

February 18, 2004

To: Georgia Legislators – state and federal
Atlanta School Board and Administration
Georgia Department of Education
Persons interested in Education Issues

As implementation of No Child Left Behind enters its third year, policy makers, educators, parents and pundits are examining its effectiveness in reforming the nation's education system through testing and accountability. The overall goal – to close performance gaps by race, region, economic status, learning ability, and language proficiency on key success indicators in reading and math so that all children are learning on grade level within a decade – has rightly received broad-based support. Many agree data-driven, standards-based reform required by the No Child Left Behind Act is essential for America's youth to succeed in higher learning, and compete globally in the 21st century workplace.

While the intentions of NCLB have been applauded, detrimental characteristics in implementation are now apparent. As states and school systems struggle to put testing and accountability structures in place, they have encountered certain difficulties along the way. It is increasingly evident that specifics within the law itself may preclude its broad objectives from being realized.

The Council of Intown Neighborhoods and Schools and North Atlanta Parents for Public Schools, two Atlanta-based, volunteer public education advocacy groups, convened a forum in October 2003, to constructively address issues surrounding No Child Left Behind. Parents, teachers, principals, school administrators and policy makers met to share information and experiences, while gathering feedback and developing recommendations to help realize the full potential of the law.

Attached is a summary of our findings. As you develop policies and procedures for the coming year, thank you for taking the time to consider this perspective from people who are directly affected by NCLB. It is imperative steps be taken to ensure effective implementation. The stakes – success for all students – could not be higher.

Respectfully,

The Council of Intown Neighborhoods and Schools
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No Child Left Behind: A View from the Inside

On October 22, 2003, the Council of Intown Neighborhoods and Schools (CINS) and North Atlanta Parents for Public Schools (NAPPS) held an open forum to develop positions on the No Child Left Behind Act, and specifically its affect in Georgia and Atlanta Public Schools. A week prior to the forum, NAPPS and CINS held a joint meeting on NCLB, with representatives from Atlanta Public Schools providing background on the NCLB Act and its impact on the Atlanta school system. The purpose of the forum was to gain input from parents, teachers and principals in the CINS and NAPPS communities in order to provide feedback to federal and state legislators, the Georgia Department of Education, and APS on various aspects of the law. CINS and NAPPS support the overall objectives of NCLB to improve educational opportunities for all children. However, there are specifics within the law that when implemented preclude the good intentions of the law being realized. The organizations feel strongly that in order to leave no child behind, we must leave no school behind.

For discussion purposes, forum participants broke into four smaller groups: Adequate Yearly Progress; Needs Improvement List; Communications, and Funding. Each group developed specific issues, concerns and recommendations related to its topic for presentation to the whole forum. All forum participants then had the opportunity to provide additional input in each topic area. Below is a summary by each topic, including small group and whole forum discussion.

Summary of Recommendations

Adequate Yearly Progress

- The group expressed concern about students new to the U.S., with limited English proficiency being required to take standardized tests (in Georgia, the CRCT) in a language they are just beginning to learn. A state Limited English Proficiency (LEP) panel is considering the need and practicability of establishing alternative assessments. This could help, but would raise other issues. Therefore, the recommendation is for legislators to reconsider a “grace period” for these students before they are required to take standardized tests that are counted towards a school’s AYP.
- The NCLB goal of 100% proficiency in performance targets by 2014 is statistically unattainable and unrealistic. Eventually many schools will be on the Needs Improvement list and virtually all school systems will be subject to sanctions. Legislators should set the bar high, but with more realistic, attainable goals for disaggregated and total populations. While every school should continue to pursue proficiency for every child, penalties associated with non-attainment should be capped at a certain high level of proficiency.
- The 95% test participation requirement for each subgroup causes many schools to be on the Needs Improvement list due to student absences. To meet the 95% requirement, schools should have a longer period of time over which to give the test(s), with greater frequency and more make up dates.
- AYP goals for students in Special Ed subgroups are based on grade level testing. For students with special needs, develop and administer functional grade level or differentiated testing based on individualized assessment plans.
- While high school graduation rate is a measured success indicator in Georgia for meeting AYP, it is not a federal requirement. High school completion rate is one of the best ways to measure success in public education, and should be included in all states’ NCLB plans.

Needs Improvement List

- There is concern with the way the penalties for schools on the NI list for two or more consecutive years are structured, with transfers to other schools as the first sanction. This may do more to leave these schools behind than to help them improve. As more “motivated” families choose the transfer option, NI schools lose an important resource that could help with their improvement. The recommendation is to make the first sanction steps to improve school performance with support services, including: tutoring; longer school days/years; staff development; incentives for highly qualified teachers to go to struggling schools; reform models, and class size reductions. Move the transfer out sanction to later years on the list.
- Being on the NI list has a huge impact on school morale. Focus on standardized tests leads to the exclusion of art, music, etc. Teacher flexibility, motivation and creativity are often negatively affected. One problem with the list is that there is no distinction between schools that are truly struggling and schools that may have barely missed a performance target in one sub-group, or may have had a few too many students absent on test days. The recommendation is that a grading scale be developed to show “shades of gray” in schools needing improvement, with separate scales for performance targets and test-taking participation requirements. Structure the “sanctions” more constructively to improve schools based on where they are on this grading scale. Target support services specifically to the needs of the schools identified in the missed AYP performance goals.

Communications

- The chain of communication from the federal government to the state to local school systems to schools and finally to the parent community is weak and untimely. As a result, many families are not getting the information they need, when they need it, to make a well-advised school choice. Following are recommendations to improve clarity and timeliness of communications on NCLB:
 - Improve the timing of test score data reporting to schools and families. Contracted testing services should report results to the state soon after testing is complete, and the state should turn around the NI list much earlier so that schools and families have sufficient time prior to the start of the school year to act. If this requires states to test students earlier in the school year, this is preferable to receiving unverified student data days before the start of the new school year. Schools should receive student test score data before the end of the school year to allow them to make important management and staffing decisions well in advance of the new school year. Consider a one-year lag-time from reporting of test results to implementation of sanctions. Make sure data is accurate before it is released to the public/media.
 - Clarify state-level parameters for implementation of NCLB so that there are common standards for interpretation, while preserving the flexibility at the State and local system levels. In particular, give greater specificity to the policy regarding transfers and school over-crowding. Communicate direct, actionable information from the federal government to the states to school systems, schools and parents. Information should be shared with parents at all schools, not just those on the NI list.
 - Give families better information to make a knowledgeable choice. Include information on specific reasons the school is on the NI list and what the school is doing to improve. Give accurate, complete information on all options for school choice, including transfer requirements and procedures. Information given to parents needs to be actionable; the message needs to be clear and directions need

to be specific. Inform schools that meet AYP and their families what to expect as a result of the NCLB transfer option.

- From the local school system, there should be an annual presentation of data that includes the goals, progress and challenges of the system as a whole and the individual schools in the system. This can help provide parents the context needed for making thoughtful decisions about their child's school. Communicate in multiple formats, including verbally at meetings, on websites, and in written materials. Communicate through multiple media outlets, including newspaper, neighborhood newsletters, radio and television.
- NCLB requires states to phase in specific links between student test performance and grade promotion, beginning in 3rd grade in Georgia. School systems, including Atlanta Public Schools, need to communicate efforts to ensure all students are reading/performing/testing on grade level (including remediation and retesting), so they are not required to repeat grades. They should also develop clear policies and procedures to ensure that students have opportunities for tutoring and retesting before the start of the new school year.
- Georgia is developing new Performance Standards for introduction beginning in the 2004-05 school year. New Criterion Reference Competency Tests (CRCTs), used to determine AYP in Georgia, will be given to measure school performance using the new standards. The state should develop and communicate a plan to support teachers/schools/school systems in implementing the new curriculum while supporting test performance.

Funding

- While funding for reading programs has increased, federal funding is insufficient to meet many other requirements of NCLB, and funding streams are not well aligned with school improvement. For example, school systems are required to pay to transport students to other schools when they transfer under NCLB, often at significant cost. Funding transportation can divert funds away from improvement. The recommendation is that discreet funding streams be created for:
 - Transportation
 - Supplemental services
 - School improvement/professional development
- Because NI schools that receive Title I funds eventually lose those funds for students that transfer out, the schools are left without financial resources they need for improvement, including the money for supplemental services they must offer the next year. The recommendation is to allow schools to offer supplemental services (tutoring, reform models) in the first year of sanctions, with the transfer out option in later years. Direct more Title II funding to professional development.
- Fiscal responsibilities of federal, state and local authorities are unclear. Federal and state legislators should clarify who pays for what.
- Federal and state funding does not address school capacity issues created through the transfer option. State maximum class size guidelines should not be overridden by NCLB requirements.

About CINS and NAPPS

The Council of Intown Neighborhoods and Schools (CINS) and North Atlanta Parents for Public Schools (NAPPS) are not-for-profit organizations representing clusters of public schools in Atlanta, Georgia. Parents, teachers and school principals are the core membership of these two organizations. Both CINS and NAPPS are staffed entirely by parent volunteers. Each organization seeks to engender community participation in and strong support for the public school system from kindergarten through 12th grade in a seamless and continuous manner. Members seek out existing problems and create forums to find solutions.

Now in its 26th year, the Council of Intown Neighborhoods and Schools meets monthly with school system administrators, Atlanta Board of Education members, and representatives of neighborhood and business organizations to exchange ideas, initiate actions on issues of common concern, and undertake special projects. Since 1984, CINS has awarded annual Excellence in Education Grants that have provided thousands of dollars to classroom teachers to enrich courses in their neighborhood schools.

The 30-year-old North Atlanta Parents for Public Schools strives to increase community awareness of and support for the North Atlanta cluster schools, ultimately resulting in a high student retention rate through high school. By educating the community about existing public school opportunities and advantages, NAPPS works to strengthen the bond between their community and the school system.

The CINS cluster of schools in Atlanta's intown neighborhoods are Grady High School, Inman Middle School, Walden Middle School, C.W. Hill Elementary, Centennial Place Elementary, John Hope Elementary, Mary Lin Elementary, and Morningside Elementary. The schools in the NAPPS cluster in north central Atlanta are North Atlanta High School, Sutton Middle School, E. Rivers Elementary, Garden Hills Elementary, Warren T. Jackson Elementary, Morris Brandon Elementary, Sarah R. Smith Elementary, and the North Metro Program at Mitchell.

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