

No Child Left Behind in PENNSYLVANIA

Students Speak Out

PENNSYLVANIA NCLB HEARING

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

PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Lancaster Foundation for Educational
Enrichment
Philadelphia Education Fund

HEARING OFFICERS

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

STUDENT WITNESSES

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

Allegheny County: Duquesne City School
District • East Allegheny School District •
McKeesport Area School District • Pittsburgh
Public Schools

Fayette County: Brownsville Area School
District

Lancaster County: Lancaster School District

Northampton County: Bethlehem Area School
District

Philadelphia County: Philadelphia City School
District

The Pennsylvania hearing, one of nine held on
NCLB across the country from September 2005 to
January 2006, focused exclusively on student
testimony. This excerpt was taken from the full
Pennsylvania hearing report, which can be found
on the PEN website, www.publiceducation.org,
along with a national hearing report and eight
other state reports.

Funding for the hearing was provided by Philip
Morris USA.

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

Philadelphia high school student

At a revealing public hearing, Pennsylvania students testified about the effect
of NCLB on their schools. The students came from different communities,
but they all reached a similar conclusion: the quality of public education in the
Commonwealth is unequal, and standardized testing is making the situation worse.

This theme characterized a Pennsylvania hearing that gave students – one of the
audiences most affected by the law – an opportunity to tell their side of the NCLB
story. In Studio A of station WQED-TV, students shared feelings about the pressure
to perform academically when they did not have enough resources, and the focus on
tests that had no relevance to their academic plans.

How Students See Testing

The NCLB requirement that schools make adequate yearly progress (AYP) based on
the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) results has generated mixed
reactions and is changing what students learn. A Lancaster student said that while
midterm exams once measured student knowledge of broad subjects, “now teachers
have to give us a comprehension test that basically asks if we can understand a
paragraph or paraphrase a certain event.”

Students described losing school time so teachers can take workshops on PSSA
standards, the elimination of block scheduling, and less access to teachers. Others
said college-going peers pay little attention to the PSSAs and focus on college
admissions tests instead. In lower-performing schools, however, tests loomed as
threats with students being told they would not graduate if they did poorly on the tests.

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

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

Testing Inequities

Some students felt well prepared for college, while others were scared of what lay ahead – views determined more by where they live than by any other factor. While college-bound students were merely irritated by standardized testing, less privileged students faced significant barriers. The most compelling testimony came from a Philadelphia student:

For the last three years, I've known that I wanted to go to the University of Pennsylvania's international studies and business program. But I haven't taken calculus because it is not offered at my school, and I haven't been able to take adequate levels of Spanish. So, my desire to go to the University of Penn sort of feels crushed.

This student believes more advanced courses are not available because his school focuses on classes that prepare students for PSSAs. In ninth grade, he took a required PSSA course instead of algebra and made the highest grade in his class, but "I didn't know much about algebra." A Lancaster student offered this vision of education:

I think that one of the...concerns should not be whether people can score proficient on an exam but, rather, whether they will graduate...knowing how to be effective members of the workforce...and how to function as citizens.

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
PA 2003–04	3009	18.8%	11.0%	500	42.2%	5.4%	87%	\$9,261
United States 2003–04	90237	24.7%	11.4%	13959	28.5%	12.8%	74.9%	\$8,308
PA 2004–05	3011	23.2%	9.9%	500	38.4%	6.6%	88%	\$9,638
United States 2004–05	89493	25.6%	12.9%	13878	23.7%	12.4%	Not avail.	\$8,618

The Influence of Teachers

NCLB mandates that all students have a "highly qualified" teacher. But the quality of teaching varied greatly with geography. A Lower Moreland student described teachers who had high expectations for all students, stayed after school, attended school functions, and, after parents, are "the most important influence on us." A Pittsburgh student, however, wished for more "teachers who care about us." Some certified teachers, said a Philadelphia student, "are the ones who don't care." She gave this example:

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

Other NCLB Issues

After-school tutoring, which NCLB says must be offered to students in schools that have failed to meet AYP for two years, also plays out differently depending on geography. In some schools, the option to get extra help is left up to students. In Philadelphia, after-school tutoring is mandatory for failing students or "you won't pass." Even making after-school tutoring mandatory has its limits, said a cynical student from McKeesport:

A lot of us just blew it [PSSA] off...if you did go to tutoring, you had to retake the test. And if you got at least one point better than what you got on the first time you took the test, then you were okay. But if you failed it a second time, then you had to take it again. If you screwed up that time, then you just got a pat on the back and a thanks for trying. Basically, it's just a pointless system.

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

² Percentages taken from Pennsylvania State Report Cards for 2003-2004 and 2004-2005, available at: http://www.paayp.com/state_report.html.

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.