

NCLB: Promises and Challenges

BY SENATOR EDWARD M. KENNEDY



Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) has represented Massachusetts in the United States Senate since 1962, when he was elected to finish the term of his brother, President John F. Kennedy. Re-elected to seven full terms, he is now the third most senior member of the Senate. He is the ranking member on the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee and is a leader in education reform.

Let the Common School be expanded to its capabilities, let it be worked with the efficiency of which it is susceptible, and nine tenths of the crimes in the penal code would become obsolete; the long catalogue of human ills would be abridged; men would walk more safely by day; every pillow would be more inviolate by night; property, life, and character held by a stronger tenure; all rational hopes respecting the future brightened.

— Horace Mann, January 1841, *Common School Journal*

More than a century and a half ago, Horace Mann had the extraordinary foresight to see that public schools could become the cornerstone of a better America and the best hope of future generations.

His 19th century vision holds true in our 21st century world. Education remains the key to the golden door of opportunity. With a good education, children can dream, achieve, and lead productive lives. Without one, children will suffer a lifelong disadvantage—and our economy, our national security, even democracy itself will suffer as well.

From its beginning, the public education system in America has had to overcome many challenges. In the past 10 years, public education has been under attack for lack of progress: Forty percent of our nation's fourth-graders can't read. Students from 20 other

countries outperform our eighth-graders in math. At the twelfth-grade level, the United States placed third to last of 21 countries surveyed.

Parents, teachers, community leaders, and policy-makers have responded by demanding better-qualified teachers, smaller classes, higher student achievement, safer schools, and more after-school programs. Last year, Congress and the Bush administration worked together to pass the *No Child Left Behind Act*, a guide to federal investment in public schools that gives students the support they need to succeed.

The law requires all states to set high academic standards in reading, math, and science, and outlines what students should know and be able to do in those subject areas. Each state is charged with developing a curriculum that helps teachers translate standards into day-to-day learning for their students, and with setting performance standards for how much students should know in each grade about those subjects.

Each state must also develop tests, based on those standards, to help teachers and parents understand how well a child knows the subject matter. Tests are an important element of school reform, but they should not be punitive. They should serve as a stethoscope, not a hammer, to ensure that every child's performance is assessed—not hidden, not overlooked, and not ignored.

Standards and tests, however, are only assessments of reform, not actual reform itself. The law, therefore, also provides students with greater support and more opportunities to do well, teachers with more opportunities for professional development, and parents with more opportunities to become involved in their children's education.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

NCLB: PROMISES AND CHALLENGES CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

The act also expands support for early reading, so that all children can learn to read by the end of the third grade. More books will be available for school libraries. Support will be available to strengthen programs to make schools safe and drug free. Additional resources are being provided for the neediest students, especially those from low-income families, those with limited proficiency in English, those who are homeless, and those who are children of migrant workers and immigrants.

The nation is at a crossroads on school reform. We—parents, teachers, local and state leaders, federal officials, members of Congress, and the president—have set our sights high and are working together to achieve genuine reform that combines accountability with proven, effective change.

But our most serious challenge still lies before us. We must provide resources to make these reforms work and, so far, we have failed to do so. In April, Congress proposed to fund school reform at a level \$8.9 billion below that promised in *No Child Left Behind*. This means we will leave 6 million children behind; that we can provide no additional funding for class size reduction or teacher training and support; that we will have to slash after-school funding by almost half. And it means that states facing their own education crises because of a faltering national economy will receive no help from Washington.

Funding school reform is common sense. Businesses that want better workers invest in training. Athletes who want to be top competitors invest in training. Public schools that want to educate all children to high standards must invest in education reform.

Shortchanging education shortchanges the nation. The promise of Horace Mann has to be our promise. We can't afford to break it. ■

BOSTON PLAN FOR EXCELLENCE IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In Boston, concern that the arbitrary NCLB gradient used to denote adequate yearly progress (AYP) will unjustly label many good schools “under performing” has spurred the Boston Plan for Excellence in the Public Schools to create a complementary internal planning tool. Developed with the district, the tool uses AYP and five additional indicators, including the percentage of students passing the state MCAS tests. This fine-grained analysis, paired with observations by deputy superintendents on instruction in each school, gives principals and teachers a more complete picture of school progress—and an incentive to concentrate on instruction rather than just test scores.

NEW VISIONS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

New York City is grappling with the daunting task of fulfilling NCLB choice and supplemental service provisions for students attending 331 schools identified as “in need of improvement.” New Visions for Public Schools is helping the district address choice issues through a \$30 million initiative to replace large high schools—some designated as failing by NCLB—with smaller, more effective schools. By fall 2003, 14,000 students had applied for the 3,000 spaces in New Century High Schools in the Bronx. New Visions anticipates having 42 schools and programs open citywide during the 2003–2004 school year.