



Sharon E. Liddell, Ed. D.  
Superintendent  
(707)528-5476  
Fax: 528-5487  
E-mail: sliddell@srcs.k12.ca.us

**Testimony of Sharon E. Liddell, Ed.D.,  
Superintendent, Santa Rosa City Schools  
Before the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education  
Committee on Education and Labor  
United State House of Representatives  
April 27, 2007**

Good morning, Chairman Kildee, Congresswoman Woolsey, and Members of the Subcommittee

My name is Dr. Sharon Liddell, Superintendent of Santa Rosa City Schools in Santa Rosa, California. My roles as a K-12 educator have covered the spectrum over the past 27 years. It is my honor to testify today on behalf of Santa Rosa City School Board and our elementary and high school districts. My testimony will address the topic, *“Improving the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act’s Accountability System.”*

As a reference for my testimony, let me briefly describe our district. Santa Rosa is a community of 157,000 residents. Santa Rosa City Schools (SRCS), the largest school district north of San Francisco, serves approximately 17,000 students in grades kindergarten through twelve. Approximately 4,100 students are English Language Learners, primarily Hispanic. Special Education includes 2,100 students in various groups. About 5,000 students receive free and reduced lunches. We are an urban district with declining enrollment.

The era of accountability has been of great benefit to students in Santa Rosa City Schools. As a result, we know more than ever before about the academic progress of each and every student. It has caused us to develop professional learning communities, examine student data, use data to make instructional decisions, institute specialized programs, and to develop pyramids of interventions for struggling students. However, there are some areas which could be improved in NCLB.

**Assessment and Accountability through Growth Models**

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is currently based on meeting a certain set of externally imposed targets. As it is currently designed, this accountability does not recognize schools or subgroups for incremental growth from one year to the next.

The California Academic Performance Index (API) is a growth model that sets individualized growth targets for school-wide growth and for each subgroup. The state API system sets individual targets for each subgroup that are attainable once schools implement research-based, standards-based curriculum programs. Schools are accountable for academic improvement and build a sense of confidence and accomplishment as targets are met.

As a part of a successful growth model which ultimately meets the goals of NCLB, there should be assurance that states, districts, and schools use 6-8 week, formative assessment systems in order to provide better, more timely information about student learning at both elementary and secondary levels. Transferring the data information into direct instruction is of utmost importance. Therefore, require that the assessments provide useful diagnostic information to improve teaching and learning.

### **Assessment and Accountability in Comparisons to Other States**

California established rigorous grade-level standards in all the content areas and endeavored to refine these standards since their inception in 1999. The criterion-based assessment system, known as the California Standards Tests (CST) was written to assess these standards annually for all students in grades 2-11. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) gave each state the authority to set its own standards. In order to maintain high standards, California chose to use the fourth-highest band of five as “proficient” to measure student growth in relation to standards, considered some of the most rigorous in the United States. Benchmarks for proficiency are not considered consistent from state to state. Should states continue to be compared to one another in NCLB accountability, it is important to ensure that states are consistent in standards and in benchmarks for proficiency.

Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP) results are based upon English Language Arts (ELA) CST and Mathematics CST results of students in grades 2-8 and the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) results for grade 10. The ELA and mathematics performances of ninth and eleventh grades are not a consideration of the accountability system. The Academic Performance Index (API) on the other hand is based on assessments in the four core areas in grades 2-11 on the CST and on CAHSEE results for grades 10-12. The broader accountability stroke of the API provides a comprehensive, widescreen picture as opposed to a data snapshot.

Optimum national comparisons in accountability will result from consistent standards, benchmarks, and the use of formative assessment systems to provide ongoing, timely information about student learning at both elementary and secondary levels. Data collected can be used as diagnostic information and improved direct instruction practices for all learners, as well as to determine trends in education. Refined achievement targets can be further developed based on rates of success actually achieved by the most effective public schools.

## **Assessment and Subgroup Impacts**

Students may be identified in one or more subgroups, such as English Learner, Special Education, and economically disadvantaged. Students who belong to more than one are counted in each sub-group which results in statistical over-representation of the student. One method of adjusting this would be to count that student toward each group as an equal fraction totaling one student.

English Learners come to school districts with quite varied backgrounds, i.e. elementary and secondary students with little or no English skills; some with limited academic background in their home language; some with parents who do not speak English or have academic skills in their home language; some with backgrounds rich in academic skills and multiple languages. Flexibility in assessing identified English Learners during the first three years after school entry, while requiring specific achievement for students for up to three years, will allow students to make academic gains toward meeting state standards and English speaking skills in preparation for sustainable performance in determining AYP. Alternate, U. S. Department of Education- approved assessments, seeking specific gains may be used during that three-year period to gauge English proficiency and content knowledge.

Special Education students represent specific impacts involving individual education programs (IEPs), accommodations, and modifications, which may include conflicts with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Flexibility in use of approved alternative assessments, such as out-of-level assessments, would allow schools to meet the requirements of both IDEA and NCLB.

Students who qualify as economically disadvantaged students may or may not be part of the English Learner and/or the Special Education subgroups. However, background elements may cause students to resemble one or both subgroups. Low academic vocabulary, minimal pre-school experiences, low-frequency of reading experiences, all require intensive direct instruction, interventions, more time on task, specialized materials reinforcing the need for teacher and administrator training, fully-funded mandates, and thorough understanding of how data transfers into instructional practice.

## **Assessment and Funding Impacts**

Finances at the local level are stretched as far as possible using creative, legal, funding combinations to fund needed formative assessments to follow student progress throughout the year rather than waiting for final API and AYP assessments at the end. This process enables strategic, direct instruction to occur as soon as a need is identified. Regular programming, staffing, interventions, tutoring, technology, after-school programs, additional sections, longer school days, teacher and administrator training all must be funded. The ability to establish these structures and the ability to continue them long enough to make a difference create huge impacts on district and school budgets.

Unfunded or low-funded mandates must be addressed for school districts to be successful at the NCLB endeavor. Raise levels of Title I and NCLB funding to cover the costs that states and districts incur to carry out NCLB requirements, without reducing expenditures for other educational programs. As state and national data is reported, research and development of increasingly more effective accountability systems should be given a high funding priority.

Incorporating new areas of targeted accountability and flexibility, while acknowledging progress, all offer the promise of an accountability system that will fairly and accurately reflect the performance of students, schools, and school districts. Most importantly, they offer the promise of improved academic performance to meet the global demands facing our students.

Thank you for the opportunity to present our recommendations.