

# No Child Left Behind in PENNSYLVANIA

## Students Speak Out

### PENNSYLVANIA NCLB HEARING

WQED Multimedia • Pittsburgh  
December 8, 2005 • 9:00 AM–NOON  
Local hearing partner: **Mon Valley Education Consortium**, McKeesport

### PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Lancaster Foundation for Educational  
Enrichment  
Philadelphia Education Fund

### HEARING OFFICERS

**Amanda Broun**, Senior Vice President, Public Education Network, Washington, DC  
**Ronald Cowell**, President, Education Policy & Leadership Center, Harrisburg, PA  
**Linda Croushore**, Executive Director, Mon Valley Education Consortium, McKeesport, PA  
**William Isler**, President, Family Communications, Pittsburgh, PA  
**Geraldine Jones**, Dean, California University of Pennsylvania, California, PA  
**Thomas Knight**, Superintendent, East Allegheny School District, North Versailles, PA  
**Janis Risch**, Acting Executive Director, Good Schools Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA  
**P. Michael Sturla**, Lancaster County Democratic Representative, Lancaster, PA

### STUDENT WITNESSES

Students from the school districts listed below gave testimony at the hearing.

**Allegheny County:** Duquesne City School District • East Allegheny School District • McKeesport Area School District • Pittsburgh Public Schools  
**Fayette County:** Brownsville Area School District  
**Lancaster County:** Lancaster School District  
**Northampton County:** Bethlehem Area School District  
**Philadelphia County:** Philadelphia City School District

The Pennsylvania hearing, one of nine held on NCLB across the country from September 2005 to January 2006, focused exclusively on student testimony. 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.

Funding for the hearing was provided by Philip Morris USA.

*Everybody has been put into an awkward position, and we all have to come together to figure out what we need to do about it.*

Philadelphia high school student

**D**uring a sometimes emotional, always revealing public hearing, Pennsylvania students testified about the effect of No Child Left Behind on their schools. The students came from different communities, but all had reached a similar conclusion: public education in the Commonwealth is unequal, and standardized testing is making the situation worse.

This theme characterized a Pennsylvania hearing that gave students – one of the audiences most affected by the law – an opportunity to tell their side of the NCLB story. The three-hour hearing was held in Studio A of station WQED-TV, the same studio where Mr. Roger's Neighborhood was taped for many years. Despite the comfortable setting, the students shared feelings and opinions about some uncomfortable realities, namely, the pressure on them to perform academically when they did not have the necessary resources, and the focus on tests they felt had no relevance to their academic plans.

### How Students See Testing

The Pennsylvania hearing focused almost exclusively on student testimony, and students studied NCLB for several weeks prior to the hearing.

The NCLB requirement that schools make adequate yearly progress (AYP) based on Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) results generated mixed reactions from students. Whether they live in high- or low-income communities, the emphasis on testing has changed what students learn. A student from Lancaster said that while midterm exams once measured student knowledge of broad subjects such as the Cold War, “now teachers have to give us a comprehension test that basically asks if we can understand a paragraph or paraphrase a certain event.” A Philadelphia student said that because of testing, the district’s new core curriculum requires teachers “to be on a certain page and a certain chapter on a certain day and certain time. They get these big books that tell them how to teach and have no time to do the creative things they used to do.”

Students described losing school time so that teachers can take workshops on PSSA standards, the elimination of block scheduling to accommodate more courses, and having less access to teachers who used to be assigned to honors classes such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. “We feel a little bit left out because

we are trying to push ourselves as far as we can go,” said an IB student from Lancaster. A student from East Allegheny High School resented this emphasis on the PSSA:

*I'm not going to college for the PSSAs....If I'm going to school to learn Algebra II, I'm going to learn Algebra II, and I don't want to hear about the standards of what's going to be on this test....Colleges don't even look at that. They look at your SAT scores, they look at your GPA. So, basically get off our backs about it.*

Others said their college-going peers tend to pay little attention to the PSSAs and focus more on college admissions tests. In lower-income, lower-performing schools, however, these state tests loom as threats with students being told they would not graduate if they did poorly on the tests, or that their schools would be taken over by the state. This was the experience of a student from Duquesne High School, which is on the NCLB needs-improvement list. “Sometimes the pressure gets to you,” she said. “You try to do good, but then you end up failing. You try to figure out why because you studied.” She felt teachers were more interested in threatening students “than really teaching you what you’re supposed to know.”

Just as students in higher-income schools felt they were missing out on learning opportunities because of the testing, students in low-income schools regretted the loss of electives and occupational courses that kept them engaged. One Philadelphia student said that most of the students who entered the ninth grade with her are no longer in school. “They are not interested,” she said, “because the classes that used to be offered like culinary arts and mechanics were taken away.” College is not for everybody, she added.

Students were not in favor of lowering standards, but they were frustrated by classroom instruction that did not accommodate the students’ differing skill levels. They believe teachers spend more time with the lowest-performing students and suggested smaller classes, two teachers to a classroom, more time to meet standards for unprepared students, and even alternate kinds of assessments for students with different interests. They also recommended greater use of performance assessments, end-of-course exams, or a balance between test scores and grade point averages in evaluating school performance.

Statistics	Total Schools <sup>1</sup>	% fail to make AYP	% schools in improvement	# LEAs	% LEAs fail to make AYP	% LEAs in improvement	Graduation rate <sup>2</sup>	Per pupil expenditure <sup>3</sup>
<b>PA 2003–04</b>	<b>3,009</b>	<b>18.8%</b>	<b>11.0%</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>42.2%</b>	<b>5.4%</b>	<b>87%</b>	<b>\$9,261</b>
United States 2003–04	90,237	24.7%	11.4%	13,959	28.5%	12.8%	74.9%	\$8,308
<b>PA 2004–05</b>	<b>3,011</b>	<b>23.2%</b>	<b>9.9%</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>38.4%</b>	<b>6.6%</b>	<b>88%</b>	<b>\$9,638</b>
United States 2004–05	89,493	25.6%	12.9%	13,878	23.7%	12.4%	Not avail.	\$8,618

### Testing Inequities

Some students felt well prepared for college-level work, while others were scared of what lay ahead. Their views were determined more by where they live than by any other factor. This also colored their perceptions as to whether NCLB had improved conditions for learning. Students from higher-achieving schools praised their teachers and parents and even thanked their schools for providing extra support that put them on a college track. But a Duquesne high school student described things differently, saying that, because of NCLB “we’re more focused on the standardized tests, and extracurricular activities...that could have helped me with my career and what I want to do in college have been dropped...I feel like they’re preparing me just to do a test over and over again.”

Rep. Michael Sterla, a hearing officer who represents Pennsylvania’s 96th District, noted that high mobility rates, especially in urban schools, make it difficult to teach and to meet accountability goals. When asked about mobility and dropout rates in their schools, the students revealed what dramatically different lives they lead. A student from the Lower Moreland school district estimated that 90 percent of his friends who entered first grade with him are still in

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

<sup>2</sup> Percentages taken from Pennsylvania State Report Cards for 2003-2004 and 2004-2005, available at: [http://www.paayp.com/state\\_report.html](http://www.paayp.com/state_report.html).

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

his high school class. By contrast, a senior attending a Pittsburgh magnet school was one of several urban students telling a much different story. Since ninth grade, he said, “all my friends from years ago disappeared. They’ve been put in jail, they’ve been shot or killed, they’ve been having children.”

Dropout rates are a NCLB compliance indicator, but students described the dilemma faced by low-income schools where the lack of family and community support, and general feelings of alienation, encourage students to leave school. A Brownsville Area high school student said that when his peers got to high school “their attitudes changed. They don’t care about classes anymore. They don’t want to be there.” Jobs are a major reason students drop out, according to several students.

While college-bound students in higher-income communities were merely irritated by the imposition of standardized testing on their goals, less privileged students faced significant barriers. The Duquesne student who missed out on electives said his school did not even have supplies for his career interest, graphic design. The most compelling testimony on the disparity of resources, however, came from a Philadelphia student

*For the last three years, I've known that I wanted to go to the University of Pennsylvania's international studies and business program. But I haven't taken calculus because it is not offered at my school, and I haven't been able to take adequate levels of Spanish. So, my desire to go to the University of Penn sort of feels crushed. I'm applying to other schools, but having that goal and that one dream of going to that ideal school, I now feel left out.*

This student believes more advanced courses are not available because his school focuses on classes that prepare students for the PSSAs. In ninth grade, he took a required PSSA course instead of algebra and made the highest grade in his class, but at the end of the school year “I didn’t know much about algebra.”

Listening to urban students talk about these issues, a Lower Moreland student wished that the attention his school pays to college aspirations could become a model for urban schools. “From what I've heard today,” he said, “many of your schools have been hindered greatly by the amount of change and the amount of emphasis that has been placed on passing these tests, and it has hindered your abilities to maybe get into college or learn the intangible [things] needed to succeed in college and in the workplace.” A Lancaster student offered this vision of education policy:

*I think that one of the federal government's concerns should not be whether people can score proficient on an exam but, rather, whether they will graduate from high school knowing how to be effective members of the workforce...and know how to function as citizens....College preparation is extremely important, but if you are taught how to think, how to analyze, and how to interact with people, you will automatically pick up all the skills that you need to be an effective member of a workforce....It is much more important to emphasize what we need to make our society stronger and to make democracy stronger.*

	Student Enrollment <sup>1</sup> 2004-2005	Per Pupil Expenditure 2004-2005	Students in Title I Schools <sup>2</sup>	Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch	Students with IEPs	English Language Learners	2002 Graduation Rate <sup>3</sup>			
							All	Black	Hispanic	White
<b>Pennsylvania</b>	<b>1,815,170</b>	<b>\$9,638</b>	<b>61.9%</b>	<b>31.3%</b>	<b>14.1%</b>	<b>(*)</b>	<b>80%</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>(*)</b>	<b>86%</b>
US	48,367,410	\$8,618	49.7%	36.3%	13.6%	10.6%	71%	56%	52%	78%

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> *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.

<sup>4</sup> Data were missing for more than 20 percent of schools or districts.

<sup>5</sup> Insufficient data to calculate graduation rate.

## The Influence of Teachers

NCLB mandates that, by the start of the 2006–07 school year, all students will be taught by “highly qualified” teachers. As with testing and resource issues, the quality of teaching varied greatly with geography.

A Lower Moreland student described teachers who set high expectations for all students, stayed after school to give help, attended school functions such as debate and sports competitions to support their students, and, after parents, are “the most important influence on us.” A Pittsburgh magnet school student, however, wished for more “teachers who care about us.” Some teachers want their students to succeed, she said, “but there are the other teachers who just want a paycheck and just don’t care.” Lancaster students said that having teachers who don’t care about their students contributes to students’ decisions to drop out.

The NCLB definition of “highly qualified” – a teacher with certification who meets other standards set by the state – was so basic that it did not generate much discussion except when it came to caring teachers. Some certified teachers, said a Philadelphia student, “are the ones who don’t care.” She gave this example:

*In my school, a lot of our students don't graduate. A lot of our students don't meet the requirements, and it's because they don't have the drive and desire to succeed and to learn. That falls under the teacher's responsibility because a lot of our teachers aren't showing that they care for us. For one of our teachers, this is a sad story. She is from our neighborhood. She knows the situations that the students go through. She can relate to us. She was one of the teachers that the students loved, and after they graduated, they would come and visit her. It was unfortunate that she wasn't certified. So, at the end of last year, she was fired.*

## Other NCLB Issues

After-school tutoring, which NCLB says must be offered to students in schools that have failed to meet adequate yearly progress for two years, also plays out differently for students depending on geography. In Lancaster, Bethlehem, and McKeesport, the option to get extra help is left up to students. A Bethlehem student said only about a fourth of students take advantage of the tutoring “because most of them don’t want to go to college or probably don’t think they can make it.” A Lancaster student decried the transfer of funds from regular academic programs to the after-school program and to transfer options, which, he said, “no kids really take advantage of.”

In Philadelphia, however, after-school tutoring is mandatory for students who are failing, or “you won’t pass.” One student urged schools to get in touch with parents before students reach the failing point. It would be helpful, he said, for parents to come into the schools and understand that some teachers do not care about the students and “that we’re not getting the extra push that we need.” Even making after-school tutoring mandatory has its limits, according to a cynical student from McKeesport:

*A lot of us just blew it [PSSA] off, and it was stated that if you did blow it off or didn't score proficient, then you had to have tutoring. So you have ten days of tutoring, and if you didn't go to tutoring, then you had to go to after school. If you didn't do that, you would end up getting suspended. So, if you did go to tutoring, you had to retake the test. And if you got at least one point better than what you got on the first time you took the test, then you were okay. But if you failed it a second time, then you had to take it again. If you screwed up that time, then you just got a pat on the back and a thanks for trying. Basically, it's just a pointless system.*