

Remarks by Senator Tom Harkin to United Voices for Education  
Washington, D.C. July 30, 2007

First and foremost, this morning, I want to thank my great friend Peter Yarrow and all of you with United Voices for Education. Thank you for your activism, your passion, your compassion in advocating for educating the whole child – a concept that too often gets “left behind” – to coin a phrase – in the push to meet the demands of the No Child Left Behind Act.

I share your commitment to this broader view of what it means to give a child a quality education. And I’m proud that the Iowa Legislature, this year, passed a school anti-bullying law that will apply to all students, staff, and volunteers. Iowa is one of only 10 states to enact this kind of legislation. The bill expressly spells out sexual orientation and gender identity as targets of bullying that will not be tolerated. This is absolutely critical to creating the kind of safe, accepting atmosphere in which *all* children can learn. As you know very well, there is a broad coalition of groups pushing to include anti-bullying requirements in NCLB reauthorization, and that strikes me as just common sense.

Now, for the record, I voted for the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001. And, for reasons I will get into shortly, I support reauthorization of the law. I look forward to working with Senator Kennedy and my other colleagues on the HELP Committee to pass a bill that improves on existing law, and gives schools and educators the resources they need to succeed.

That said, *of course*, we are *all* concerned about the imbalances and distortions that have come about as various states and the federal government have pushed for higher standards and greater accountability.

Just last week, the Center on Education Policy, here in Washington, released a study showing that, as a result of NCLB, many school districts have cut back on the time spent teaching subjects other than math and reading. In the districts surveyed, classroom time spent on social studies has dropped by 36 percent, and time spent on art and music has dropped by 16 percent. This concerns me.

I’m especially concerned by the finding that time spent on physical education has dropped by 9 percent, and recess by 6 percent. A new elementary school in Atlanta was actually built without a playground! This is just plain wrong-headed and short-sighted for two big reasons: One, we are fighting a childhood obesity epidemic of frightening proportions. And, two, as any teacher or parent knows, kids have got to have time to play and burn off energy if they are going to be in a proper frame of mind to learn.

Likewise, I have always believed that, with many, many children, what motivates them at school . . . what keeps them *in* school and *engaged* . . . are things like music, art, theater, athletics, clubs, and field trips. These things are not measured on tests, but they are essential to a balanced, well-rounded, “whole child” education.

I can hear you asking, “OK, Tom, if you have these concerns about the way NCLB has been implemented, then why do you support reauthorization? Why do other outspoken progressives like Ted Kennedy and George Miller strongly support reauthorization?”

To answer that question, I have to paint a broader picture about the state of our public education system in the United States, today. Of course, the reality is that we have *two* public education systems in the United States.

In many suburban school districts, you will find excellent public schools. Virtually every

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teacher is fully certified, and many hold master's degrees and Ph.D.s. Students achieve at high levels, and 90 percent or more go on to some form of higher education.

Consider this statistic: If you look at the most affluent families in America – the highest-earning one-fifth of families nationwide – nearly 85 percent of those families send their children to *public* schools, not private. [Op-ed in the New York Times, “A Pledge of Allegiance to Public Schools,” by Richard Rothstein, March, 15, 2000] Why? Because *their* public schools range in quality from good to truly outstanding.

Meanwhile, millions of poor and minority families send their children to public schools that middle-class parents would *not* want their children to attend: Large percentages of teachers lack certification in their subjects. School buildings are rundown and overcrowded. Parent involvement and student achievement are dismally low.

These are the kinds of schools that my good friend Jonathan Kozol has written about so passionately in *Savage Inequalities* and other books. These are the schools that quote-unquote “other people’s children” go to.

Listen to what Kozol says about what happens in these high-poverty neighborhoods and schools (and I quote): “One consequence of medical and early education denial is the virtual destruction of the learning skills of many children by the time they get to secondary schools.” As we all know, in America’s inner cities, large numbers of young people are functionally illiterate when they enter high school.

A Johns Hopkins study of high schools in the nation’s 35 largest cities found dropout/attrition rates of 50 percent or worse.

My friends, this is a catastrophe. It shocks the conscience.

So if you ask me why I voted for the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, it is because it offered a framework for shining a spotlight on these high-poverty schools, and for lifting them up. It promised more money. It promised a certified, qualified teacher in every classroom. It promised to address the education needs of *every* child, including the types of children who have been systematically neglected in the past: children with disabilities, English language learners, racial minorities, and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In the past, these types of children tended to fall through the cracks – or get *pushed* through the cracks. But one of the best things about the No Child Left Behind Act is that, for the first time, it holds schools accountable not just for overall performance, but for the adequate yearly progress of specific groups of children. Test scores from various groups of students are separated out: children from low-income families, racial minorities, special ed kids, English language learners.

Test scores for these groups are reported separately. So we have visibility, transparency. And schools know this. A school’s overall rating will suffer if any one of these subgroups is failing to achieve adequate progress. So, now, schools have a powerful incentive to make sure that these kids are being taught effectively and brought up to standard. In many schools this is something new.

Ironically, this is especially important in successful, high-performing schools. In the

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past, these schools coasted along on their overall reputation, but they did a poor job with many of their minority students and students with disabilities. NCLB has changed this. Now, these schools are being held accountable for each of the subgroups within the school.

0 A common complaint about No Child Left Behind is that schools end up “teaching to the test.” Obviously, taken to the extreme, this is a bad thing. But, in general, what’s wrong with teaching to the test? If you have a high-poverty school where kids were getting passed on to junior high school not knowing how to read or how to do basic math, I say it’s a *good* thing if that school is now teaching to the test. It’s a good thing if that school is structuring its school day so kids will learn how to read and do math – and pass the test. Again, this is *progress*.

So the bottom line, in my book, is that NCLB, for the first time, is holding schools accountable for the adequate yearly progress of *all* children, including specific groups of children who were neglected in the past. And I do not want to retreat from this historic achievement.

Can the No Child Left Behind Act be improved? Of course. And that’s exactly what we will be doing in the HELP Committee. I have my own list of priorities for reauthorization.

We need to take a hard look at what are the appropriate assessments of a school’s progress.

For example, when we look at why a given school is not making adequate yearly progress, we need a broader assessment than test scores alone. We need to measure the social, behavioral, and mental health services in the school and community. Often, it’s more than academics that cause a child to struggle in the classroom.

I am a huge supporter of the School Counseling program. But we need to do more. I intend to push for a requirement that there be funding for targeted professional development with two goals: One, to give teachers the knowledge and skills necessary to identify mental health issues in the classroom. And, two, to improve teachers’ skills in managing today’s diverse classrooms, including children with disabilities.

We also need to look at resources. There’s an old saying that “vision without resources is hallucination.” We are asking high-poverty schools to work some major miracles. And this is a cruel hoax if we fail to give them the extra resources they need to get the job done.

No question, this is the greatest failure of No Child Left Behind. The President promised us major new funding for Title 1 schools. But, through FY 2007, the No Child Left Behind Act has been under-funded by a staggering \$56 billion. This is not acceptable.

We also have to address the crumbling infrastructure of our public schools, especially in high-poverty school districts. In 2000, in my appropriations subcommittee, I was able to secure \$1.2 billion for school repair and renovation. This week, I will be introducing the Public School Repair and Renovation Act, calling for \$1.6 billion in new funding.

But let’s be honest. Relatively speaking, this is a drop in the bucket. In 1995, the General Accounting Office reported that the nation’s K-12 schools needed some \$112 billion in repairs and upgrades.

Something is seriously wrong when children go to modern, gleaming movie theaters,

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shopping malls, and sports arenas, but attend public schools with crumbling walls and leaking roofs. This sends exactly the wrong message to children about the importance of education.

My friends, affluent, middle-class kids in the United States *already* attend high-quality public schools. They *already* have highly qualified teachers. They *already* make adequate yearly progress and achieve at high levels.

Our challenge is to ensure that *all* American children have this opportunity – not just *our* children but also “other people’s children.”

On that score, I’d like to close with a story – a true story. It was broadcast on the radio during the worst fighting in the civil war in Bosnia back in the mid-1990s:

A reporter covering the war in Sarajevo witnessed a little girl who had been shot by a sniper’s bullet. A man standing nearby scooped her up in his arms, and the reporter put both of them in his car to rush to the hospital.

The man holding the child pleaded, “Hurry, my child is still alive.”

A few minutes later, he again pleaded, “Hurry, my child is still breathing.”

And minutes later, he begged, “Hurry, my child is growing cold.”

As you can guess, by the time they got to the hospital, the little girl had died. And the man turned to the reporter and said, “This is a terrible task for me. I must go tell her father that his child is dead.”

The reporter was taken aback. He said, “I thought she was *your* child.”

To which the man responded. “No. But aren’t they *all* our children?”

My friends, we know that they *are* all our children. There must be no such thing as “other people’s children.” And it is our responsibility to ensure that *all* of them receive a “whole child” education . . . and that *all* of them learn how to read, do math, and achieve in school.

Thank you!