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## Protecting Education IN TOUGH ECONOMIC TIMES

A CONVERSATION WITH PETER MCWALTERS, ANGELA MONSON, AND TED SANDERS

Although states face budget deficits, there is a groundswell of support for protecting education funding. Can states find the resources to meet the requirements of *No Child Left Behind*? Three education reformers draw on their experience at the state level to discuss the challenges of implementing NCLB in the current economy.

Peter McWalters was appointed Rhode Island Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education in 1992, and is president-elect of the Council of Chief State School Officers. Mr. McWalters spent over 20 years in educational leadership and teaching positions, including superintendent of schools, in Rochester, NY.

Senator Angela Z. Monson has been a member of the Oklahoma State Senate since 1993, where she currently serves as first assistant majority floor leader. Senator Monson is also president of the National Conference of State Legislatures, a bipartisan organization serving the lawmakers and staffs of our nation's states, commonwealths, and territories.

Ted Sanders is the president of the Education Commission of the States (ECS). He has had wide experience as an educator, including classroom teacher, chief state school officer in three states, acting US secretary of education, and, most recently, university president. Dr. Sanders joined ECS in February 2000, leaving Southern Illinois University, where he had served as president since 1995.

**CONNECTIONS:** *State budgets are probably in worse shape today than at any time in the past 50 years. What are states doing to ensure adequate funding for education in this economy? Can they support education and still balance the books?*

**SENATOR MONSON:** State legislators individually, and legislatures collectively, know and value the importance of education. But these are not normal times: states are being forced to cut education budgets. In most states, there's simply no way we can balance the budget without making some cuts in education.

**MR. SANDERS:** This isn't the first time we've been here, although, in my experience, this is the worst financial situation the states have ever faced. In the past, states would leave appropriations for elementary, secondary, and higher education to the end of the legislative appropriations process. Whatever was left would be divided among those sectors. That's no longer true. In this downturn, most states are trying from the front end to hold elementary and secondary education funding harmless.

Oregon is the poster child for how extreme the situation is. Statewide, they are closing schools 9 days early this year, while the city of Portland is shutting down 15 days early. But something else is going on as well. A good number of states are trying revenue enhancements. Riverboat gambling is following the lottery as the fundraiser of choice—it seems just about every state wants to use riverboat gambling revenues to help close some revenue gap. Sin taxes on cigarettes, alcohol, and beer are also on the table for discussion. And several states have legislation to increase sales and income taxes.

**MR. MCWALTERS:** Like so many other states, Rhode Island has a budget shortfall. Even so, education has surfaced as a clear priority. The governor is placing edu-

cation at the top of the preservation list, as opposed to making it an afterthought. He does a very good job of saying, "Listen folks. These are a hard couple of years. My strategy is to invest in areas that will have the greatest leverage as we come out of this."

**CONNECTIONS:** *National polls, including the annual PEN/Education Week poll, indicate that there seems to be more unanimity in supporting funding and increased taxes for schools from all political parties and across demographic categories.*

**MR. SANDERS:** There's not much debate about the link between an educated citizenry and a state's economy. I think everyone now believes that education is important from the perspective of building a state's economy. Education is seen as a real investment in the future.

**SENATOR MONSON:** What's really driving this train for increased funding is not politicians with a bully pulpit, but regular folks out there—moms and dads who want their kids to have a quality education. They don't want 35 first-graders in a classroom with one teacher. They understand the relationship between the quality of education a child receives and the funding available for that education, and they're willing to make sacrifices to get there.

In Oklahoma, there is a huge push for a penny sales tax for education, and it's coming from regular citizens who say I'm willing to pay for a quality education for my children. This is a regressive tax, but I suspect the mom who's making \$25,000 a year and can't afford private education is willing to pay an additional penny in sales tax so that her child can receive a quality education. I still wonder if elected officials are going to bite the bullet and vote for tax increases for education. I hope we do.

**MR. SANDERS:** It's pretty clear that the sin tax and those kinds of things are pretty easy to do. But when you start talking about increasing sales taxes or income taxes, that gets far, far more difficult politically. But it's happening in some places, and those efforts are being led by both Republican and Democratic governors.

**CONNECTIONS:** *Given the state of the economy and the level of federal help available, can you afford to implement No Child Left Behind?*

**MR. MCWALTERS:** The whole environment has changed. We put a priority on all kids, high standards, accountability, and intervention. Now there's this catch-22 with *No Child Left Behind*. We think states are moving in the right direction. We have plans, standards and assessments, and intervention strategies. But because of the state budget crisis, we can't intensify our support for teachers, and the federal government's budget proposal in '04 doesn't provide this support either.

In the old days, when states had to implement federal policies, the only thing states paid for were the salaries of the finance people who passed out the checks. Now, there is federal support for schools, but states have to take the leadership role in developing standards, curricula, and assessments, and in supporting district leaders. And many states are still struggling with that dynamic; my department is being downsized at a time when we are being asked to provide more help than ever.

Having said that, the teacher quality requirement in *No Child Left Behind* is a godsend to those of us battling the fact that the least experienced teachers are often in front of the neediest kids.

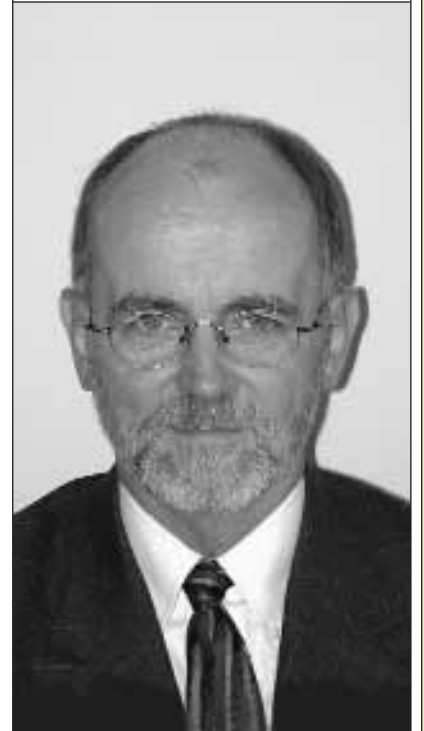
**MR. SANDERS:** The levers shaping *No Child Left Behind*—setting standards, building accountability systems that inform instruction, strengthening the quality of teaching—are exactly right. There's plenty of room to debate the specifics, but those focal points, along with using scientific evidence to discover what works most effectively, are absolutely crucial.

The thing I fear most is not whether we will have enough money to do the job, but whether this is simply a compliance exercise that will not fundamentally change the way we do business. We need to embrace the spirit of this legislation so that not one single child gets left behind. Yes, we have to worry whether there's enough federal and state money to do this and, yes, we have to make sure those resources are there. But we've got to be equally committed to rethinking how we use our current resources to get the job done.

**SENATOR MONSON:** No one disagrees that every single child in this country deserves a quality education. But we are concerned that, once again, states are going to be left holding the bag for addressing a federal commitment, much as we have for special education. The other concern I hear from state legislators is how can we draw more highly qualified people into teaching? How can we recruit people who want to teach but can make more money as a Wal-Mart floor manager than as a teacher? Do we have the resources, and will we commit those resources? And if we commit those resources, do we have the appropriate assessment instruments to determine whether schools and students are making progress?

In order for *No Child Left Behind* to truly work for all children, the partnership between the federal government and state governments needs to include not only the funding piece but also an open and valid discussion in which we ask: What do we know about

Below: Peter McWalters



Below: Angela Z. Monson



Below: Ted Sanders



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learning? What do we know about the education of children? What don't we know? Can we measure learning appropriately? What are the appropriate roles for the federal government, the state government, and local boards of education? We need a conversation between policymakers and all the other players involved.

**CONNECTIONS:** *Are states worried about the number of schools that could be designated low performing? What effect might that have on confidence in public education?*

**MR. MCWALTERS:** I'm not worried in that sense yet. The US Department of Education has approved our approach and I will continue to identify a bunch of schools. We will meet the reasonableness test since people already know these are low-performing schools. They are not meeting the needs of all children, so let's not act like they are. The real question is whether the system can provide schools the support they need to improve capacity, practice, and student outcomes.

**MR. SANDERS:** We know from a couple of decades of polling that, while the public is generally skeptical about the quality of public schools overall, people make exceptions for the schools where they send their kids. This is particularly true in urban inner cities, so in a lot of ways the reaction to schools being identified as needing improvement is going to be a ho-hum/nothing new here reaction. We knew that all along.

However, there is going to be a tremendous disconnection when a school with an overall stellar performance gets labeled as needing improvement for failing to meet performance expectations for a subgroup population. I don't know how to predict that debate.

I hope it produces the kind of discussion that ought to take place in a lot of affluent communities in America that are not serving the needs of all their children and that these communities get serious about educating every child.

But it could also result in outright rejection of the law with political backlash from Mr. Bush's constituency. In an ideal world, I would hope the term "needs improvement" would urge communities to look at the data and ask what's going on and how they might change the profile. If that turns out to be the case, then a little public hand-wringing will be for the good.

**SENATOR MONSON:** A real concern for some of us is what legal repercussions might occur. There are legal rights to a quality, equal education in this country. If schools fail, particularly schools with a high number of minority students or specific populations, do we set ourselves up for legal battles in the future?

**MR. MCWALTERS:** I haven't run into any public backlash yet. If a district is not doing enough to help a specific subgroup, we need to ask, is this because the kids are highly mobile and the system never had a chance to work with them? Are programs effective? Having disaggregated data will give us this information.

**CONNECTIONS:** *Are you saying it will be difficult for urban districts with highly transient, low-income populations to demonstrate improvement given the fact that they're not dealing with the same student population from year to year?*

**MR. MCWALTERS:** Exactly. I like the idea of the feds saying to the states, "Economic security, and the quality of life depend on having every kid hit the target in 12 to 14 years." So we have to solve the problem of transience, solve the problem of stability, solve access to daycare and quality healthcare. That's the part of the challenge that I like. It isn't just about whether that teacher on this day is performing well, even though we have to solve that problem as well.

**CONNECTIONS:** *About half the states have exit examinations. Given the funding situation, is there concern that the extra help some kids might need to graduate will not be forthcoming? Does this make exit exams inherently inequitable?*

**MR. MCWALTERS:** I will not impose high stakes testing until I can come up with a system where I can hold the adults responsible for organizing themselves and getting resources and programs to every kid in a reasonable fashion. Our accountability system must land on districts and schools. It shouldn't land on individual children. I'm sending ninth-graders on to high school when I know they haven't had adequate preparation since the fourth grade, and now all of a sudden it's their fault when they don't perform well. I'm all for the high stakes part of NCLB, but it's got to be high stakes for public policy, not for individual kids.

**SENATOR MONSON:** You're absolutely right. It's not the kids' fault that they can't pass an exit exam. In our state, you receive a standard diploma if you meet minimum standards and then get a certificate of distinction if you meet high standards, and that includes taking four years of math. The point is, there are many disparities and inequitable situations that cause students to fall behind. We cannot place responsibility on the kids unless we put responsibility on ourselves to ensure that kids have an equitable opportunity to achieve. ■