



*Great Public Schools
for Every Child*

WRITTEN TESTIMONY
OF
JOAN BIBEAU, EDUCATION MINNESOTA
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR

Regarding
“ESEA Reauthorization: Boosting Quality in the Teaching Profession”

May 11, 2007

Chairman Miller:

I'm very pleased to have this opportunity to testify before the Committee. I bring to you today my experience not only as a veteran classroom teacher, but also as a member of Education Minnesota, an affiliate of both the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA).

To get to Washington, D.C. from my home in northern Minnesota this week meant a one-hour drive to Hibbing, then a 7 a.m. flight to Minneapolis and another flight to D.C. Our county has not had airline service for two years. It took the better part of a day to get here. But I was willing to make this journey because I believe it is very important for members of Congress to hear from practicing teachers as you consider the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the current version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

First I want to tell you something about myself. I am a teacher of 34 years and an enrolled member of the White Earth Band of Ojibwe. I've been asked: "How did you succeed in becoming a teacher?" The answer is that there were two major influences—my parents and my recruitment into the Northern Plains Indian Teacher Corps. I have earned Minnesota teaching licensure in Early Childhood, Early Childhood Family Education, Early Childhood Special Education, Kindergarten, and first through sixth grade. I earned my Masters Degree in Elementary Education in 1984 from the University of North Dakota. I was awarded the Minnesota Indian Education Association Teacher of the Year Award in 2006.

Here is my view of NCLB, and the view of many other teachers: It often seems as though the rules were made without regard to the actual needs of our students and the realities of our work as teachers. If I had one suggestion for the Committee, it would be this: Improve the law so that it recognizes the actual world we teach in and then provide educators with the tools and resources we know are essential to helping our students succeed.

Let me share with you some of the realities that will help describe where I live and teach. My home is in rural northern Minnesota in Itasca County, with a population of 44,000. Our county encompasses three small remote communities on the Leech Lake Indian Reservation. I teach preschool and kindergarten at Eagleview Elementary on the Leech Lake Reservation. This community is 64 percent American Indian and has a 60 percent graduation rate. The median household income is \$11,875 and half of our population is living below the poverty line. We are a Title I school, with 82 percent of our students receiving free or reduced price lunch. Many of our families do not have reliable transportation, telephone service, or adequate housing. They need to travel great distances for health care, employment (unemployment is 30.9 percent), and access to stores.

The challenge for NCLB and educators is to support and educate **ALL** children, especially those who are struggling academically. We certainly need the best teachers we

can find for our student population in northern Minnesota. But I don't see the evidence that NCLB is particularly helpful in this regard.

In Minnesota, nearly all teachers already meet the federal requirements to be considered "highly qualified" when they enter the profession because the state Board of Teaching has established high standards for teacher preparation and licensure.

My district's biggest challenge is funding. We hire good teachers, and we can't afford to keep them because our student enrollment is declining, as it is in many northern Minnesota districts. As a result, many of our teachers—including me—have been laid off multiple times for budgetary reasons. Most of our new teachers start out in part-time positions or as substitute teachers, waiting for a full-time opening.

Three districts in my region have had major budget deficits and have had to dramatically cut staff and educational opportunities. We now have large class sizes and are continuing to cut critical services for students at all levels.

Appropriate licensure is also a problem under these conditions. To meet students' educational needs with the staff we have, some teachers are provisionally licensed to teach outside their current instructional area—especially in areas of unique student needs—while they complete the necessary coursework. For this reason, it is essential that NCLB retain the current highly qualified teacher definition and the flexibility to allow rural teachers like me to demonstrate, via the HOUSSE provisions, subject matter competence in the multiple subjects we are required to teach.

The solution is not to make the "highly qualified" requirements stricter or to make teachers jump through more hoops to prove their qualifications. What's really needed to ensure high-quality teaching is funding that allows us to keep the good teachers we have. States and communities should provide all teachers with professional pay and adequate working conditions in order to attract and retain qualified individuals in the teaching profession. Also, the federal government should provide incentives to attract and retain teachers in hard-to-staff schools and subjects, as you have proposed with the TEACH Act, Chairman Miller.

In the area of professional development, we need more resources in programs that we know work to help teachers do their jobs, including mentoring and induction, systemic school-based professional development, and incorporating research-based programs and curricular supports for teachers and paraprofessionals. For example, my local union has included in our contract with the school district a mentoring program to support and retain new teachers. Each new teacher has a mentor, is able to observe an experienced teacher, and receives two additional workshop days. Programs like these have been shown to reduce teacher turnover and improve student outcomes and I encourage you to think about these kinds of initiatives as you make improvements to NCLB.

Additionally, Minnesota requires all school districts to set aside 2 percent of their revenue for professional development that is determined by teacher-led committees at the district

and school site level. My state-level union, Education Minnesota, has a statewide training program to educate our members about this law and help them advocate for quality professional development. However, many of our school districts are facing budget crises, and all too often, some or all of this professional development money is used elsewhere. For example, our district teachers sacrificed the 2 percent set aside for staff development to the general budget this year.

The federal government could contribute greatly to improving teacher quality if it would support bills such as the Teacher Center Act, introduced last year by Chairman Miller to fund first-rate professional development programs.

On the state level, Education Minnesota is beginning a collaborative effort with the state Department of Education, colleges and universities, and other professional groups to support professional learning for teachers at all stages of their careers. We held an Induction Institute in St. Paul this past week to train teams of local educators to set up high-quality induction programs in their district. It would be wonderful if the federal and state governments would make this kind of professional development partnership a funding priority.

Improving all of these other programs won't matter unless we also improve teaching and learning conditions in schools. This includes providing smaller class sizes, ensuring that schools are safe and orderly, and maintaining adequate facilities and materials to reduce teacher turnover and make it possible for teachers to do their best work.

A recent study by California State University's Center for Teacher Quality found that the teaching and learning environment was even more significant than salary in teachers' decisions on whether to stay in the profession or leave. The study pointed to such things as adequate time for planning and professional development, reliable assistance from the district office, the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues and have a meaningful role in school decision-making, and adequate facilities and equipment. These factors also apply to our schools in Minnesota. (The CSU's Center for Teacher Quality study can be accessed at: http://www.calstate.edu/teacherquality/documents/possible_dream.pdf.)

The federal government can help remedy these problems by supporting programs and policies that support teachers as they work to ensure that all students meet high academic standards. These include:

- **Financial Incentives:** The federal government should fund programs that provide financial incentives for qualified individuals to enter the teaching profession, and for collaboration among school districts, teacher unions, and institutions of higher education for the development of programs that would facilitate the recruitment and retention of a qualified diverse group of teacher candidates.
- **Mentoring and Induction:** All newly hired teachers should receive quality induction and mentoring services from trained veteran teachers to ensure a successful experience in the first years and decrease the turnover of new teachers.

Incentive grants to districts to develop peer assistance programs that focus on the improvement of staff knowledge and skills should be available to help struggling teachers improve professional practice, retain promising teachers, and build professional knowledge to improve student success.

Chairman Miller's TEACH Act recognizes the importance of giving teachers across the nation access to high-level, ongoing, high-quality professional development programs that are designed and delivered by expert practicing teachers, as well as to mentoring with modeling, demonstration, weekly coaching, training, and stipends for mentors. Congress should incorporate these ideas into ESEA reauthorization.

- **Professional Development:** Teachers must be intimately involved in every phase of their ongoing training, with high-quality professional development programs focusing on pedagogy and helping teachers develop the deep understanding of how students learn. The information needs to be timely, research-based, and relevant—information that one can use immediately upon returning to the classroom. These programs should be developed in a collaborative fashion between school districts' leaders and the local teachers to ensure that teachers—and other educators—receive professional development that is directly linked to their and their students' needs and tied to the school's and district's curriculum and instructional needs and strategies.

Chairman Miller's Teacher Centers Act would give all teachers opportunities for ongoing, high quality intensive professional development that is available at the school site.

- **Teacher Leaders:** Teachers who earn advanced certification by passing the demanding performance-based assessments of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, who agree to teach in hard-to-staff schools, and who take on additional roles such as mentoring, peer support, and other professional development activities should be paid for their leadership roles.

The federal government should continue to provide support for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards to assist more teachers to obtain National Board Certification. In addition, the federal government could provide financial incentives for board-certified teachers to go to and stay in hard-to-staff schools.

- **Collaboration:** NCLB should include a grant program to states willing to encourage skills- and knowledge-based staffing arrangements in schools. This program should encourage collaboration between the school administration and the local organization representing teachers and other educators, as well as increased collaboration among teachers and between teachers and other education staff, to promote innovation in the way teachers' and support professionals' roles and responsibilities are defined.

- **Teaching and Learning Conditions:** The TEACH Act acknowledges the importance of teacher working and student learning conditions by calling for a number of useful assurances such as improved working conditions, reduced class size, incentives for attracting a critical mass of qualified teachers, and school repair, renovation, and modernization.

The federal government also should require states to develop a “learning environment index” for all schools, and require districts and states to address the problem areas identified for schools not making adequate yearly progress (AYP). Many of the schools not making AYP do not have adequate facilities, safe conditions, teacher retention incentives, or the necessary financial and professional supports. The learning environment index should identify and measure teaching and learning conditions in each school.

Furthermore, Title II (the Teacher Quality State Grant program) should be amended to include an independent, targeted class size reduction program. It also should be amended to allow districts to work with local teacher unions to survey principals, teachers, and other school staff about their working conditions. Such surveys can be powerful tools to obtain information that can identify improvements needed in schools throughout the district to help spur student achievement. North Carolina has been a leader in using teacher working condition surveys. Other states that have utilized this tool include Arizona, Kansas, Nevada, Ohio, and Mississippi. Additional information on teacher working conditions surveys can be obtained from the Center on Teacher Quality at: <http://www.teachingquality.org/twc/whereweare.htm>

- **Compensation:** To attract, retain, and support the highest quality teachers, paraprofessionals, and other school employees, schools must have a healthy environment, supportive climate, and working conditions that support success and provide professional compensation and benefits. All educators—including both teachers and paraprofessionals—require an adequate compensation system with competitive base pay and benefits for all.

Teachers also should be provided with opportunities to improve their salary through the performance of additional responsibilities. Many teachers possess a high degree of teaching knowledge and skills. They know and do what is required to make sure all students reach high academic standards. Now we need to make sure that these and other accomplished teachers are utilized as teacher leaders who support effective practices in their schools, communities, and states. To attract and retain qualified teachers in hard-to-staff schools, we need to provide teachers an array of financial incentives by giving them different professional opportunities.

Furthermore, the federal government should reward states that set a reasonable minimum starting salary for teachers and a living wage for support professionals

working in school districts that accept federal funds. For example, the nation and the states could demonstrate their commitment to educators by ensuring that no teacher in America makes less than \$40,000 and no public school worker makes less than \$25,000 or a living wage.

To sum up, I encourage the Committee to look at teacher quality not just in the policy arena—and not just in terms of rules and requirements—but also through the eyes of experienced, highly qualified teachers. Ask us what should be done and then listen to what we say about what actually works in the classroom. Also, we urge you to hear our ideas about what we need to be great teachers who can help our students achieve at high levels. We are more than happy to assist you.

Thank you again for inviting me to testify today.