

No Child Left Behind in ILLINOIS

More Unfulfilled Promises?

ILLINOIS NCLB HEARING

Garfield Park Fieldhouse • Chicago
November 17, 2005 • 4:00–7:00 PM
*Local hearing partner: Cross City Campaign for
Urban School Reform, Chicago*

HEARING OFFICERS

Richard Guss, Student, Harlan High School,
Chicago, IL • **Wendy D. Puriefoy**, President,
Public Education Network, Washington, DC •
Ken Rolling, Executive Director, Parents for
Public Schools, Chicago, IL • **Beth Swanson**,
Director, After School and Community School
Programs; Chicago Public Schools, Chicago,
IL • **Careda Taylor**, Deputy Chief, High School
Programs; Chicago Public Schools, Chicago, IL

STUDENT WITNESSES

Maria Salgado, Senn High School • **Michael
McDowell**, Austin High School • **Terri Shields**,
Dyett High School • **Brandi Jones**, AASTA
High School

PARENT WITNESSES

Chris Brown, Local School Council; Jones
College Prep High School • **Wanda Hopkins**,
Parents United for Responsible Education •
Ana Cepeda, Funston Elementary School

COMMUNITY WITNESSES

Idida Perez, West Town Leadership United •
Andrea Lee, Grand Boulevard Federation •
Kathy Posner, City Club of Chicago • **Jim
O'Neal**, Civic Leader • **Ken Farmer**, Colorado
College student on semester program in
Chicago • **Julie Woestehoff**, Parents United for
Responsible Education (PURE) • **Travis Stein**,
John Paul Jones, **Alfred Rodgers**, Group
Neighborhood Capital Budget Group • **Wanda
Evans**, **Antoinette McMorris**, Purple Rain •
Samuel McDade, **Sha Calhoun**, **Claudia
Ingram**, TARGET Area Development Corp. •
Denis Ferguson, Chicago Commission on
Human Relations • **Eddie Brant**, Student
Teacher • **J.E. Terrell**, Garfield Boulevard
Federation • **Steven Evans**, Just Us Fellas

The Illinois hearing was one of nine hearings on
NCLB held across the country from September
2005 to January 2006. This is the second set of
hearings organized by PEN to convey the public's
concerns and recommendations to policymakers in
advance of the scheduled 2007 reauthorization of
the law.

*From what I've seen with the parents we work with...parents are still very
uninformed and misinformed. So that means year after year, nothing different
is being done that is effective.*

Sha Calhoun, TARGET Area Development Corporation

After almost four years of experience with the No Child Left Behind Act,
residents of the Chicago area view its promises as yet another disappointment
for the children of Illinois.

Just like previous waves of reforms that have swept through the state in the past
15 years, it seems NCLB has done little to address the inequities experienced by
students in low-income schools or to improve the trust between schools and parents
and communities. Moreover, many of its provisions are seen as counterproductive.

This theme characterized an Illinois hearing that gave students, parents, and
community leaders – audiences very much affected by the law, but usually left out of
the policy debate – an opportunity to tell their side of the NCLB story.

The Illinois Context

Taking advantage of an increasingly flexible stance by the US Department of
Education toward NCLB implementation, Illinois was able to significantly reduce
the number of schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) simply by
increasing the minimum number of students needed to constitute the subgroup of
special needs students.

Using this new criteria, the number of Illinois schools that must include special
needs subgroups in determining AYP fell from 535 (28.06 percent) in 2004 to 394
(27.2 percent) in 2005. The elimination of these subgroups from AYP calculations
is particularly disturbing in face of a recent study by the National Assessment of
Educational Progress on the math and reading skills of fourth- and eighth-graders. The
study reveals that the longer students stay in school in Illinois, the worse they perform
in math across all ethnic groups. While black and Latino Hispanic students showed
some improvement in reading over the years, their eighth-grade scores were still very
low, with only 21 percent of blacks and only 19 percent of Hispanics scoring at or
above proficient.

Illinois ranked tenth in the nation in 2004 on expenditures per student (\$9,839),
but there are large funding disparities among districts. With almost 56 percent of
funding dependent upon local property taxes, the spending gap (\$2,060) between the
wealthiest and poorest districts is the largest in the country. If this spending gap were

closed, the lowest-spending districts would receive an additional \$50,000 in funding per classroom according to The Education Trust, a Washington, DC-based research organization.

Like many states, Illinois' highest concentration of poor students live in urban areas; about 58 percent of students living in urban areas attend Title I schools and the city of Chicago has the highest percentage of Title I schools. Thus, the testimony of Chicago students, parents, and community representatives is particularly relevant to understanding whether NCLB is improving the academic progress of the state's low-performing schools and students.

From the testimony given at the hearing, it is apparent that, while the Chicago community still believes in the goals of NCLB, it is terribly disillusioned by the failure of NCLB to make a difference. Indeed, the reform-weary residents of Chicago see little attention being paid to the concerns they have with the implementation of the law.

Statistics	Total Schools ¹	% fail to make AYP	% schools in improvement	# LEAs	% LEAs fail to make AYP	% LEAs in improvement	Graduation rate ²	Per pupil expenditure ³
Illinois 2003–04	3,767	26.3%	17.5%	886	37.8%	27.3%	86.6%	\$9,189
United States 2003–04	90,237	24.7%	11.4%	13,959	28.5%	12.8%	74.9%	\$8,308
Illinois 2004–05	3,767	26.3%	19.4%	879	27.0%	27.3%	87.0%	\$9,591
United States 2004–05	89,493	25.6%	12.9%	13,878	23.7%	12.4%	Not avail.	\$8,618

Information Is a Problem

Underlying the NCLB reform agenda is the belief that if parents and communities have reliable data about school performance, they will make demands and take actions that will lead to improvements in their children's education. In Chicago, however, information is neither reliable nor accessible.

This lack of information was glaringly obvious in the testimony given by students. While it is district policy to tell high school students their state assessment scores, the students said they had not received this data. Nor had they been told the reasons for NCLB's accountability measures, and neither students nor parents were aware of academic standards.

Moreover, parent advocates worried that only a small number of parents actually understood their rights to information and involvement under NCLB, even though the law refers to parents more than 300 times. "We have to ask what happens to the parents who don't understand their rights, who don't understand the tutoring, who don't understand that you have an ability to make a change," said Andrea Lee, education organizer for the Grand Boulevard Federation. "Sometimes it is difficult...to get information on how schools really are testing," she noted, and said that this information would help parents and the community "figure out what we can do to make improvements." Julie Woestehoff, executive director of Parents United for Responsible Education (PURE), said parents are "confused and frightened" by some of the many letters they receive about test scores and unqualified teachers.

Doubts About High-Stakes Testing

Closely tied to the lack of information is concern that the total reliance on test scores to measure a school's value does not give parents the kind of information they want. John Paul Jones, the father of 10 children, all either current or former public school students, testified that test scores fail to tell him the things he wants to know about his children's schools. He wants indicators of how the school is helping students build character and develop good social habits, and how it influences the way they conduct themselves in public. "I'm just not getting the full knowledge of what I would like to see occurring with my child in the public schools," he said.

This testimony points to a general dissatisfaction with test-based accountability. Wanda Hopkins, who is active in local school councils and parent organizations, noted that several years ago PURE filed a civil rights complaint against the

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

² Figures taken from Illinois State Board of Education, State Report Card, available at <http://webprod1.isbe.net/ereportcard/publicsite/getSearchCriteria.aspx>

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

Chicago public school system for its use of a single test to determine whether or not a student got promoted. As a result, Chicago public schools had to use more than one measure, but NCLB overturned that policy. “Standardized tests are all about sorting children out and not about finding out what helps them,” Hopkins said, adding that “high-stakes testing is already increasing the dropout rate, and it forces low-performing schools to push out struggling students. And these are the students that should be benefiting from the...act.”

Making Do With Less

Students testified about being pressured to do well on tests “so the school will look good” and using what should have been learning time for test practice. More importantly, they felt that test-based accountability was unfair because students did not have equal access to the resources needed to do well on tests. Terri Shields, a senior student at Dyett Academics Central High School, testified that she is three years older than some of her textbooks, while a friend in a wealthier neighborhood has new textbooks. “We’re taking those tests based on reading and learning from these old books, but if my books are from 1990 and their books are from 2004, I’m 10 years behind,” she said.

Others attending high-poverty schools testified about having to use shredded textbooks, sitting in cold classrooms, and seeing inequities within their schools. Austin High School student Michael McDowell said he applied for the International Baccalaureate (IB) program at his school because he found out that IB students were the only ones allowed to use the one working computer lab and the graphing calculators. He said that regular students were only recently given access to the chemistry lab and that was only because student enrollment is declining since the high school is being closed down. “There should be funding for another lab for regular students,” he declared. He felt it wasn’t fair that regular students had to buy cheap calculators while he is supplied with the most advanced models, and appealed for information on how money is being spent at the school.

	Student Enrollment ¹ 2004-2005	Per Pupil Expenditure 2004-2005	Students in Title I Schools ²	Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch	Students with IEPs	English Language Learners	2002 Graduation Rate ³			
							All	Black	Hispanic	White
Illinois	2,097,518	\$9,591	56.3%	44.2%	15.2%	(*)	74%	52%	52%	85%
US	48,367,410	\$8,618	49.7%	36.3%	13.6%	10.6%	71%	56%	52%	78%

Parents also testified about the lack of resources in Chicago schools. Travis Stein, research analyst for the Neighborhood Capital Budget Group, said that closing down a school like Austin High was not the way to address students’ needs. Wherever they go “they still don’t have access to the computer lab or the graphing calculators and those kinds of things.” Kathy Posner organized volunteers from outside the neighborhood to come to the aid of a low-income South Side school where the paint was peeling, students lacked an arts program, and there was only enough money to tutor half the children who were eligible. Another parent noted that her school was reported “safe” under NCLB regulations, but the children have to deal with peeling lead paint, asbestos in the heating ducts, and broken floor tiles – all “real safety issues” in her opinion.

Students in low-income schools feel most cheated when it comes to the competence of their teachers. Despite NCLB’s definition of a highly-qualified teacher as one that holds proper certification and meets state content requirements, and its mandate that there must be a highly-qualified teacher for every core subject classroom, public schools in Chicago are not assigning experienced teachers evenly across the system. Furthermore, students do not have confidence in the definition. They cited instances of teachers who were able to get students engaged in the content but who were then

¹ National Education Association, *Rankings & Estimates Update (2005)*. Figures are computed from NEA Research, Estimates databank. The figures are based on reports through August 2005. This source provided the Student Enrollment and Per Pupil Expenditure data.

² Hoffman, L. and Sable, J. (2006). *Public Elementary and Secondary Students, Staff, Schools, and School Districts: School Year 2003–04* (NCES 2006-307). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Data were taken from this source for the following columns: Students in Title I Schools, Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch, Students with Disabilities, English Language Learners.

³ *Public High School Graduation and College-Readiness Rates: 1991-2002*, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research (2005). Figure calculated using the Greene method, which estimates the number of students who enter a ninth-grade class, makes some adjustments for changes in population, and divides the resulting number into the number of students who actually graduated with a regular diploma. It is not a four-year graduation rate; as long as there is not a substantial change in the number of students in each class that graduates in more than four years, such students are included in the calculation.

⁴ Data were missing for more than 20 percent of schools or districts.

transferred or dismissed because of their lack of credentials. “The teachers with the heart and the teachers dedicated to us – they’ve been taken away from us,” said Brandi Jones, a senior at the Applied Arts and Science Technology Academy. Maria Salgado, a senior at Senn High School, said that “it’s a good thing to try to have students taught by people who can actually teach. But there are teachers who are [certified] to teach, who have gone to school, who may have a PhD or whatnot, yet they are not making a connection with the students....So, it’s not necessarily what degrees they have, but what connection they have with the students and their ability to form a partnership with them.”

What Happened to Parent Involvement?

Even though NCLB seeks to give parents and communities a greater voice, a sense of powerlessness pervaded the testimony from students, parents, and community representatives. Many of the policies enacted to comply with the law seem to be undermining a sense of community. Unlike the local school council reforms enacted 15 years ago in Chicago, which mandated parent control at the school level, NCLB “doesn’t mandate that parents and community people have any real authority over what happens in their schools,” said Chris Brown, parent of two children attending Chicago public schools. When schools are turned into charters or are closed, parents lose the ability to make these schools accountable, said one parent with long experience serving on local school councils.

One tenet of NCLB – the right of parents to transfer their children to a higher-performing school – was strongly criticized by PURE’s Julie Woestehoff. “The parents who call us,” she said, “are sending the federal government a clear message: ‘Don’t tell me to move my child to another school – help me make my child’s school better.’” The choice provision also was criticized for fostering an increase in student mobility, already a major problem for Chicago schools.

Ana Cepeda, a parent volunteer at Funston Elementary School, described what strong community involvement can accomplish. The Logan Square Neighborhood Association, she said, has launched five community learning centers, a literacy home visit program, parent tutoring in five schools, and opportunities for parents to take college classes in the neighborhood to become teachers. Even though these initiatives helped raise student achievement, the association must still struggle to raise funds, she said, and then wondered why, if the federal government is so concerned about schools and children’s education, “doesn’t it contribute to programs like these that really work instead of using money to come up with complicated laws that do nothing but take jobs away from good teachers, over-test our kids, and suggest that states take over struggling schools?”