Training; Columbus Urban League, Columbus, OH • **Guitele Nicoleau**, Director, Research and Member Development; Public Education Network, Washington, DC • **Terry K. Peterson**, Senior Fellow, Education Policy and Partnerships; University of South Carolina Educational Foundation, Kiawah Island, SC

STUDENT WITNESSES

Tiffany Smith, **Alexandra Sanley**, Brookhaven Leadership Institute, Columbus • **Dwayne, Sunita Denton**, **Katrina Woods**, Marion-Franklin High School, Columbus • **Heather Loomis** (*school not given*) • **Jasmine**, **Ryan Brown**, **Christian Colson**, **Jesrusha Clark**, Dayton Early College Academy • **Lakita Williams**, Brookhaven Leadership Institute, Columbus • **Janesa McPherson**, Columbus Africentric Early College • **Rachel Sanchez**, **Travis Cushing**, Lorain Early College High School • **Ashleigh Hart**, **Tarshay Dennard**, **William Owens**, School of Multiple Intelligences, Lima

PARENT WITNESSES

Bonita Johnson, Toledo • **Tammy Avila**, Toledo • **Laura Pryor**, Toledo

COMMUNITY WITNESSES

Claude Cliborne III, Public Affairs Manager, Sprint, Lima • **Mary Cofer**, Director of Diversity Culture, American Electric Power, Columbus • **Eddie Harrell**, Executive Director, Project GRAD, Columbus • **Kent Friel**, Cincinnati Citizens School Committee • **Bob Faulkner**, Mahoning Valley Vision for Education • **Norris Finley**, Project Coordinator, Coalition for Quality Education, Toledo • **Gary Williams**, Director of Outreach, Washington State Community College, Marietta • **Holly Fidler**, Educator, Columbus • **Eileen Cooper Reed**, former Director, Children's Defense Fund, Cincinnati • **Trisha Jackson**, **Dexaray Porter**, Academy of Creative Expression, East High Education Campus, Cleveland

I think the schools should want to change for the better.

Travis Cushing, Lorain Early College High School

The far-reaching effects of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) are changing Ohio's public schools, and leaving the public worried that these changes may threaten critical components of school improvement, namely, community will and collaboration. This theme characterized an Ohio hearing that gave students, parents, and community leaders – audiences very much affected by the law, but usually left out of the policy debate – an opportunity to tell their side of the NCLB story.

Calling NCLB a “momentous piece of legislation,” Chad Wick, president of KnowledgeWorks Foundation, opened the public hearing by reminding witnesses and members of the audience that NCLB had ushered in a new era of public school accountability. However, he also reminded them that “true accountability has to reach beyond results of tests, report card scores, and state sanctions.” Believing that the voices of parents, youth, and other members of the public, particularly those from communities most affected by the law, are missing from the debate and should be integral to the decision-making process, Wick called for policies that “truly serve the people.”

Positive Signs but Caveats

Several students, including some attending high schools labeled as needing improvement, testified that the learning environment was improving. They reported receiving more attention from teachers and more focused teaching. “Teachers can't spend their time in classrooms like they used to,” said ninth-grader Rachel Sanchez from Lorain. “They would often waste time teaching what they felt was easier to teach...but now they have to teach a broader range of objectives to meet the standards of the tests.” In a similar vein, a Dayton Early College Academy student said class time had been extended and extra help was available to students.

Retired Cincinnati businessman Kent Friel, now a leader in citizen support for schools, praised the increased accountability under NCLB, and Norris Finley, a Toledo community organizer, noted that the law has generated an unprecedented amount of conversation about schooling. Almost none of the witnesses, however, gave the law an unqualified endorsement. While its goals are laudable, those giving testimony seemed to be saying, its implementation is not working out as expected. Often, some of the issues attributed to NCLB – such as inadequate funding and assessment policies – were due more to state regulations than to federal law, but in the eyes of the public, they are one and the same.

The students who testified had done their homework. Some cited research they had conducted on the achievement gap that showed achievement scores for black students in Ohio schools were lower than scores of white students and other minorities. Students from Lima testified that they had researched NCLB by going straight to the source, namely, the 670-page law. “We couldn’t even begin to get through it,” said senior Tarshay Dennard, “and understanding it was even more impossible. We wonder if the people who voted ‘yes’ on NCLB even read it.”

Alexandra Sanley, a student at the Brookhaven Leadership Institute in Columbus, had this to say: “No Child Left Behind in some ways is achieving its goal of better preparing students for life after high school, but it’s not fulfilling its purpose for those students who fall short of standards. The students who appear to be benefiting from it are those who have no problem passing standardized tests or other requirements. For others, it is a hindrance.”

Testing Problems

Students and adults alike testified that by basing student and school accountability solely on state test scores, NCLB was having negative consequences. Too much teaching, particularly teaching in urban schools, is now focused on preparing students to pass tests. This discourages good teachers from teaching in urban schools, according to Cincinnati civic leader Kent Friel. “Because there is so much pressure for schools to show progress,” he said, “the act encourages school principals in large districts to push out kids so that they don’t figure into the assessment results.”

Some students feel that testing discourages students and they want to see alternative forms of accountability being used. The Ohio Graduation Tests, for example, don’t take into account a student’s ability to do well in class and are causing some students to think about dropping out, said Alexandra Sanley of Columbus. Denying students a diploma because they cannot pass a test “is totally a contradiction of No Child Left Behind,” said Heather Loomis, a sophomore at Brookhaven Leadership Institute. Sanley added that it was “ironic” to have high-stakes testing at a time when schools were pushing alternative assessments.

Statistics	Total Schools ¹	% fail to make AYP	% schools in improvement	# LEAs	% LEAs fail to make AYP	% LEAs in improvement	Graduation rate ²	Per pupil expenditure ³
Ohio 2003–04	3,901	17.0%	12.5%	608	36.0%	8.1%	84.3%	\$9,035
United States 2003–04	90,237	24.7%	11.4%	13,959	28.5%	12.8%	74.9%	\$8,308
Ohio 2004–05	3,838	24.3%	13.1%	609	44.5%	9.7%	85.9%	\$9,557
United States 2004–05	89,493	25.6%	12.9%	13,878	23.7%	12.4%	Not avail.	\$8,618

Lakita Williams, another Brookhaven student, felt the law’s requirements will hold back some of her peers who are straight-A students but are not good at taking tests, and stated that NCLB “has not proven itself in my eyes to be working, and I feel that the government should step back. Laws don’t empower students, teachers do, if they are free to be creative and rigorous as opposed to drilling us to pass a test that has no bearing on my ability or my employability.”

The emphasis on state standardized tests is watering down the curriculum, according to several witnesses. Travis Cushing from Lorain Early College High School said he was repeating material he had learned in the eighth grade because his tenth-grade teacher was prepping students for the state test and, he added, “all we’re learning are the terms needed for the test.” Eileen Cooper Reed, former director of the Children’s Defense Fund in Cincinnati, lauded the goal of closing the achievement gap but believes NCLB’s narrow focus on math and reading ignores other purposes of schooling. “To develop [as] whole, productive adults,” she said, “children need to do more than pass tests. They need physical, social, and academic and mental development from schools.”

Some business community witnesses want to see higher-level skills in Ohio’s high school graduates. But, as Gary Williams, director of outreach for a community college in Marietta explained, the business people he talks to “don’t want to hire test takers.” Instead, they want to hire “people who have a work ethic. They want people to show up on time with

¹ Title I Report, Vol. 7 Iss. 4 (LRP Publications 2006). Data for columns 1-6 were taken from this report.

² Data taken from Ohio State Report Cards, available at http://www.ode.state.oh.us/reportcard/state_report_card/.

³ National Education Association, *Rankings & Estimates Update (2005)*. Figures are computed from NEA Research, Estimates databank. The figures are based on reports through August 2005.

the basic skills necessary to do the job. They want creative people. They want problem solvers. They want people who can work in teams, and they want lifelong learners.”

Teacher Quality

Witnesses agreed with the NCLB requirement that all students should be taught by highly qualified teachers, but they felt that teacher quality issues are far more complex than mere certification can address.

Resources should be directed less to testing and more toward developing stronger relationships and trust between teachers and students, urged Gary Williams. That teacher-pupil relationship was very important to students, who felt that the primary criteria for a qualified teacher should be support for students and the ability to get material over in a variety of ways. Jerusha Clark, a Dayton Early College Academy student, would ask of a teacher: “Are you a teacher who can read the textbook or are you a teacher who can tell me how this concept applies in other areas of life. If you give me a linear equation, are you going to tell me this applies to an architectural problem or are you going to tell me you need to know this or that....Can you explain to me the purpose of why I’m learning this?”

Marietta’s Gary Williams, who has worked in the Appalachia area of southern Ohio all his life, found the NCLB teacher quality benchmark to be unrealistic. In high-poverty schools in Appalachia, he said, up to 42 percent of secondary teachers lacked a major or a minor in the subject matter they are assigned to teach. Because of the low tax base, teachers are underpaid, and schools will not be able to attract enough teachers to meet the benchmark. Certification standards, and NCLB reforms in general, were not the problem he went on to explain:

I believe that the bottom line is this: what you call a program, how much money you put into it, what testing and monitoring you put in place, does not cause real change. Real change happens when an educator is given training, the time, the tools, and the resources to allow that human connection between the teacher and the child to occur that sparks the child’s enthusiasm, and sets the mind free to dream and think about the future....Any state or federal law...should ensure that this connection happens and should never put in place policies, procedures, and mandates that impede this process.

	Student Enrollment ¹ 2004-2005	Per Pupil Expenditure 2004-2005	Students in Title I Schools ²	Students Eligible for Free/ Reduced Lunch	Students with IEPs	English Language Learners	2002 Graduation Rate ³			
							All	Black	Hispanic	White
Ohio	1,846,763	\$9,557	61.8%	33.3%	14.0%	1.7%	78%	55%	55%	83%
US	48,367,410	\$8,618	49.7%	36.3%	13.6%	10.6%	71%	56%	52%	78%

The Community-Building Factor

Perhaps no issue impinged upon people’s values and beliefs as deeply as NCLB sanctions on schools and communities.

Witnesses clearly were troubled by the effect that labeling was having on their schools and their communities. Business community representatives, in describing several successful initiatives to help struggling students and schools, wanted schools to be viewed as community assets rather than failing institutions. Eddie Harrell, executive director of Project GRAD in Columbus, added that “if our schools are viewed as community assets regardless of their performance...and are viewed as those that need help instead of those that need to be closed, I think we can impact the schools to help them turn the corner to achieve the progress that we hope they will achieve.”

¹ National Education Association, *Rankings & Estimates Update (2005)*. Figures are computed from NEA Research, Estimates databank. The figures are based on reports through August 2005. This source provided the Student Enrollment and Per Pupil Expenditure data.

² Hoffman, L. and Sable, J. (2006). *Public Elementary and Secondary Students, Staff, Schools, and School Districts: School Year 2003–04* (NCES 2006-307). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Data were taken from this source for the following columns: Students in Title I Schools, Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch, Students with Disabilities, English Language Learners.

³ *Public High School Graduation and College-Readiness Rates: 1991-2002*, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research (2005). Figure calculated using the Greene method, which estimates the number of students who enter a ninth-grade class, makes some adjustments for changes in population, and divides the resulting number into the number of students who actually graduated with a regular diploma. It is not a four-year graduation rate; as long as there is not a substantial change in the number of students in each class that graduates in more than four years, such students are included in the calculation.

Before giving parents the option to transfer their kids to other schools – an NCLB intervention that is not viable, according to several witnesses – resources should be used to help struggling schools improve. Norris Finley, the community leader from Toledo, noted that failure to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) under NCLB should trigger higher levels of assistance, not remove student and parent assets from the schools. Eileen Cooper Reed of Cincinnati observed that, because there is little space available in better-performing schools, students are not likely to be able to move from a low-performing school so “the bottom line is to take it [resources] to the students where they are.”

Students who had studied NCLB were unanimous in their opposition to labeling of students and schools. “When district and school report cards are negative,” said Heather Loomis, a Columbus high school student, “it reflects on the community. Who wants to attend a failing school? Better yet, what parent wants to live in a community where the schools are failing?” Parents, she added, cannot dodge the fact that they are as responsible for assuring student success as are schools and teachers. Columbus student Alexandra Sanley declared that schools were set up for failure under NCLB because of mandates on attendance, graduation rates, and standardized test scores, even though parent and community factors influence these outcomes. Citing NCLB’s provision for eventual takeover of underperforming schools, she asked: “What can complete strangers do that the administrators and teachers whom we have come to know and respect could not do? How can they – a group ignorant of anything except the negative aspect of our school – do anything for us?”

Several witnesses felt that community involvement could produce a shared vision that would help schools that need improvement. They urged that teachers and administrators be taught skills to work with parents and to make schools more “welcoming.” They wanted resources to help parents be more effective supporters of education, and others wanted interventions to start early so that children can begin school on an even ground. Many said NCLB is underfunded, and that state funding leaves low property tax districts unable to respond to the demands of the law.

Efforts to improve student progress, many testified, should be more helpful and less punitive than what is happening under NCLB. “We all want a good education,” said Ashleigh Hart, a student from Lima, who went on to explain how she sees the problem:

Just in our group of 13 students who have been preparing for this event, we have one who wants to be a veterinarian, one who wants to attend West Point, and one who plans to be singing and dancing on Broadway. So what is a good education? One that can open our chosen doors. Can a school that is driven to ensure adequate performance on standardized tests prepare Shannon, Billy, and Charis all equally well? No Child Left Behind seems to believe that education is one size fits all. Everyone is judged based on objective data reported in numbers that can’t really show what we’ve learned. However, they easily measure how we compare with others. It’s easy to gather numbers showing how many of our students are absent, how many are poor, and how many can’t perform math at exactly the same level as other kids their age from richer families and schools. The numbers don’t give a fair picture of the progress made or the lessons learned.

The Ohio hearing was one of nine hearings on NCLB held across the country from September 2005 to January 2006. This is the second set of hearings organized by PEN to convey the public’s concerns and recommendations to policymakers in advance of the scheduled 2007 reauthorization of the law.

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