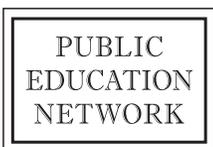


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Open to the Public

Speaking Out on "No Child Left Behind"

A Report from 2004 Public Hearings



Public involvement. Public education. Public benefit.

Sponsored by the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy at MassINC and Public Education Network



Public Education Network

Public Education Network (PEN) is a national organization of local education funds (LEFs) and individuals working to improve public schools and build citizen support for quality public education in low-income communities across the nation. PEN believes an active, vocal constituency is the key to ensuring that every child, in every community, benefits from a quality public education. PEN and its members are building public demand and mobilizing resources for quality public education on behalf of 11.5 million children in more than 1600 school districts in 33 states and the District of Columbia. In 2004, PEN welcomed its first international member, which serves almost 300,000 children in the Philippines.

Our Vision

Every day, in every community, every child in America benefits from a quality public education.

Our Mission

To build public demand and mobilize resources for quality public education for all children through a national constituency of local education funds and individuals.



Hearing Held in Boston, Massachusetts

June 2, 2004

4:00–7:30 PM

Old South Meeting House, Boston, MA

Acknowledgements

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No Child Left Behind In Massachusetts

Despite similar goals, the comprehensive standards-based reforms in Massachusetts and the all-encompassing *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) federal legislation are not meshing well, leading to confusion and some disillusionment. This was a major theme of a statewide hearing on NCLB held in Boston on June 2, 2004. Sponsoring organizations were Public Education Network (PEN), a national organization representing community-based school reform groups and individuals across the country; and the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy at MassINC, which conducts research and convenes policy leaders and others to follow school reform efforts in the Commonwealth. The Nellie Mae Education Foundation provided support for the hearing.

The hearing was an opportunity for public voices—of parents, students, and community representatives—to tell their stories amidst a debate often controlled by organizational spokespeople. Both urban and rural people from across the state spoke up about how NCLB is touching students and schools in their areas of the Commonwealth. Those who testified see NCLB primarily from a very personal viewpoint, what is happening to their children or in their classrooms. Still, there was some general agreement on such issues as:



“NCLB is a wonderfully written law that is all about parent involvement, school choice, and supplemental services. However, like with most things, the devil is in the details.”

—Robin Foley, Federation for Children with Special Needs, Boston

- An uneasiness with the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) that has been compounded by the punitive use of its data to label schools as low performing to meet NCLB mandates. The pressure to improve scores because of NCLB sanctions has further narrowed the curriculum for students and created a demand for better assessments. The labeling also diverts needed resources away from struggling schools and makes it even harder for parents and communities to help these schools get better.
- The cost of fulfilling NCLB mandates, especially testing, has added to severe budget problems at school and district levels. Most of the testimony about drastic cuts in education budgets reflected state and local decisions. NCLB, however, is seen as the funding culprit, and those who support its goals are frustrated by what they perceive as a failure to fulfill its funding promises.
- The lack of clarity and access to information for parents about their choices under NCLB—to transfer out of consistently low performing schools or to obtain supplemental services for their children. NCLB has encouraged parent activism, but it still is underfunded and not as powerful as it ought to be. Nor do parents have sufficient understanding of what parent involvement means under NCLB.
- NCLB confuses, penalizes or is even in conflict with provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and programs for English-as-a-second-language students.



The “Why” of the PEN Hearings

Shortly after NCLB was passed in 2001, Public Education Network (PEN) began an intensive examination of the law to determine the rights and privileges it accords to parents and community members. Approximately 10,000 print copies of the resulting publication, *Using NCLB to Improve Student Achievement: An Action Guide for Community and Parent Leaders*, have been requested by organizations throughout the country, with a further 40,000 copies downloaded from the PEN website. In addition, a series of NCLB action briefs, developed by PEN in partnership with the National Coalition for Parent Involvement In Education, have been downloaded more than 25,000 times.

With this demand for information on NCLB as background, PEN held a series of state hearings to give the public a structured way to enter the debate on the pros and cons of NCLB and the effects, both positive and negative, the law is having on schools and students. Nine hearings took place in eight states over a five-month period. Each state hearing was conducted in partnership with local organizations and presided over by a panel of state and national hearing officers.

PEN hopes these forums will broaden the public debate about NCLB and will give policymakers information on how their work encourages or discourages quality public education for children. The findings from PEN's NCLB hearings will be transmitted to decisionmakers at the national, state, and local levels to help them determine which aspects of NCLB the public supports, what are the primary concerns, and what mid-course corrections are needed to achieve the most beneficial results for all students.



The Massachusetts Context

With almost one million students in about 1,900 public schools, Massachusetts has been experiencing a growth in enrollment for at least the past 10 years. Almost all of the significant growth has been among minority students, who now represent one-fourth of the pre-kindergarten through 12th grade student population. The number of low-income students also grew significantly (from 23.2 percent in 1993 to 27.2 percent in 2003).

A decade ago the Commonwealth embarked on an ambitious standards-based school reform strategy encompassing new state assessments aligned to standards and multiple system improvements. The Massachusetts Education Reform Act moved the state from an almost totally local-control system to one with an active state-level presence and accountability mandates. The Act introduced charter schools into the mix of public schools. Public education funding increased gradually, until the economic downturn of the past few years. According to national indicators such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), Massachusetts students' achievement has improved and is among the highest reported for the states.



Proponents of the reforms credit the high-stakes nature of The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) for much of the progress in achievement. In 2003, 95 percent of the high school graduating class had passed both reading and math exams and qualified to graduate. Passing rates among minorities, however, were much lower—88 percent of blacks passed both exams, as did 83 percent of Hispanics. Critics of the reforms object to high-stakes decisions determined by test scores and cite higher school dropouts as a negative result of the testing environment. Also, in April 2004, a Superior Court ruled that state financing was not enough to fulfill opportunities to meet all of the state standards, especially in low-income school districts.

This context of a steady course on standards-based reforms accompanied by equally steady misgivings by advocacy groups and others formed the backdrop for the Massachusetts hearing on NCLB. With one of the most active education reform commitments in the country, how was Massachusetts responding to the federal overlay of reforms? The testimony covered many issues, but hearing officers were particularly listening for evidence and opinions in the three areas which PEN has determined to be central to the NCLB strategy: accountability, teacher quality, and building a committed community.



What We Heard About Accountability

Using high-stakes testing as one of the anchors of state accountability is a given in Massachusetts and has had its critics all along. The emphasis on test scores under NCLB reflects that ongoing debate in the state. Those testifying at the Boston hearing unanimously supported accountability. The issue for many witnesses, however, was confusion caused by the federal mandates. “We all need to be on the same page, language and score-wise,” said a panelist representing the Massachusetts PTA.

“So, when I pick up a piece of paper I’m not having to read the definitions and trying to figure out where my child falls within the school, within the district, and within the state.... Proficient in Massachusetts is different than what is proficient in other states, it’s different for what we need on MCAS. There has to be some aligning of the verbiage so we are all talking the same language.”—Anne Walsh, parent, Massachusetts PTA

The requirements for meeting accountability standards frequently were blamed for severe budget cuts impacting classrooms throughout the state. Panelists, both parents and students, described overcrowded classrooms, lack of access to advanced classes, teacher dismissals, and curtailing of electives. Accountability is important, said a parent from a rural area, but the increased emphasis on testing and its funding has caused “irreparable damage.”



A school principal from the Ashfield School called for a constitutional guarantee of adequately funded public schools, saying that this was the only way to get enough clout to assure stable funding. And a community organizer for an Hispanic student advocacy group told the hearing that Hispanic parents were in favor of testing, but they “are against the fact that their children attend schools which lack the resources necessary to make them successful on these tests. That’s what they are against.”

Another panelist worried that MCAS and its use for certifying schools under NCLB failed to measure skills, such as critical thinking, that are valued by employers and post-secondary institutions. Nor does the law encourage the use of community resources, said a representative from the Boston Private Industry Council, but because of the emphasis on testing, “community engagement takes a backseat.”

The NCLB added focus on accountability has troublesome consequences for several sub-groups of students, according to the panelists.

- NCLB wording on the testing of English-language learners has heightened “a political fight between the pro-and anti-bilingual forces,” said Lee Valentine, language rights policy director for the Mass English-Plus Coalition. The NCLB language regarding the redesignation, or mainstreaming, of English language learners creates a bias against two-way bilingual programs, he

“Without the proper funding, President Bush, Gov. Romney and all legislators are sure changing the future of our children and our nation. As a parent, I applaud the goal set for No Child Left Behind, but I decry the lack of funding to support it.”

—Bonnie Graves,
parent, Mohawk
Trail Regional
School District

explained. Moreover, MCAS does not have an adequate measure of English language learners, others testified.

- The emphasis on sub-groups delineated in NCLB has detracted from the needs of gifted children, testified a pediatrician who specializes in caring for children with attention deficit disorders. Gifted children who have learning disabilities but have mastered most of the basic learning needed to pass tests are being neglected and denied services, such as diagnostic testing, she said.

- Some parents of students with disabilities feared that NCLB testing requirements would lead to labeling and re-isolation of their children within schools. A parent who works with the Federation for Children with Special Needs had mixed feelings about NCLB. He acknowledged greater collaboration between regular and special education teachers, but “I cringe because I ask myself: Will the leadership in a higher performing school really honor a school choice request from a family from an under-performing school if the student

has a disability?... Will the students with disabilities be left behind at under-performing schools? Once enrolled in a school, will the teachers really welcome students with disabilities into the general curriculum...?”

On the other hand, one parent, who said she has spoken out against using a single test to measure student progress, believed the travails of finding a proper placement for her disabled child would have been avoided had NCLB been in place for her. “I love this law,” she said, “because I think it’s saying we are accountable to all students.”



What We Heard About Teacher Quality

A “highly qualified teacher” in Massachusetts must hold a valid teacher’s license (preliminary, initial, or professional) and demonstrate subject matter competency in the areas he/she teaches. Massachusetts reports that 94 percent of its teachers in core academic subjects are highly qualified—96 percent in low poverty school districts and 88 percent in high-poverty school districts. While the panelists at the hearing did not make teacher quality a major issue, some of those testifying indicated they did not believe the definition used by the state guarantees that a teacher is competent.

First of all, the organizer representing Hispanic issues said parents in her group were “shocked” to learn that their children’s teachers might not be qualified. They had received no information about this NCLB requirement.

There were concerns that teachers did not have the proper skills for teaching in diverse classrooms. A student from the Mohawk Trail Regional high school suggested that money spent on MCAS would be better used to fund observations of classroom teachers “to make sure they are really good and not just certified.” A parent who works with parents of children with disabilities praised NCLB’s emphasis on using scientifically based research practices, but wanted to know how to get the information about best practices. “The teachers don’t have it, I promise you,” she said.

Similarly, the plea to expand the concept of what it means for students to be proficient to encompass multiple talents and skills means “a huge leap for teachers who are not adept at teaching critical thinking skills,” said a community representative.



What We Heard About Building a Committed Community

NCLB mentions parent involvement innumerable times and relies on specific choices for parents—to transfer out of persistently low-performing schools and/or to enroll their children in supplemental educational services—as the mainstays of its parent choice policies. Those testifying at the Boston hearing challenged both the premise and the implementation of these policies.

Parents wanted all schools to be good. “Students leaving one school and going to another does not guarantee their success,” said a Springfield parent. “We need to know what is wrong in schools that are failing.” A Boston parent had two tales to tell. His daughter transferred to suburban schools through an interdistrict plan and was prepared for and accepted at a four-year institution. His son attended a city high school, which the parent did not believe prepared him well, and he failed to meet MCAS requirements for graduation. Nevertheless, he told the hearing that his daughter paid a “high price” to attend school out of the district, and that he felt the schools should have given his son a better education “without my son having to go to another community.”



"I don't think moving the child is the answer, although I would never sacrifice my child. I think what it does is create a majority of under-performing schools rather than working with the school to become performing. Moving the kids to a few schools I call the underground railroad. It only creates this little systemic change, and it doesn't actually help the problem because the school is still going to be under performing. We need to work with the schools that we have now."

—Karen Wontan,
Boston parent

A Springfield parent, who said he was fortunate that his children were in a charter school, nonetheless criticized policies that penalize schools for low performance. "When a school is low performing," he said, "more money should go toward that school. It shouldn't be penalized or stigmatized in the neighborhood or community because...that stigmatization means it will really not be able to get enough money." The whole school system, he added, should be held accountable.

Parents also are not getting the information they need to make choices. A parent who works for a group funded by the Federation for Children with Special Needs estimated that one-third of the families who contact her "are confused, not informed or misinformed about their rights covered under the education reforms." Advocacy groups can provide information, said another representative of such a group, but it usually is only the savvy parent who takes advantage of such resources. The parents she works with who transferred their child out of a school or found supplemental services "are the most informed, so the children who may need it (the choices) the most, their parents are not having access to those kinds of resources." The representative of the Massachusetts PTA noted that money intended to improve communication with parents was spent on "putting out report cards that are very confusing to parents." Another parent working with parents of children with disabilities said schools and districts were not always forthcoming with data about disabled children.



Parents and students called for greater outreach to parents, using non-traditional channels, and full funding of parent centers. Parents may be receiving information in traditional ways, such as written announcements about NCLB and report cards, said an advocacy worker with Hispanic families, “but they do not know what they mean.” Schools may say that they send home mailings and hold open houses, “but that doesn’t mean that parents understand what are the implications” of the law.

“(P)arent engagement was or is the backbone of NCLB, but (our parents) are without a safe place...to be able to advocate and to learn about these services. It could be outside the school, perhaps hosted at a community organization, perhaps hosted at churches, perhaps hosted at local gathering places where folks can get this information about the choices that parents have.”

–Melissa Colon, Coordinator, Iniciativa

Even when information on choices is available, at least one parent found the offer to be hollow. As soon as she received notice that her son was enrolled in a low-performing school and could transfer to a higher performing one, she phoned the Parent Center in her school zone but was told there were no more slots available. She then applied for supplemental services, but after several weeks of searching, she was told he was not eligible because he was not low income. Eligible or not, this parent wanted to be better informed.

“I’d want to be informed as to what my options are, even though it did turn out that because my family is not qualified for free or reduced lunch, I didn’t have access to them (the options of the law) because that at least gives me some idea of where I stand, and that way I am able to (see) if there is anything I can do as a parent to help inform all the parents and tell them, ‘maybe you can do something to help change it.’”

–Karen Wontan,
Boston parent



Public Education Network Online Survey Results

From August 10 through November 17, 2004, Public Education Network, through its GiveKidsGoodSchools.org advocacy website, conducted a survey on various aspects of *No Child Left Behind*. The online survey garnered 12,000 responses from people around the country who joined in this vibrant and vital national debate on public education.

PEN analyzed the data, which was disaggregated by state, to provide a snapshot of knowledge and attitudes about *No Child Left Behind*. The results for Massachusetts are on the following pages.



Demographics (228 respondents)

Age

Under 18	0%
18-24	4%
25-34	16%
35-50	46%
50-65	31%
Over 65	3%

Race/Ethnicity

African-American	3.5%
Asian or Pacific Islander	.5%
Hispanic/Latino/Mexican	2%
Native American or Alaskan Native	2%
White	88%
Other	4%

Gender

Female	84%
Male	16%

Education

Less Than High School	0%
High School Grad or GED	6%
Some College	14%
Four-year College Degree or More	80%



Demographics (cont.)

Please identify yourself (check all that apply)

Educator	47%
Elected Official	4%
Parent/Guardian of Current Public School Student	43%
Parent/Guardian of Former Public School Student	22%
Community Activist	22%
Concerned Community Member	55%
Business Person	8%

Did you vote in the last election? (check all that apply)

School board election	66%
Mayor	44%
State legislator	80%
Governor	84%
US Congress	78%
US President	87%
None of the above	5%

Please identify the type of school(s) your child(ren) attend. (check all that apply)

Public school	58%
Private school (non-religious)	9%
Parochial or religious school	5%
Home school	4%
Too young to attend school	6%
I do not have children	23%



How They Responded to the Survey Questions

Have you heard of the NCLB Act?

Yes	98%
No	2%

What do you know about NCLB?

Have heard of the law, but know little about its provisions	16%
Know about some provisions of the law	57%
Have an in-depth knowledge of the law	27%

Where have you received most of your information about NCLB? (check all that apply)

Parents	14%
Teachers	29%
Administrators	43%
Other school personnel	15%
Community organizations	23%
Local newspapers	40%
Local television	18%
Radio	18%
National media	38%

Do you believe NCLB is:

A good law and should be continued without change	8%
A law that needs changing	71%
A law that should be repealed	21%

Does NCLB require too much testing, too little, just right?

Too much	66%
Too little	4%
Just right	7%
Don't know	23%

Do you believe that EVERY child in the country will score at grade level or above by the end of the 2013 school year, as required by NCLB?

Yes	0%
No	89%
Unsure	11%



Should states and school districts be required to report test scores on the basis of disability, income, English language proficiency, race/ethnicity?

Yes	55%
No	23%
Unsure	32%

Do you believe that a single test can tell if the entire student body needs academic improvement?

Yes	4%
No	95%
Unsure	1%

Do you believe that a single test can tell if the individual students are performing satisfactorily?

Yes	6%
No	92%
Unsure	2%

Do you believe that every child should have a qualified teacher?

Yes	97%
No	1%
Unsure	2%

Do you believe that, by 2005, every school will meet the NCLB requirement that all teachers must be qualified in the core subjects that they teach?

Yes	14%
No	73%
Unsure	13%

Have you received information from you school district about the qualifications of teachers in your schools?

Yes	41%
No	59%



How would you rate the teachers in your local schools?

No qualified teachers	0%
Some qualified teachers	19%
Many qualified teachers	54%
All qualified teachers	10%
I have no way of judging	16%

Have schools in your community been labeled as “needing improvement” or “failing” because of NCLB?

Yes	44%
No	35%
Unsure	21%

Are you getting enough information about the performance of the schools in your community?

Yes	46%
No	54%

Has NCLB made a difference in any of the following areas? (check all that apply)

Access to information about schools	30%
Student performance	17%
Parental involvement	12%
Teacher quality	14%
None of the above	54%



Have you been asked to become involved in any of the following educational activities related to NCLB? (check all that apply)

Developing state standards	4%
Developing the state test required by NCLB	1%
Developing the state and/or local report cards required by NCLB	2%
Developing the district Title I parent involvement policy	4%
Giving input into the district annual Title I program	8%
Making recommendations for what constitutes a “highly qualified teacher” under NCLB	4%
Participating in the improvement team for schools that were identified as needing improvement under NCLB	7%
None of the above	84%

NLCB gives parents and students attending low-performing schools a choice option (transferring to another public school within the school district).

Do you think this option will help students perform better academically?

Yes	32%
No	68%

NLCB gives parents and students attending low-performing schools a supplemental educational services option (providing tutoring beyond the regular school day to help students meet the standards).

Do you think this option will help students perform better academically?

Yes	76%
No	24%



For More Information . . .

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