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In Leaving No Child Behind Have We Forsaken Individual Learners, Teachers, Schools, and Communities?

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The education of America's youth and the concern that our children—from all backgrounds and means—are not achieving to the high standards expected is the current hot topic in the public view. Children's reading achievement is at the center of this conversation. Calls for holding educators and schools accountable are rampant in the press and in forums sponsored by the federal government. The federal government's attention to the nation's schools, particularly to children who are not achieving at the basic levels in high-poverty schools, has convinced a large proportion of the general citizenry that the government cares about quality education and is willing to do something to improve the current situation. After all, partisan politicians, known to not pass bills sponsored by the opposing party, voted in bipartisan spirit for the recent No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation (retrieved July 23, 2003, from www.nochildleftbehind.gov). The NCLB Act of 2001: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) is the law authorizing the majority of federal K-12 education programs; it was signed into law on January 8, 2002. The title of the act—No Child Left Behind—is a phrase borrowed from the Children's Defense Fund and the documentation includes over 1,000 pages of description and another 1,000 pages of guidelines and regulations. The reauthorization period spans six years (fiscal years 2002-2007), which extends beyond the next Presidential election. In the next section of this paper I will overview the legislation components, drawing from presentations provided by the American Federation of Teachers website on the ESEA (retrieved September 18, 2002 from <http://www.aft.org/eSEA/index.html>).

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE NCLB LEGISLATION

Beginning in 1994, states were required to develop standards and assessments that were to challenge students served by Title 1 to perform at higher levels. State educational agencies are required to identify schools in need of improvement and to take corrective actions for continuously low-performing schools and districts whose students fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) toward meeting challenging state standards. The NCLB law determines what progress on these assessments should look like and what sanctions should be leveled when schools and states do not meet progress goals. ESEA funding was set at \$12.3 billion with monies targeted in the following areas:

- Title 1: Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged (\$10.35 billion);
- Title 2: Preparing, Training, and Recruiting High-Quality Teachers and Principals;
- Title 3: English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act;
- Title 4: 21st Century Schools;
- Title 5: Promoting Informed Parent Choice and Innovative Programs;
- Title 6: Flexibility and Accountability; and
- Title 7: Native American and Alaskan Education Programs.

The Title 1 portion of the program, targeted at improving academic achievement of the disadvantaged, serves approximately 13,000 school districts (out of 15,000 school districts nationwide), or 47,000 school buildings and 12.5 million students. Title 1 funds can be spent on preschool programs, to reduce class size or provide other related educational supports by hiring additional teachers and paraprofessionals, and for extended school day/extended year programs. Monies can also be used to implement exemplary instructional programs and to provide professional development for teachers and paraprofessionals. Title 1 also deals with student testing, specifically annual reading and math assessments in grades 3-8 and testing at the secondary level (grades 10-12). States will be allowed to select and administer their own tests and these assessments must be aligned with state academic standards, thus allowing students' achievement to be compared from year to year based on measurable, verifiable, and accepted professional assessment standards; these assessments must be in place by 2005-06. A total of \$387 million has been appropriated to pay for the first year of developing new assessments.

The accountability aspect of Title 1 requires that states determine and set an AYP definition so that all students are expected to improve annually and reach the state-defined "proficient" level on math and reading assessments in 12 years. The government's goal is for test scores to serve as a monitor and to ensure that different cohort groups—kids in grade 3 in 2002 and kids in grade 3 in 2004—show consistent achievement. In addition, test data must be disaggregated and reported by race, poverty, English language learners (ELL), and disabilities, and each of these subgroups must make progress. Test results from individual schools will be examined, and if any subgroup does not make progress then that school is labeled "in need of improvement." It should be noted that 95% of each subgroup must take the assessment. States are allowed to choose where to set the initial "proficient bar" based on the lowest achieving demographic subgroup or lowest achieving schools in the state, whichever is higher. Once this initial bar is set, the state is required to raise the bar in gradual but equal increments to reach the goal of 100% proficiency in 12 years.

CONSEQUENCES OF INADEQUATE PROGRESS

Schools that do not make AYP for two consecutive years are placed into the "school improvement" category. They are supposed to receive technical assistance and funding from the district to turn around performance. However, it has been predicted that funding will not be sufficient to cover the costs, based on the number of schools that will not make sufficient progress (see Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002). School districts will be required to offer public school choice to all students in "school-improvement schools" no later than the first day of the school year after the school has been identified as needing improvement. If more than one school is making AYP in a district, then parents must be offered the choice of moving their child to more than one school; parents' preferences must be taken into account. However, parents cannot transfer their children to those schools that have been identified as needing "corrective action" or that are "persistently dangerous." In addition, if schools do not make AYP for two consecutive years, districts will be required to pay for transportation costs of students that want out of these schools; the district must use a portion of Title 1 funds to pay for transportation (unless a lesser amount is needed to meet the requirements). The law also states that districts must spend not less than 10% of their Title 1 funds on professional development for teachers and principals and districts.

Schools that do not make AYP for three consecutive years will remain in the school improvement category and districts must pay for public school choice. These districts must also provide low-income students in failing schools with supplemental services, drawing upon some Title 1 funds to pay for these services. Districts must use a portion of Title 1 funds for supplemental services or transportation for public school choice, and the amount spent on each child for supplemental services cannot be more than the Title 1 allotment for the child.

If schools do not make AYP for four consecutive years, then districts must implement a corrective action plan which includes options such as implementing a new curriculum, professional development, and/or replacing certain staff, and they must continue to offer public school choice and supplemental services. And if schools do not make AYP for five consecutive years, the district has to make significant changes such as a state takeover of the school, hiring a private management contractor, or converting the school to a charter school; the district must simultaneously continue to offer public school choice and supplemental services.

The new legislation also requires that states and school districts provide public "report cards" on student achievement on state assessments disaggregated by subgroups. Reports must also include comparison of students at various levels of achievement on assessments, graduation rates, number and names of schools identified in need of improvement, comparisons of actual academic achievement for all groups of students as compared to annual objectives, professional qualifications of teachers, and percentages of students not tested (retrieved September 18, 2002, from <http://www.aft.org/esea/index.html>)

Despite the talk about flexibility and local control, the NCLB law provides more federal influence on how the money is spent, yet woefully little money to create tests or

to support the schools that do not make AYP. Further, the law is full of contradictions within and across the regulations and many components have not been presented in detail. State education personnel and local districts have an enormous number of regulations and rules to assimilate. They are under great pressure to succeed because critical funding could be withheld if they do not make AYP, literally ensuring that they will have schools judged as failing.

NCLB AND THE NEGATIVE POSITIONING OF THE PROFESSION

On the surface, the federal government's message in NCLB is one of supporting education and all of our nation's children. This message is tough to criticize when much of the general public sees this action as a solution to a long-standing, unresolved problem. But one needs to only slightly scratch the surface of the NCLB Act to realize that it also positions teachers and other school personnel as being the primary cause of students' low achievement: Educators are characterized as untrustworthy and accountability measures are needed to ensure that quality teaching and learning occur. This message is clearly evident when we examine an excerpt from a text composed by the federal government and located at the NCLB website under the title "For Parents" (retrieved July 23, 2003, from <http://www.ed.gov/inits/backtoschool/families/families.pdf>). The specific document is titled: "Back to School, Moving Forward, What 'No Child Left Behind' Means for America's Families" (pp. 8-9).

"Annual Testing: Learning What Works"

"Just as you can't judge a book by its cover, you can't judge a school by its location or its design. Some rundown schools in poor areas are making great progress at improving student performance, while some suburban schools with fancy athletic equipment and new science labs are failing to educate many of their students adequately—particularly their disadvantaged and minority students. The only sure way for parents to know how their children's schools are doing is to examine the regular, objective information on student progress that the president's plan will require all public schools to produce. The best way to obtain that useful information is through standards-based assessments—or tests. Taking a test is like going to a doctor for a check-up. Just like a check-up, a test can tell you what kind of help you need and where you need it most. It also gives your children a chance to demonstrate what they have learned. While tests may intimidate, just like a doctor's office, they are safe and effective. If a state fails to use standardized tests, the state will have a hard time making sure no child is forgotten and no classroom is slipping through the cracks. The same is true for districts and schools. Through effective testing, communities and parents can learn which schools are doing the best. They can also discover the methods that work the best and encourage their wider adoption."

The focus on standardized testing and high achievement scores and the rhetoric of accountability inherent in the government-authored documents promote the idea that complex problems related to teaching and learning require simple and easy solutions that can be monitored by test results. These solutions are presented to the public in a time of

"no new taxes," a time when many believe that we need to reduce wasteful spending, shore up failing schools or close them, and ensure that those left behind in a pared down education system are accountable to the public for their work. This production model flourishes amidst the threat of firing teachers and administrators if poor production (e.g., student test scores) is exhibited. The production efficiency and the accountability complement is played publicly as a great political cause and a diversion from the complex issues that we, as a nation, need to face, among them such concerns as the development of our citizenry and escalating poverty.

In this paper I critique how recent federal legislation—in the form of the NCLB Act—has been touted as providing the answer to addressing the educational needs of all children as it diverts attention from actual problems. The legislation has many positive components—the most important being the goal of providing high-quality education for all of the nation's youth regardless of their race, class, ethnicity or abilities. But the bulk of the legislation, with its focus on accountability and the intended sanctions for schools that do not attain AYP increases defined by test scores, is diverting and will continue to divert politicians, policy makers, taxpayers, parents, and educators' efforts away from what we should be focusing on: the specific learning needs of our high-poverty, low-achieving youth and the resources and support needed by their teachers, schools, families, and communities to effectively develop high-quality education.

Most critically and cynically, the individual kids touted as the beneficiaries of this legislation are currently those who have the highest potential of actually getting lost in the confusion and political discourse that have accompanied the legislation as teachers, administrators, parents, and students seek to respond to the consuming focus on standards, scientifically based curriculum and high-stakes testing. I posit that as designed and currently enacted, the legislation will actually leave behind the very communities, parents, and children we do not want to forsake.

In part one of this paper, I describe the current context in which parents and educators find themselves. In part two, I present texts created by the government for parents and the general citizenry and housed on a website, that describe the NCLB Act and parents' views on this legislation. In part three of the paper, I discuss why the NCLB legislation is so worrisome in light of the real problems facing us in society and education, such as poverty. Within this discussion, I want to present various constituents' perspectives on this law, particularly Americans in urban areas of the country, many of whom are the parents of high-poverty youth or youth of color. Finally, in part four of the paper I pose solutions for what we, as National Reading Conference (NRC) members, need to do in light of the current legislation and with respect to societal and educational needs.

PART ONE: THE CURRENT CONTEXT

We find ourselves in a state of general unrest, fear of terrorism and war, and rapidly diminishing resources. There is no end in sight. Our country is investing in global economic growth in which few people benefit, rather than investing in a higher quality of

life for the majority of people who occupy most of the land on the planet. Let us examine one example of the perceived lack of investment in a higher quality of life and its results: the public's perceptions of how well they are raising their kids.

A nonpartisan, nonprofit research and citizen education organization recently released a report entitled *A Lot Easier Said Than Done: Parents Talk About Raising Children in Today's America* (Public Agenda Online, 2002, retrieved November 15, 2002, from <http://www.publicagenda.org/specials/parents/parents.htm>). This report was based on national surveys, phone interviews, and focus groups. Parents with children between the ages of 5 and 17 were asked to comment on the challenges they face in raising their children and queried about what strategies they use to support their children's development. Sixty-one percent of parents surveyed rated themselves as fair to poor in raising their kids with 17% of respondents characterizing themselves as "overwhelmed," noting that there is so much stress in their lives. A similar percentage of parents classified themselves as "softies," and one commented, "I'm sometimes too tired to be firm with my child even when I know I should." In addition, 76% of families strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that it is much harder for families to do a good job raising kids when both parents must work.

Surveyors also asked parents how much they worried about the quality of their children's schooling. Parents from high-income families rated low-quality schools as less of a worry (38%) as compared to low-income parents (56%). However, concerns expressed about the quality of schools were minimal compared to fears about protecting kids from strangers, kidnappings, drugs and alcohol, or the negative influence of other kids. Overall, parents are consumed with worry about paying bills, making ends meet, juggling the demands of work and family, and getting good health insurance and medical care for their children.

In *What Kids Need*, a report recently published by the Carnegie Corporation (2002), the authors note that work plays a huge role in the lives of families on both sides of the poverty line. Most moms and dads have to work and are working harder than ever before; that is, they are putting in more hours and are expending more physical and emotional energy. These parents are also working unpredictable or nonstandard hours that make the running of households and childcare arrangements very challenging. More than 25% of low-income working mothers work nontraditional hours, primarily at night, and more than seven million Americans, nearly 50% of them women, hold down more than one job.

Parents are also feeling pressure from recent reports in the popular press about the importance of their role in children's learning in the early years. They are particularly concerned about the role of early experiences that they provide or arrange for their children to have and the impact of these experiences on brain development and the role parents are encouraged to play in their child's cognitive and emotional development. In reflecting upon what kids need, the current work life of parents, and the critical role outlined for caregivers in rearing children, pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton noted, "Many parents may be uncomfortable there [in the spotlight and are] looking for ways not to feel so important. Perhaps it comes from the stress of having so many responsibilities"

(Carnegie Corporation, 2002, p. 49). Dr. Brazelton's notion that parents want out of the spotlight may explain parents' feelings about education and schooling; perhaps many parents push for school accountability so that teachers and schools are held responsible for doing a good job educating their children because parents believe they are unable to find time to fulfill this role adequately themselves. Findings from these two sources indicate that parents are working desperately, trying to make ends meet. Even though some parents worry about the quality of schools, particularly low-income parents or single moms and dads, the majority of parents are far more worried about health care, paying bills, and finding time to spend with their children.

Building a Political Agenda Around Concerns about Schools and Schooling

Now let us look at the federal government's heightened attention and publicizing of education issues and concerns within this broader socioeconomic context. Much of the federal agenda is built on parental concerns, selectively drawn by government officials based on data from recent polls, about students' general educational progress and about parents' roles in this process. A crisis in education is manufactured to promote the need to hold someone accountable for creating the situation and then someone else for improving it. The manufactured crisis in education (cf., Berliner & Biddle, 1995) perpetuates a sense of unrest and federal distrust in our citizenry. The crisis perpetuates the belief that children are not learning what they need to know to perform well on achievement tests, and this lack of learning must be occurring because teachers are incompetent, lazy, and using inappropriate materials and methods. Ultimately, a perspective is promoted that suggests that teachers are not held accountable for ensuring that every child is learning and progressing to a high level every year.

The crisis is amplified when parents read reports that highlight how the U.S. educational system and students' reading and math scores wane in comparison to other countries (e.g., in the recent Programme for International Student Assessment study, Finland was rated as #1 in reading) and this lag offends the competitive nature of most Americans. Citizens also become concerned when National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reports indicate that their state is not in the top 10 in comparison to other states. The NAEP test results (regardless of concerns voiced by academics about the inappropriate cut-off scores) have been appropriated in another attack on educators, and this attack is often effective because the public lacks information about what the test measures and what the levels of "basic" and "proficient" actually mean. In addition, citizens voice displeasure with schools and educators when local newspapers report on the results of state assessment scores with headlines such as "Crucial test scores show little change" (Draper & Walsh, 2002). Parents who study assessment scores for math and reading listed on the front page of their local newspaper are concerned when their kids' school does not measure up with neighboring schools or when their school evidences little or no achievement gains from the previous year. Prestige, for many citizens, is enhanced by the neighborhoods they live in and where their kids go to school. Realtors publish reports rating neighborhoods by school test scores to sell homes for higher prices in high-performing districts.

The focus on education by people outside of the field has been carefully crafted to deflect attention away from complex, critical problems that must also be solved if education is to be improved. These problems include a lack of high-paying jobs, inadequate day care, the lack of housing, and poor health care for families in poverty. Solving educational problems has national appeal; politicians can empower parents to hold schools accountable, allowing themselves to be twice removed when reform plans do not work. Solving the problems of poverty and helping families in need are intractable. With all the current attention focused on education, we are forced to ask if parents are, in fact, overly concerned about the quality of schools, and if so, are test scores and accountability all they are concerned about? What about the quality of teaching and learning and the experiences that occur within schools that keep kids motivated to attend and learn? Examining parents' perspectives on schools and education from several years ago to the present time may help us address the current attention on schools and quality education.

Parents' Perspectives about Schools and Schooling

In *A Place Called School*, John Goodlad (1984) reported the findings of two surveys of parents' perceptions about the goals of schooling, the first of which was conducted in the 1970s. Survey results showed that parents were dissatisfied with their children's schools. The data indicated that parents held a relatively narrow view of the goals of schooling (e.g., the focus should be on learning basic math skills). Goodlad questioned these results, relating that they were influenced by a "back to the basics movement" that was at its height during this time, along with a widely publicized decline in test scores. These factors resulted in schools being criticized by the public and in the press.

A second survey of 8,624 parents, conducted in the 1980s, asked respondents who had children in elementary through secondary schools to "grade their schools." Overall, these parents rated schools with a grade of "B," conveying "substantial satisfaction." In this same survey, parents were asked about the importance of four broad goals of schooling: (a) academic goals, embracing intellectual skills and domains of knowledge; (b) vocational goals, geared to developing readiness for productive work and economic responsibility; (c) social and civic goals, related to preparing students for socialization into a complex society; and (d) personal goals, emphasizing the development of individual responsibility, talent, and free expression.

Parents rated all four goal areas as "very important," with 90% of parents rating academic goals as "very important," 90% of elementary parents rating personal goals as "very important," and 80% of parents with secondary students voicing this opinion (Goodlad, 1984). Seventy-three percent of elementary students' parents ranked social goals as being very important; 66% of junior high students' parents and 64% of secondary school students' parents rated social goals as very important. Teachers and students were also included in the study and analyses related similar rankings with these groups to the rankings of parents.

Clearly, parents and teachers rated intellectual goals as the most important to attain, but the fact that the other goals (social, personal, and vocational) were also considered

essential indicates that those surveyed would be unhappy to see these goals eliminated (Goodlad, 1984). If motivation to attend and participate in learning opportunities matter to adults, it should also be noted that students felt even more strongly about the importance of these goals (social, personal and vocational). Goodlad summed up the results by noting that most parents' goal for their child's education was that their kids "have it all." He also commented that politicians have misinterpreted parents' expectations for schooling (e.g., a focus on the academic skills) and then overreacted with their own sole focus on academics and accountability as the way to improve education.

Although Goodlad's (1984) findings are almost 20 years old, they still seem predictive of parents' desires for their children to "have it all." Goodlad's findings also remind us of the power of various political agendas and the messages portrayed by the media that pick up and sensationalize waning trends in education. For example, in a recent poll (April 2002) conducted by Public Education Network, the largest network of independent-based school reform organizations with members in 28 states, and Education Week National Survey of Public Opinion, 1,050 voting-age Americans surveyed revealed a good sense of what initiatives need funding in today's schools. The report titled "Accountability for All: What Voters Want from Education Candidates" documented that Americans ranked education second to the economy and jobs on their list of issues they were most concerned about. Four out of five Americans stated that quality education for all is a national priority, and 85% said that achieving this goal is important to the nation's future; 9 out of 10 persons polled believed this is an attainable goal. Americans reported that school quality is important because quality public schools build stronger families (24%), improve the local economy (20%) and reduce crime rates (15%).

Americans reported consistent views about how to improve public education nationwide: Only 5% indicated a belief in using the taxpayers' money to pay for private school options and 53% opposed any cuts to education funding, even at the cost of cuts to other services that are deemed essential, such as healthcare, Social Security, law enforcement, and roads and transportation. When asked to rank education items that should not be cut, 38% of Americans rated early childhood their first or second choice followed by reduced class size (35%), teacher training (32%), and teacher pay (25%). Unfortunately, the areas parents highlight for investment or for maintaining are those that will, in all likelihood, not be funded because monies will need to be moved around in school budgets to focus on raising students' test scores.

Survey results also indicate that parents favor requiring students to pass a basic skills test to be promoted to the next grade (74%), but they are concerned about the effects of the new emphasis on testing. For example, 24% of surveyed voters worried that a focus on testing would encourage teaching to the test; 8% thought it would increase drop-out rates. The public is even less supportive of the high-stakes use of data from test scores to judge schools and student performance. Less than half of the respondents stated that they value standardized test scores as an important indicator of school quality while an equal number indicated that they do not find the scores important. In contrast, survey findings that focused on assessing school performance indicated that 76% of parents value information on teacher quality, 74% value student literacy, 74% value information on books and other

learning tools, 67% want information on school budgets, 66% want comparisons of local schools to other schools in the state, and 63% desire data on school safety. The findings from this survey are important in view of the next statistic: 42% of Americans say their decision on where to move their family is influenced by the quality and reputation of schools in their community.

In summary, data from these surveys indicate that the public values public education, wants quality teachers and schools, and is willing to invest or at least not divest in these institutions. Parents' willingness to invest in early childhood programs, reduced class size, and teacher training and pay are interesting, and reflect what parents read in the papers (the need for early childhood vs. remediation later) or what they want for their children (smaller classes and teachers with updated information). Parents appear to believe that schools should be accountable for helping children learn the basic knowledge they need to succeed, but parents expressed concerns about high-stakes tests, and the outgrowth of these foci: teachers teaching to the tests or test results being used as a key indicator to judge students and the quality of schools.

Perspectives on Standards and Testing

In Reality Check 2001, a poll jointly sponsored by Public Agenda Online (2001) and Education Week and funded by the Pew Charitable Trust and GE Fund, public perspectives about setting standards for students' and schools' performances were documented. They surveyed students, parents, teachers, and college professors. Survey results indicate that parents and others believe their schools set high standards and they support this action; parents like knowing how their kids' schools rate on accountability measures as compared to other schools within the district. Parents, teachers, and students did not voice significant dissatisfaction with high-stakes testing in their own schools, but few believe that students' futures should rest on one high-stakes test. All groups strongly opposed basing promotion or graduation solely on the results of testing. The findings of this poll are used selectively in documents on the government's NCLB website (e.g., the last two findings noted above were left out of the report compiled by the government).

Two other findings were selected for inclusion on the government website. First, students voiced little resentment or anxiety over testing and promotion and think the tests are fair. Second, some teachers said standardized tests can motivate kids and diagnose problems and that "real learning" in classrooms is not suffering due to testing. However, large majorities of teachers went on to say that districts are putting too much emphasis on tests and schools are not chiefly to blame when kids do poorly (not reported in government documents). Employers who have been critical of local schools still indicated concerns about students' basic skills. But 64% of these individuals say that today's kids do not graduate from local schools unless they have learned what was expected of them. An area of concern for teacher educators is the perspective held by fellow higher education colleagues—in the content areas outside of schools of education like mathematics, English, and chemistry. Professors in these disciplines noted that students are not well prepared for college and work and significant majorities continue to voice concerns about students' basic skills.

In sum, similar to the results of the Public Education Network/Education Week survey (2002), parents believe in some forms of accountability for kids and schools. They want to know that their kids' schools are providing basic, quality education and this should be reflected in test scores listed by districts/schools in the newspaper. The newspaper is a good way to get this information out to parents (and many parents enjoy seeing how well their kids' schools score compared to other schools). But also, like the previous survey, parents are worried about the use of these tests to penalize students in terms of promotion and graduation. They indicate that other forms of assessment should also be used to make these decisions. The results of polls like those summarized above are used by various groups to sway perspectives and causes. The responses, specifically the language parents use to explain their concerns, have been used by the government to indicate that schools and teachers are not taking responsibility for all kids' learning and that the government must step in to force schools to do a better job.

PART TWO: THE GOVERNMENT'S STRATEGY FOR SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION ON EDUCATION

It is interesting how the lack of rigorous standards and inadequate testing in schools has been posed by the government and media as part of the reason why kids are not learning. Teachers have not been criticized; in fact there are comments on the government website about how teachers are trying to do the best they can (see later section of this paper). So who will serve as the scapegoat for the current problems we have in education and reading achievement in particular? I believe the finger points toward reading researchers.

Reading Researchers and Teacher Educators—Part of the Problem, Not Part of the Solution

For many years reading researchers have been characterized as incessantly arguing among ourselves about which theory better explains how kids learn to read and what methods and materials are needed to further students' literacy development. Our own intellectual processes—engaging in intellectual dialogue and critique, experimentation, and seeking creative solutions to meet individual students' needs—have been used against us. We are viewed as being unwilling to address why many children are not learning to read as they progress through the grades; we have not come up with the "right answer," and we are positioned as continually falling back on the it-is-a-complex-process argument when pressed for a solution.

When attacked, our counterarguments have portrayed us as providing more evidence for our lack of willingness to come up with definitive, scientific research and clear answers about how best to develop children's reading abilities: we are positioned as defensive, self-serving, out-of-touch, and unreasonable. A case in point: people in high positions in government regularly monitor the NRC Listserv and forward to influential senators particular "conspiracy conversations" and other statements written in a moment

of frustration and anger. These messages reinforce arguments that university academics are part of the problem—not the solution.

In fact, educational researchers and teacher educators have now been positioned as the primary reason for many of the current failures in our educational system. This is why we are not part of the current conversation—we are not allowed to be part of the government's solutions. We have been positioned as the problem. This belief about us became totally clear in the What Works Clearinghouse, established in November 2002 by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (formerly OERI) that includes a select group of researchers, who are to address the following problem:

too many children are not getting the quality education they deserve. Our nation's failure to improve our schools rests in part on insufficient and flawed educational research... [and] solid evidence rarely makes it into the hands of practitioners, policy makers and others who need it to guide their decisions... Educators, policymakers, and the public need a central, independent, and trusted source of evidence about what actually works in education. (Retrieved November 24, 2002, from www.w-w-c.org/about).

With a shift from the "great debate" to the "reading wars," the government has stepped in to solve the problem that academics are portrayed as unwilling to solve. And government officials express to the public the best ways to teach children to read. The government is telling parents that their children are more important than these academic wars. This further positioning of academics as being part of the problem, and the government being the solution, is evident in the website information they present to educate the general public about the NCLB legislation. This information is meant to "bring them [parents and the public] on board" as part of the leverage in making this new legislation "work."

Closing the Achievement Gap: Government Documents Used to Inform Parents

In examining the government website targeting parents (retrieved July 23, 2003, from <http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov/parents/index.html>) you see that informing parents and community members about what educational components their child/citizens are entitled to and providing parents with free, useful educational materials are key purposes of the site. I want to focus on the message and the language used by the government—particularly the metaphors—as they deliver their messages. I will also present several documents from the website because I believe that they are visually powerful in conveying a particular message to parents. I quote from the site's homepage:

It's a new era in education and we want you as parents and community members to be part of the transformation. Here on the OFFICIAL NCLB [caps added] website you can find answers to your questions about the new education law signed by President Bush on January 8, 2002. Take Action

In the header of this website there is a link titled "For Parents" and clicking on this link takes you to "Resources"—free booklets with advice, tips, and guides from the

government to help children learn to read and learn. In the next section of this paper, I examine a component of this website titled "Closing the Achievement Gap in America's Public Schools." This site includes a free, downloadable PowerPoint presentation, available for parents and community members to read or use. I analyze slides from this online presentation. I believe it is important for educators to examine what the public is learning from the government about NCLB and how various messages could be shaping citizens' beliefs about their rights as parents, what is best for their children, and what to believe about teachers, schools, and reading experts. In the opening slides from "Closing the Achievement Gap," the government grounds the NCLB legislation on principles of accountability for student performance (intimating that in the past we have not held educators accountable for students' learning); a focus on what works (implying that teachers and researchers are not to be trusted to determine which reading methods or materials foster student learning); the mandate to reduce the bureaucracy and increase flexibility in how schools use money; and the desire to empower parents (or arm them with the knowledge they need to demand better teaching and services from teachers and schools, respectively).

The focus on holding schools accountable and the message that this is the way to raise student achievement is evident in a quote from President George W. Bush on the site (retrieved July 23, 2003, from <http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov/next/closing/slide006.html>):

Accountability: Raise Standards, Raise Hopes

Accountability is an exercise in hope. When we raise academic standards, children raise their academic sights. When children are regularly tested, teachers know where and how to improve. When parents know scores, parents are empowered to push for change. When accountability for our schools is real, the results for our children are real.

Educators should be concerned with the promises made to parents by President Bush (as evidenced by the quote above) and be skeptical about what tests can tell teachers and parents. Tests, Bush claims, are the source for determining what students are learning and what they are not learning and then what needs to be fixed. The message also implies that if scores are low, parents should "push for change."

In a series of additional online slides the case is also built for why we need accountability by documenting that billions of federal dollars have been spent with no results—no closing of the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their more affluent peers. Statistics are presented that highlight findings using language that parents would find disturbing: "60% of poor fourth-graders cannot read at a basic level; U.S. students lag behind their international peers in key subjects; past Federal education policy has lacked focus and has never insisted on results" (retrieved July 23, 2003, from <http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov/next/closing/slide007.html>). The overriding message in this slide is shame: It is shameful that we have wasted money on education endeavors with no results; we should be #1 when compared to other countries in education (as in sports); and Democrats who proceeded the current administration must have been incompetent.

To provide evidence for these shameful results, additional slides are presented that highlight NAEP scores and the drop or lack of positive change in the reading scores for grade 4, particularly during the years of the Clinton administration (1992-2000). Reading score percentile ranks are used to bolster the current government's leave no child behind argument: High-performing students in grade 4 show increases, and low-performing students show decreases (National Center for Educational Statistics, NAEP, The Nation's Report Card Fourth Grade Reading, April 2001, retrieved June 1, 2002, from <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2000/2001499.pdf>). Additional slides note that federal funding for reading will triple (from \$300 million to \$900 million this year) coupled with a new emphasis on using scientifically based instructional materials. In addition, the government declares that standards are "The Road Map to Reform" (retrieved July 23, 2003, from <http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov/next/closing/slide013.html>). For example, standards are characterized as "guideposts for academic achievement, clearly telling teachers, students, and parents where they are going." The subtle message here is that educators do not have an informed sense of curriculum planning and many have been using materials that are not scientific. The effect of poor materials and lack of clear direction in what and how to teach has resulted in teachers potentially using experimental or unproven materials and methods resulting in poor student performance. The government proposes that this is unacceptable when it is clear that what works (e.g., particular materials, methods) to improve reading instruction is available and simply needs to be employed. The text also implies that teachers do not know what literacy skills children should have and be able to employ at various points in their literacy development. The "Road Map" analogy also suggests that there is one, clear path to academic achievement for children and we cannot waste time on alternative methods.

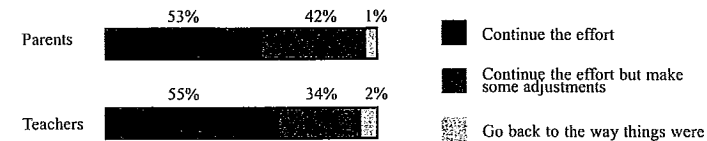
The government site also provides selected survey data to counter arguments against crafting higher standards by noting that parents and teachers support higher academic standards (see Figures 1 and 2). The "rest of this story" was related in an earlier section of this paper. Parents and others surveyed indicated support for local efforts to raise standards and using test scores but only as one part of seeking to raise achievement. All groups strongly opposed basing promotion and graduation solely on one assessment. Likewise, the government presents a small segment of different survey data where the public was asked about the usefulness of statewide tests for evaluating school and student performance. The website reports that "Scores on statewide tests are helpful for parents to keep up with how their children are doing" with Likert scale ratings of ranging from strongly agree 39% to disagree 7% (retrieved July 23, 2003, from <http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov/next/closing/slide019.html>). The unreported "rest of the story" is that parents tend to know about the test scores for their districts and where their district is ranked with others. As educators we know that merely having this ranking data does not mean that parents understand what the test scores actually mean or have knowledge of other factors that would allow them to understand the challenges facing students and educators in specific schools and districts—factors that have deep implications for high or low test scores. Further, changing instructional practices without

Figure 1

Closing the Achievement Gap in America's Public Schools (Slide 14) (retrieved July 23, 2003, from <http://www.nclb.gov/next/closing/slide014.html>)

Parents and Teachers Show Strong Support for Higher Academic Standards

When it comes to this effort toward higher academic standards do you think your school district should:



Source: Public Agenda 12/01

Figure 2

Closing the Achievement Gap in America's Public Schools (Slide 19) (retrieved July 23, 2003, from <http://www.nclb.gov/next/closing/slide019.html>)

Most Americans say that statewide tests are useful for evaluating school and student performance

Scores on statewide tests are helpful for parents to keep up with how their children are doing.



Scores are very useful for parents and the community to evaluate how well their schools are performing.



Scores on statewide tests are very useful for schools to evaluate how well their students are performing.



Source: Belden Russonello & Stewart/BRT 07/00

Legend: Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Somewhat Disagree, Disagree

knowledge of what tests measure could result in parents demanding surface level changes in curriculum, methods of teaching, or staffing that are uninformed by research or best practices and will have debilitating effects on the quality of instruction.

Likewise, students were polled and asked if they thought they had to take too many test and if teachers focused so much on preparing for standardized tests that they neglected other important topics (Figure 3). Most students (over 70%) did not feel that time spent on testing or test preparation was out of proportion. Unreported on the government website were additional findings from this same survey. These additional data indicated that one-fifth of the teachers polled fear that the focus on test preparation is detracting from real learning in schools and 83% fear that teaching to the test could become the norm, with another 50% stating that schools will be overwhelmed with students who fail tests. Large majorities of teachers polled feel that districts are placing too much emphasis on tests and that schools are not chiefly to blame when students do poorly on tests.

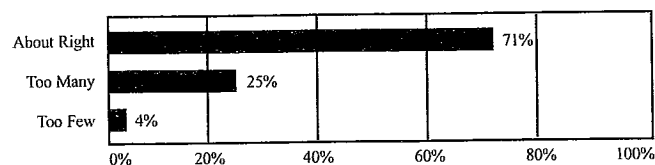
In Figure 4, the government outlines what will happen if schools do not make AYP and states that for the first time the public will "know" if schools are not doing their job

Figure 3

Closing the Achievement Gap in America's Public Schools (Slide 21 and 22) (retrieved July 23, 2003, from <http://www.nclb.gov/next/closing/slide021.html> and <http://www.nclb.gov/next/closing/slide022.html>)

Student Perceptions of Testing

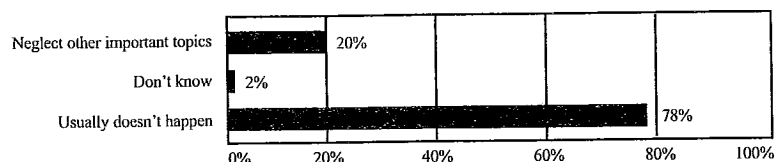
Do you think you have to take too many test, too few, or just about right?



Source: Public Agenda 12/01

Student Perceptions (continued)

Do your teachers focus so much on preparing for standardized tests that they neglect other important topics, or does this usually not happen?



Source: Public Agenda 12/01

Figure 4

Closing the Achievement Gap in America's Public Schools (Slide 26) (retrieved July 23, 2003, from <http://www.nclb.gov/next/closing/index.html>)

What if a school fails to make AYP?

- For the first time, parents, voters and taxpayers will know when schools aren't getting the job done.
- Failing schools will receive extra help.
- Students in chronically failing schools will have escape routes.
- Schools that continue to fail after receiving extra help may be reformed by the state.

and "failing schools" will receive help. Other loaded terms used in this slide are metaphors that denote disaster and impending punishment: "Students in chronically failing schools will have escape routes" and "Schools that continue to fail may be reformed" [italics added] (retrieved July 23, 2003, from <http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov/next/closing/slide026.html>). "Parental Options" are outlined in Figure 5, enhancing the government's message that testing will provide the answers parents seek when determining whether their school is of high quality. Parents are also empowered to do something if a failing school does not improve. Specifically, being empowered means getting your child out of failing schools—abandoning these sites—as "a safety valve for students trapped in chronically failing or dangerous schools" [italics added] (retrieved July 23, 2003, from <http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov/next/closing/slide028.html>) Again, metaphors indicate disaster, but with a remedy of bailing out to save one's child.

Figure 5

Closing the Achievement Gap in America's Public Schools (Slide 27) (retrieved July 23, 2003, from <http://www.nclb.gov/next/closing/slide027.html>)

Parental Options

- Testing empowers parents with data. But parents must be able to do something with that data if a failing school does not improve.
- There must be a "safety valve" for students trapped in a chronically failing or dangerous school.

Figure 6

Closing the Achievement Gap in America's Public Schools (Slide 32 and 33) (retrieved July 23, 2003, from <http://www.nclb.gov/next/closing/slide032.html> and <http://www.nclb.gov/next/closing/slide033.html>)

Basic Premises of Reading First

- All but a very small number of children can be taught to be successful readers
- Prevention of reading problems is far more cost effective and efficient than remediation
- Reading failure can be prevented by relying on the extensive scientific research base in reading

Why Scientifically Based Research?

Scientific Research . . .

- Is not subject to fads and fashions
- Make teaching more effective, productive and efficient
- Is less subject to political correctness

In Figure 6 the government unveils the Reading First legislation, stating that all children but a very few can be taught to read and that "reading failure can be prevented by relying on the extensive scientific research base in reading" (retrieved July 23, 2003, from <http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov/next/closing/slide032.html>). This serious oversimplification of a complex process—teaching all children from many diverse backgrounds to read—and the link to a specified source of data for solutions should be of grave concern to educators. This message undermines teachers' knowledge base and the difficult work we do each day with a variety of learners. The government places blame for poor teaching on the shoulders of educational researchers, noting that the rest of the research conducted that is not deemed "scientific" has subjected teachers to "fads and fashions," whereas scientific research "is less subject to political correctness" and will make "teaching more effective, productive, and efficient" (retrieved July 23, 2003, from <http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov/next/closing/slide033.html>)—the latter three descriptors indicating an alliance with a business model.

The final slides of the government's presentation further blame researchers for current national educational problems and low-test scores. Reading First positions the government as helping misled teachers to produce successful readers by "putting the solid research base into the hands of teachers," (retrieved July 23, 2003, from <http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov/next/closing/slide035.html>) insinuating that this has not been done by educational researchers. The government sympathizes with teachers.

The slides state, "We're asking a lot of our nation's schoolteachers [and] Teachers should be treated and supported like the professionals they are" (retrieved July 23, 2003, from <http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov/next/closing/slide036.html>). The blame is subtly attached to a group of people never mentioned in the documents: Educational researchers and more specifically, reading researchers.

Are Parents "On Board" with the Government's Education Message and Mission?

Despite the recent messages given to parents about standards and testing and the government documents outlining the NCLB legislation, a current survey completed well after the NCLB legislation was introduced and signed into law indicates that most parents generally have a positive view of schools and teachers. However, there are key differences in how educators and parents view problems in achievement and schooling. Specifically, in June 2002, Phi Delta Kappan (PDK) conducted a Gallup Poll and surveyed, via telephone, 100 adults, aged 18 and older. The results, published in the September 2002 PDK, indicate the following: 71% of public school parents gave the schools their eldest child attends a grade of "A" or "B"; parents see the lack of financial support for schools as the top problem; 78% of parents would reduce spending in other areas of government and 58% would raise taxes to avoid spending cuts in education. In addition, the public would support investing more resources in schools with problems rather than close them, make kindergarten mandatory, and add quality preschool programs. Individuals surveyed (23%) believe overcrowding and lack of discipline are areas of concern in schools, and 77% of parents favor smaller schools, believing that these environments make a difference in students' achievement (52% believe that elementary schools should be capped at 500 or less; 73% would like to see middle schools as 1,000 or less, and 64% think high schools should be capped at between 500-2000.) The public's perspective about the need for smaller schools could be seriously compromised when the NCLB legislation plays out over the next several years, with children from failing schools being able to move into schools in their neighborhoods that are making AYP, potentially causing small schools to increase in size while more and more low-achieving students join their high-achieving children.

In the PDK survey, the public appears to welcome the prospect of an increased federal role in education via the NCLB Act. Specifically, 57% of parents believe an increased role for the feds is a good thing and 68% would go beyond the law and require all states to use the same nationally standardized test to measure student achievement. Additionally, 66% of parents would support a national curriculum. In support of the NCLB legislation, poll findings indicate that parents believe the following: 67% support mandated testing in grades 3 through 8; 96% support requiring teachers to be licensed in the subjects they teach; 96% believe that teachers should pass a competency test before being licensed; 86% support offering "in district" choice for all students in schools that fail to meet state standards; 90% support offering tutoring by state-approved providers, and 56% support termination of principals and teachers. It should be noted that retaining community schools and seeking to improve existing schools was supported by teachers

(vs. closing these and starting new schools such as charter sites)—a finding in opposition to the NCLB Act.

Differences between educators and the public exist in the poll findings. Educators are concerned that schools will be judged as failing unless every student demonstrates proficiency on a high standards test by the end of the 2013-2014 school year, but 80% of the public believes that schools can achieve this goal. Educators are also concerned about the heavy focus on reading and math, but 56% of parents surveyed welcome this focus on the basics. The public is also not as concerned about the increase in testing—47% stated that the amount of testing is just right. The public is more lenient in their ideas about having a "highly qualified teacher in every classroom," recognizing that this may not be a possibility, and 93% stated that the best teachers available should be hired. This finding could be both positive and negative. One could infer that teachers educated in quality preparation programs are valued by parents, but parents may also view alternative programs as preparing good teachers—opening the door for alternatives to licensure programs or tests that indicate one's ability to teach (see parents' support for competency testing above). Unless information is disseminated that informs the public that teachers who help students achieve and learn are those who go through teacher education programs vs. merely show content knowledge on a test, we will not counter the messages of these new routes to teaching.

An important finding in the PDK poll is that parents recognize the achievement gap between white and black and Hispanic youth and realize that the gap must be closed. This message is directly linked to the NCLB legislation. Interestingly, parents understand that poverty is a key issue impacting schools and students' learning. They associate some kids' failure to learn not with the quality of schooling but with the intractable problems related to the environments in which they live (home life, economic disadvantage, poor community involvement).

In sum, parents value education and believe that it must be funded, although they realize funds are difficult to obtain. They want accountability from schools—they want highly qualified teachers teaching in schools that have a disciplined atmosphere and are not overcrowded. They also want teachers to be accountable by providing quality instruction—particularly in reading and math—and they believe that the results of quality instruction should show up in test results for schools. Parents believe that if teachers and schools do not perform well, then children should be able to move to other schools in the district and they recommend that ineffective teachers and administrators should be terminated. However, parents also realize that schools and teachers need to be funded appropriately.

PART THREE: THE REAL ISSUE IS POVERTY

The NCLB legislation continues to emphasize tests results over all other educational endeavors. Because all of the requirements of the law have not yet been planned for, there is a high probability that schools already in trouble could be further distanced from their wealthy, more "test successful" counterparts, with the likelihood of continued dwindling

monies if these low-performing schools do not make AYP several years in a row. High-poverty parents of low-achieving students, typically in urban areas, could end up with children taught by individuals other than the best teachers—due to teacher “fright flight,” fear of repercussions/loss of job if one does not raise test scores. And neighborhood schools could be closed based on not meeting AYP. All of this could happen at a time when public opinion favors the government’s actions, when parents believe in the promise that all children can learn—that no child will be left behind, and when citizens have voiced a desire to hold schools and teachers accountable to the point of recommending that they be terminated if sufficient test results are not produced. Will we then forsake individual children and their families?

The basis for academic success comes down to money—adequate funding to increase quality teaching and learning for students in low-performing schools in predominately urban districts. The real problem is poverty. It is a key issue impacting low-achieving schools and students’ learning within these buildings. Learning in schools is impacted and linked to the intractable problems related to economic disadvantage and the environments in which children live—their home lives and communities—often with minimal involvement from adults who are struggling to make ends meet. (For a poignant story on the impact of poverty related to education please see the National Public Radio (NPR) piece “The Dangers of Poverty,” a story from Dan Cabot, July 15, 2002).

The Rising Numbers of Poor

In September of 2002, Daniel Weinberg from the Census Bureau reported in an interview on NPR that the poverty rate rose from 11.3 % in 2000 to 11.7 % in 2001 after falling for four consecutive years (Fessler, September 25, 2002). The number of poor people increased to 32.9 million, an increase of 1.3 million individuals. Weinberg reported that median household income fell 2.2 % but noted that these changes are “understandable” since over the past year the nation’s economy was in recession. But the new census data reveals worrisome trends showing that the poor are getting poorer. In this same NPR interview, Robert Greenstein, executive director of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, stated that the gap between the richest and both the middle-income and the low-income Americans is wider in this recession than in the previous three with the average poor person falling further below the poverty line. Arguments have been made that this is due not only to economic problems, but also to the lack of impact felt by government programs such as unemployment insurance and welfare, both designed to support the poor. Others, such as spokespersons from the Heritage Foundation, argue that the poverty rate for the most vulnerable didn’t go up and thus welfare reform programs must be working.

Many citizens question why the federal government has not addressed concerns about our nation’s high levels of poverty with the same energy they used in ushering in the NCLB legislation. Perhaps politicians think they have addressed poverty and are, in fact, linking their education agenda with their welfare reform agenda. For example, in a

recent Review of Research in Education article (Ripke & Crosby, 2002) titled “The Effects of Welfare Reform on the Educational Outcomes of Parents and their Children,” the authors noted that President Bush has promoted NCLB in the interest of our children’s future employability and self-sufficiency, yet

it is clear that children’s outcomes depend heavily on what is happening to the adults in their families. The welfare and employment pattern of parents appears to affect children primarily via pathways of income and education, rather than through effects on parent psychological well-being or parent-child relations. As such the ‘new’ educational goals for children cannot and will not be met without improving financial and human resources of families. (p. 246)

Thus, new welfare reauthorizations must focus on poverty reduction to impact child well-being.

The findings of this research also remind us that, despite the fact that many families who were on welfare are eager to work and are not relying on welfare monies anymore, these same families are now facing difficult tradeoffs between work and family needs, resulting in great stress in their lives. As noted by Ripke and Crosby (2002), the 1996 welfare reform law “focused heavily on changing the behaviors rather than the resources” (p. 247) of welfare recipients. The underlying assumption is that poverty and joblessness are caused by negative personal characteristics (e.g., “lack of effort”). But these policies “ignore the influence of such structural factors such as the unemployment market and the lack of national child care and health systems” (Ripke & Crosby, 2002, p. 247). Resources are needed to support families as much as incentives to help change behavior.

I argue that the current NCLB legislation also focuses on changing “behaviors” rather than the “resources” needed to support high-poverty, low-achieving schools, children who attend these schools, and families and community members who make up the school partnership. Despite the federal government’s distaste for the term “complexity,” it is unfair to consider any other way of characterizing these serious societal and schooling issues.

Poverty and the Impact on Urban Schools Despite the NCLB Legislation

Urban Americans who participated in an October 2002 Annenberg Institute survey know that their schools are struggling, and they understand why. Approximately two-thirds of those polled gave urban schools a poor or failing grade because they believe that kids in these schools are not receiving a quality education—for a number of interrelated reasons. Urban Americans believe that all children have a right to a quality education, and 74% support the central provisions of the NCLB law—greater accountability for student achievement. But these same individuals, many of whom live in urban communities with low-performing schools, recognize potential fallout from the legislation. This fallout will directly impact struggling urban communities and their schools.

The condition of urban school buildings and classrooms was the greatest concern voiced by those surveyed, particularly African Americans and Latino/as. Dan Carpenter, a

writer for the Indianapolis Star, noted that kids living in poverty often attended schools that could be described as “decrepit buildings, crowded classrooms, invasive neighborhoods, broken homes, and political abandonment.” Carpenter went on to note that because of these factors, teaching kids in these schools was the “toughest job in America” (as cited by Rose, 2002, p. 2).

Results from the Annenberg survey also indicated that urban Americans view good teachers as reluctant to teach at the worst urban schools. Parents know this is an important roadblock to a quality education for their youth. They also recognize that inequitable funding is a key problem (with minority parents noting this more often than other groups polled). In addition, 74% of urban Americans polled believe that the NCLB provision that allows students from under-performing schools to transfer to higher-performing schools will end up harming the struggling urban schools from which students transfer. They also expressed concerns about the sole reliance on standardized testing and stated that this will not help individual children or urban schools that are struggling. Most (71%) believe that the standardized test scores central to the NCLB act arrive too late for schools that are struggling or for teachers to help individual children.

Those polled believe that urban schools need more than the “quick fix” approach provided by singular approaches such as performance standards—they do not see these as effective methods toward improvement. They also believe that holding schools accountable is important but state that struggling urban schools need to also be provided with the funding, resources, and support they need, and currently lack, to improve. Specifically, urban Americans believe that a systematic effort is needed to provide struggling schools with better teachers, administrators, and highly challenging instructional materials. They believe that schools need funding so that buildings are refurbished and maintained in good condition and environments inside are created that are safe and drug-free. These Americans believe that district-wide solutions are better than school-by-school reform. (School-level reform seems inequitable because certain schools and students could be neglected in this process.) And there is a strong belief that schools will never improve unless we give them the funding and specialized help they desperately need. A district-level approach is important because it seeks to improve the entire system rather than focusing on fixing one school at a time.

A large percentage of urban parents (83%) support giving the community a greater role in reforming urban schools and greater responsibility for what happens to students in their cities. Urban Americans want students to have access to community resources such as recreation, art, and public health. Those polled believe that community organizations share some of the accountability for what happens to students in their community and believe that churches and community organizations, such as YMCA and Girls and Boys Clubs, want to be and should be more actively involved in helping to reform urban schools and allow them to be successful. Executive Director of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform Warren Simmons stated:

School quality varies widely but predictably in urban school districts and it is poor and minority students who usually lose out in this immoral lottery. If leaving no child behind means identifying and addressing the needs of low-performing schools, we must also provide the supports that districts need to create systemic solutions for these schools. (Annenberg Foundation, 2002, p. 1)

Why, when we have evidence for the need for additional funding and resources to solve the problems inherent in our high poverty, low achieving urban schools, is there a lack of response by the government and an actual deflecting of this message to other problem sources? Do these schools have a champion and if so would the concerns ever be heard and acted upon?

Politicians' Responses to Poverty and the Plight of Schools and Children

In his article “Kudzu, Rabbits, and School Reform,” John Goodlad (2002) noted, “No political leader has emerged to champion the relationship between education and democracy and the role of our schools in it” (p. 23). I respectfully beg to differ with Mr. Goodlad. Let me provide one example. The late Senator Paul Wellstone referred to the threat afoot in education today when he spoke at Teachers College in March 2000, stating, “The threat of high-stakes testing is being grossly abused in the name of greater accountability, and almost always to the serious detriment of our children.” He noted that the

continued misuses of high-stakes tests is in itself a gross failure of moral imagination, a failure of both educators and of policy makers who persistently refuse to provide the educational resources necessary to guarantee an equal opportunity to learn for all our children. It holds children responsible for our own failure to invest in their future and in their achievement... Our chronic refusal as a nation to guarantee that right (sound education) for all children, including poor children is a national disgrace... it is a failure which threatens our future as a nation of citizens called to a common purpose, allied with one another in a common enterprise, tied to one another by a common bond.

Wellstone understood very well what was going on with politics and setting up false systems of accountability. He noted that it is absurd to think that

students who attend the poorest schools have anywhere close to the same preparation and readiness as students who attend the wealthiest schools. People talk about using the test to motivate students to do well and using tests to ensure that we close the achievement gap. This kind of talk is backwards and unfair. We cannot... close the gap until we close the gap in investment between poor and rich schools no matter how motivated some students are. Instead of doing what we know works... we place the responsibility squarely on children. (2000, March)

We need to cultivate this same concern, passion, and activism on the part of our politicians at the local, state, and national levels. We need influential people to understand that the problem of poverty must be addressed and that a quality education for all requires safe and appropriate school buildings, access to quality learning materials for all students,

and securing and retaining caring, qualified, and effective teachers. Improving schools means not blaming students, teachers, parents, teacher educators, and researchers. Rather, we need to focus on the needs of individual children, youth, and educators; on how to support reforms in school districts, on what families and communities need to function well to support their youth; and on attending to the needs of the poor in our society. We must recognize that good schools are only possible when all of us—regardless of our fortune in life—own up to this responsibility.

PART FOUR: WHAT WILL NRC'S RESPONSE BE?

As individual NRC members, we must understand our current reality without believing that we are powerless to do anything because we do not have the resources or the power or the inspirational message needed to make a difference. This cannot be our choice. Accountability to students and their parents for the literacy learning of young people is a moral and professional responsibility that teachers and literacy researchers embrace. The current political and economic climate has the potential of diverting educators' and parents' efforts away from developing the literacy skills and motivations of individual learners—preschool through young adulthood. Teachers and researchers, partnering with parents, other educators, and community leaders, must move the current conversation surrounding literacy teaching and learning beyond the singular focus on standardized testing designed to sort out successful and unsuccessful kids, teachers, and schools. This destructive focus highlights, reproduces, and amplifies existing inequities in broader society. A preoccupation with who can succeed and who can not, as defined by tests, is generally accompanied by packaged programs and strategies that promise remediation of teachers and students alike, but which do nothing to address deeper issues that are at the heart of learning.

What Role Will NRC Members Assume in Refocusing the Current Discourse?

What can we do individually, community-by-community, state-by-state, to collectively provide quality literacy learning experiences for all learners? I propose that the charge before us as individuals and a community includes the following key ideas.

1. *We must not sacrifice quality as we work as colleagues in educational settings, researchers, and professors of teacher education and professional development.* We have a strong and rich knowledge base already in place about what literacy development involves and what effective teachers are doing to help students move towards rigorous, meaningful, new learning goals. We have much yet to learn, and competent researchers and teacher educators are working daily on important research and educational programs that address the real literacy issues that must be at the forefront of discussions about education in today's society. These include: (a) understanding how individual students from various cultures and educational backgrounds learn and interact during literacy lessons in home and school contexts; (b) using this knowledge along with the best

strategies, appropriate materials, and experiences we can develop to meet various students' literacy learning at school, at home and in community programs; (c) learning to adapt teaching and learning strategies in timely, flexible ways to promote equitable learning that results in high achievement for all students; and (d) determining ways that educators, schools, parents, and community leaders can work together to solve literacy concerns by developing common goals.

2. *We need to identify some of our best scholars, ask them to work together to develop a national research agenda based in part on pressing issues that we need to respond to, and organize ourselves to address these issues.* What we have not done as well as a research community is to identify what we know and what we generally agree upon related to literacy development, teaching, and learning. But this prospect is tricky—our organization and yearly conference where we present and talk to each other has always been the heart and soul of who we are. We come together each year to dialogue and critique research and ideas. It has never been our mission to seek consensus on issues and then create policy statements that indicate what we know about literacy teaching and learning. Perhaps this is because as researchers we feel that seeking consensus does not move us to the next level in our search to improve the human condition. Yet this lack of coming together on key issues in our field has been used against us in the public arena. Many of our research topics and our written reports have positioned us as having little impact on daily events in schools and communities. As a result, many policy makers discount us.

We need ways to move forward as a research field. It is vital that we have our annual conference with forums and opportunities for scholars to critique and challenge ideas and hold different points of view. We also need the freedom to pursue individual research interests yet to work toward some common goals or research agenda, albeit at various research sites—much like various teams of doctors working on a cure for the common cold or cures for cancer. I believe that we need to consider a continuum of perspective and effort. Members would need to agree that there are research issues that we individually embrace, but there are educational issues that must be researched—by us. If we do not take up these issues, they will be taken up by others who are likely to have neither the expertise of reading professionals nor the connections with and commitments to teachers and children in schools.

3. *We must invest in the development and dissemination of concise, accurate, broad, and fair compilations of the research in reading, written for, and shared with, policy makers.* Reading scholars note that educational researchers should assume responsibility for alerting policy makers to the breadth of relevant reading research. This is so true. And yet we have not effectively determined how to create appropriate, concise reports for board audiences or direct people outside of our field toward appropriate research or resources. NRC has not yet mustered its resources to produce research review reports that are disseminated by our organization. We have started to move in this direction with the NRC Literacy Research Reports (LRR), but I would suggest that more organized, systematic, flexible efforts are needed in this area, with a broad variety of reports for

various purposes and audiences. The documents I am proposing must be created quickly and be easy to understand; they must also lack the jargon or philosophical “triggers” that turn off politicians (the “complexity” term). Yet they cannot sacrifice or mock the reality of teachers’ work, students’ learning, or school and classroom situations.

We need to develop new genres of writing and we need NRC members willing to find the time to write policy papers. Likewise, once the reports are crafted, we need free access within our organization so that members across the country can use ideas to further their local work with policy makers. Allen Berger and others who regularly write for newspapers and policy makers have provided excellent models for us. Another example of this new form of writing are the two documents produced by the Reading Recovery Council of North America (2002)—an Executive Summary and a longer report of the evidence base for this program. These documents were disseminated to a large audience of scholars, and I assume, policy makers. They are professional, easy to read, and powerful in their message.

To engage in this enterprise will mean targeting NRC resources towards the development, production and dissemination of high-quality materials that are approved by the elected board of our organization. Perhaps we could hire a professional writer who could work with several NRC members on the writing task. We could contract with individual NRC members. Our goal would be to proactively create documents that are short and useful to teachers and policy makers—documents that detail “What works” and why (grounded upon a rich theoretical and broad research base), and a marketing plan to disseminate them.

4. *We must engage in dialogues with various groups of people including teachers, superintendents and parents, business leaders, legislative aides, and legislators/politicians; we need to serve on panels, standards boards, consortiums, and think tanks both within and outside the area of literacy.* Interactions with various groups outside of our literacy research circle are critical to understanding their perspectives, and their perspectives are critical. We must strive to be civil, straightforward, timely, and reliable in our interactions as well as interact in ways that indicate that we have as much to learn from these individuals as they learn from us. What we share in common is our concern for children, youth, and their families. To engage in this important work we must change the nature of our university work and what is rewarded at universities (via tenure and promotion processes and merit pay). Work in schools over extended periods of time or work with business leaders and legislators is critical and time-consuming work—and it will take each and every one of us at our respective universities. We cannot relegate these tasks to the clinical faculty, the new assistant professors, or those without grants. Further, I guarantee that literacy researchers will not be alone in this endeavor. For starters, our math colleagues will need to be our partners based on the intense scrutiny they also are enduring with mandated testing and similar struggles about which math materials should be used and what instruction should look like.

There is a real fear of interacting with groups outside the safety of academe and particularly those in large organizations or in government positions. Because we are

unfamiliar with the discourses of these groups, we do not usually address questions or criticisms about issues in our field in face-to-face encounters like legislative hearings. Instead, we typically craft our arguments in writing with time to formulate statements and document claims. We do not relish preparing for testimony before a panel on standards with two hours preparation time; we are very uncomfortable with attacks on our ideas or knowledge in public settings. I believe this is a risk all of us are going to need to take.

5. *We must work with the media to impact public opinion and policy.* Dick Allington (2002) recently pointed out: There is no link between reading research and policy making because the link seems to be between policy making and public opinion polls. Allington adds, “Public opinion can be shaped” (p. 34). In support of this claim, Reutzell, Hollingsworth, and Cox (1996) found that legislators usually consult the newspaper (85%), national magazines (80%) and radio and TV broadcasts (79%). The PDK (2002) survey, reported earlier in this paper, revealed that parents judge schools based on information from newspapers, word of mouth, and, as a last resource, communications from school. Allington makes a strong case for an effort he believes is underway to shape public perceptions against teachers and good teacher preparation. He stated, “The success of this campaign will depend on whether the profession can counteract the distortions and misrepresentations of research that abound in the policy environment and the media” (p. 34). I agree and propose some modest ideas about how we could start.

First, a solution is proposed by the authors of *What Kids Need*: “Many policy makers lack first-hand experience of today’s most effective programs, and the clear-cut evidence they seek cannot always be marshaled. As a result, policy is sometimes shaped as if children can flourish while families struggle and parents despair” (Carnegie Corporation, 2002, p. 15). As researchers and educators, we work directly with teachers and students in schools. We need to get the media out to schools so that these individuals can see and report what it looks like and feels like in low-achieving schools. We need to show the roles that poverty and lack of resources play in the challenge to educate today’s youth. Individuals in the media need to be cultivated as our allies and provided with data so they understand what is taking place in schools and witness our collaborative efforts to make changes. Likewise we need to work with teachers and administrators and encourage them to communicate well and often with legislators and the media. Building relationships between the media and educators takes a great deal of trust and building trust takes time and multiple experiences that are mutually beneficial.

6. *We must not abandon children and youth, teachers, and schools that need us the most at this very point in time.* In a recent article from RecordNet News titled “End creative teaching, official says” (Balta, Oct. 25, 2002), U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education Susan Neuman stated that the NCLB Act, if implemented the right way, will put an end to creative and experimental teaching methods in the nation’s classrooms. “It will stifle, and hopefully it will kill (them),” said Neuman. This statement was intended to address the lack of research-based methods and materials purported to be used by teachers in our nation’s schools. But the idea of reducing teaching to approved lists of scientifically based materials—many with scripted lessons—flies in the face of what we know about

crafting curricula and experiences with kids to meet their intellectual and emotional needs, and teaching in culturally responsive, flexible ways based on what students need at various points in their development.

And parents agree with educators as evidenced in the recent Educational Testing Service (ETS) survey report "A National Priority: Americans Speak on Teacher Quality" (Hart & Teeter, 2002). Americans believe that effective teaching is more than what you know as a teacher; quality depends also on how you teach and how well you engage students and convey information. When asked "What is Quality teaching?" all adults responding noted the following: "having skills to design learning experiences that inspire/interest children (42%); having a lot of enthusiasm for the job (31%); having a caring attitude towards students (26%); having a thorough understanding of their subject (19%); having a lot of involvement with parents (16%); several years' experience as a classroom teacher (6%); and an advanced degree from a good school of education (4%)" (p. 12).

Interestingly when parents were asked, "What are the keys to improving teacher quality?" adults were at odds with the Secretary of Education's perspective that subject knowledge and verbal skills are key. Fifty percent of parents stated that a barrier to teacher quality was that "colleges turn out good teachers who then leave" the profession because of salaries and working conditions. Only 14% of parents saw the following as problems: "good students not attracted to teaching" or "low entry standards for teacher education." Overall, parents want well-educated teachers, which they define as more than just subject matter smartness. They want teachers who are skillful at designing instruction, care about kids, are enthusiastic, and involve parents to support students' learning.

Parents do not want to redesign teacher education programs. But they do want to know that their child's teacher is knowledgeable and they do believe in the need for greater accountability. They believe that continued education (training such as what happens in business) is necessary and good salaries are important because these will retain good teachers (although this is not always the case—conditions of work, the support and autonomy teachers feel, smaller class sizes, teaching kids that they feel can be successful—these things also matter greatly to teachers).

We need to build on these core ideas of what parents want and value in teachers. We know that placing the very best teachers in front of kids, and providing the support it takes to retain them, will make a difference. Further, we must help provide ongoing professional development that is content based but also involves the best of what we know about how children learn and how to build motivating experiences and sound environments. This will serve to improve literacy teaching and learning. And we know this works (see Barbara Taylor and David Pearson's book, *Teaching Reading: Effective Schools, Accomplished Teachers*, 2002).

In the final pages of his new book, *Big Brother and the National Reading Curriculum*, Dick Allington (2002) discusses working with state and local education agencies, teachers, and parents. He notes that we must empower teachers because many teachers are not resisting the idea of being told how to teach and with what materials. As

Allington states, if teachers do not accept responsibility and autonomy for what occurs in classrooms, then they will not feel responsible for the plans put into place and if the plans fail, it will be someone else's fault—not the teacher's. This only results in unsatisfactory teaching and learning. Teachers need to be knowledgeable about what they do and feel comfortable articulating their rationale for particular uses of materials and methods. They also need the skills necessary to discuss students' growth and areas of concern with parents and policy makers and how classroom activities and curricula are designed to support students' literacy learning. I have come to understand that teachers need models for how to speak out just as much as we do. By teaming together with researchers and teacher educators, classroom teachers have been, and can continue to be, powerful advocates for themselves and for the work we do in higher education.

A Call to Action

I want to share with you a story about Mary McEvoy, our former colleague at the University of Minnesota, who perished in October of 2002 in the same airplane accident that took several lives, including that of Senator Paul Wellstone. At her memorial service Mary was described as a dangerous person: she asked the hard questions; she got in there—was "in your face" at times and utterly charming a moment later. She was smart, energetic, persistent, and goal driven. She took the time to do the hard work of advocating for youth and adults who need our support, knowing that it was work that had to be done. She was willing to forgo wealth and a sense of safeness and predictability about her life as long as work needed to be completed. She is a model for many of us when we think about our role in bettering the lives of those who struggle in this world.

NRC can give us the power to rearm ourselves, provide the sharing of knowledge and strategies to allow us to do our local work; the strength and renewed resolve to remember for whom we do our work. When we look at those who matter most to us we find the connection between our soul's desire for our lives and the meaning in our work. We can make a difference through our actions. Let me close by asking you to look closely at the faces of youth and the teachers that you work with and consider the ideas in this paper. May we each be reminded to heed the call of children and youth everywhere as they say to us, "Look at me—focus on me. And then I will not be lost—I will not be abandoned—any more."*

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* The slide presentation, shared at the close of this NRC presidential presentation in December 2002, was created by Dr. David O'Brien, from the University of Minnesota. The accompanying music and lyrics were adapted from the work of James Horner & Will Jennings' song titled: Then You Look at Me.