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NCLB Reauthorization – Teacher Quality

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No Child Left Behind is landmark legislation in the history of public education. It has sparked impassioned debate about the depth and breadth of its mandate, the range of the impact of testing and accountability, and the punitive effects on districts, schools and staffs in many of the states. The passions of the debate were predictable. NCLB has inexorably and definitively challenged the public will to educate ALL of our children to levels of proficiency once obtained by more privileged sub-sections of our student population. The unique insistence that students of all colors and ethnic groups, all income levels, and all language groups must be educated to a uniform set of academic standards is laudable. It is my belief that embedded in the goals and intended outcomes of NCLB is a principle dearly held by me and my colleagues in Springfield, Massachusetts. The principle is “There is no Excellence without Equity.” We cannot consider the education system in America to be excellent unless we are attaining equitable outcomes for all children—poor children, children of color, children whose first language is not English.

NCLB represents a systemic commitment to rally the political will to educate ALL children to high standards. However, we are not yet there—neither in experiencing the public will for the success of all children, nor in experiencing the tangible results of significant closing of the achievement gap. It will take more time. But it will also take more focused effort, more transformational work at the state, district and school level, and more targeted resources aimed at improving the quality of teaching and the conditions in which teachers work. NCLB must be reauthorized—and soon.

At the outset of my comments on the teacher quality issues of NCLB, I want to express both my thanks and gratitude to Congressman Price for his thoughtful legislation on the Teacher Incentive Fund. The program provides unique opportunities for school districts to reward excellence in teaching based on actual results in student achievement. The stability and continuity of this program are critical to advancing the efforts to improve teacher effectiveness.

The teacher quality provisions of NCLB currently focus on knowledge and credentials. Knowledge of content is implied in the highly qualified provisions, and the expectations of licensing credentials is evident. However, there are no explicit provisions regarding results with students. This seems to be a glaring omission when so much of the emphasis of NCLB accountability provisions are on results in student achievement. As student achievement is the primary driver of AYP and the overarching goal of public policy, shouldn't teacher quality (and by extension, administrator quality)

be connected to student achievement results in a sensible and responsible manner? I believe it should.

The Teacher Incentive Fund creates the opportunity for highly motivated and courageous school reformers to change tightly held traditions in education. In fact, the Teacher Incentive Fund has served as a catalyst for reform in the Springfield Public Schools. Working in collaboration with our local teachers union, we have created a way to measure teacher performance based on a teacher's ability to improve student achievement. Our school system recently incorporated a way to recognize effective teachers in its new contract with the teachers' union by adding two positions for which teachers must apply that have student achievement results as a required criteria for appointment. Teachers who are selected for appointment to these positions must have demonstrated more than a year's growth in student achievement on a value-added measure. Additional criteria include demonstration of best practices, exemplary performance on generic teaching behaviors, and excellent attendance. However, the inclusion of student results for these highest paid teaching positions recognizes that the highest quality of teaching is directly connected to student learning. It alters the equation in favor of student outcomes. Receiving a Teacher Incentive Fund grant will enhance Springfield's and other districts' capacity to implement our model of rewarding and incentivising teachers for results in student learning. Our long-term goal is to appoint highly successful teachers to these new positions, and empower teachers to lead a powerful transformation in the way student learning is accelerated in Springfield. Building high-powered teams of teachers, redeployed to serve our schools with the greatest needs, is intended to produce ever-increasing numbers of students reaching proficiency and mastering the knowledge and skills necessary for success in the new "creative economy" of the 21st century.

The Springfield model intentionally rewards qualitative results with students and a high quality of technical work in utilizing best practices. A significant goal is to attract and retain the highest quality teachers and provide them with interesting, exciting and challenging career paths for which they will be amply compensated. Additionally, the district and the union have agreed to differential compensation for designated "critical shortage" teachers certified in mathematics, science, special education, and English language learning (ELL). In addition to successfully negotiating differentiated pay models for Springfield teachers, we recently concluded a far-reaching agreement with the teachers' union on the new "Commonwealth pilot schools." In this agreement, the pilot school faculties are freed-up from most labor contract provisions and local district requirements in-lieu-of commitments to obtain substantial achievement improvements. All teachers at the two pilot schools (one middle school and one high school) had to commit to work under a local work agreement and to reapply for their positions.

Teacher quality in urban districts takes on particularly significant and urgent dimensions. High minority/high poverty schools, principally located in urban districts like Springfield, have larger numbers of novice teachers and lower percentages of fully credentialed teachers than schools with higher income student populations. (How and

Why Do Teacher Credentials Matter for Student Achievement by Clotfelter, Ladd and Vigdor – March 2007)

- In a recent report from the Education Trust (Teaching Inequality: How poor and minority students are shortchanged on Teacher Quality by Peske and Haycock – June 2006) it was reported that in Wisconsin, as mirrored in the national data collected, minority students/students in poverty are disproportionately assigned to novice teachers. In the highest minority schools 1 in 4 teachers compared to 1 in 10 in low-minority schools had fewer than three years of teaching experience.
- In a recent research brief (Tennessee’s Most Effective Teachers: Are they assigned to the schools that need them the most? – March 2007) from the Tennessee Department of Education, they found that across schools in TN:
 - High-poverty schools and high-minority schools have a larger percentage of beginning teachers than low-poverty schools and low-minority schools, and
 - High-poverty schools and high-minority schools have a smaller percentage of teachers with master’s degrees than low-poverty schools and low-minority schools.

“The variation in teachers’ impact on children is probably clearest in the research of the statisticians and economists who are studying the relationship between individual teachers and the growth students achieve in their classrooms during the school year. This approach is called “value-added” measurement. William L. Sanders, who founded the Value-Added Research and Assessment Center at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, found that, on average, low-achieving students gained about 14 points each year on the Tennessee state test when taught by the least effective teachers, but more than 53 points when taught by the most effective teachers. Teachers made a difference for middle- and high-achieving students as well”

“...we need to move to a more direct measure of teacher quality. What really matters is teachers’ effectiveness at growing students’ knowledge. With annual assessments, it is possible to determine how much students have grown during their year in an individual teacher’s classroom. By controlling for external variables, we can isolate the individual teachers’ contribution, or value-added. This method looks at what was taught in a classroom, but doesn’t disadvantage teachers who take the toughest assignments.”

Springfield is aggressively pursuing an approach that recognizes the fullest definition of highly qualified to include demonstrated results with students. Our ability to place highly effective teachers in schools with students who have the greatest needs may give our thousands of low income students a fighting chance to reach the high levels of achievement that they need—and that they deserve.

The overall context for the reauthorization of NCLB should be nothing less than a sacred social contract between the public education institutions of this nation and the communities they serve. We must mutually elevate the aspirations for what our youngest

citizens must have in their schooling and must acquire as outcomes. The precipitous and persistent drop-off in the status of U.S. students compared to their international peers on PISA and TIMSS is appalling, unacceptable and fear-provoking to all of us who care about our nation's capacity to compete in a global economy. While many other nations are deadly serious about their education outcomes advancing their position in the global economy, we quibble over local control versus national standards, and that testing and accountability systems place too much pressure on students. A rededication to placing U.S. education number 1 in the world is critical to our economic and political future as a world leader. Our children deserve no less—our citizens must have public policy that places excellence and equity as centerpieces of education outcomes.