

Friday, April 27, 2007

Committee on Education and Labor:

Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education

Field hearing on "*Improving the No Child Left Behind Act's Accountability System*" scheduled at 9:30 a.m. at the Marin County Board of Supervisors Chambers, 3501 Civic Center Drive, Room 330, San Rafael, California

Melanie Blake, Teacher
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Chairman Kildee and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education, I am pleased to have been invited today to testify on “Improving the No Child Left Behind Act’s Accountability System”. My name is Melanie Blake and I am a teacher at Sonoma Valley High School, located about 30 miles north of where we sit today. I have been a public school teacher for over twenty years. I hold a master’s degree in educational leadership with an emphasis in assessment. I have several teaching credentials and have worked with students of all ages, from elementary school through college. I have taught developmentally challenged students, high achieving students, native speakers and English Language Learners. I currently teach seniors English, civics and economics. I come here today on behalf of the 340,000 members of the California Teachers Association, to share my experiences and observations, which reflect what is happening with many of my colleagues as well.

At my school, Sonoma Valley High, we have a group of dedicated teachers, supportive administrators, and involved parents. We are part of a district that also includes 5 elementary schools and 2 middle schools that feed into our high school, as well as two alternative education schools and two K-8 charter schools. Our schools are an integral part of a larger community that is a rural/suburban mix in the southeast corner of Sonoma County. If you walked through our community, you would see the last mission built in California, small shops and a traditional movie house all situated on a quaint plaza, complete with playgrounds and picnic area, nestled in the rolling hills and surrounded by vineyards. What many people would not guess if they visited our community is that we are also a school district which has been designated for Program Improvement – in other words, a failing district under the No Child Left Behind Act.

Two of our elementary schools and both of our middle schools are designated as Program Improvement Schools and my own school, Sonoma Valley High School, was a PI school just one year ago. The high school was able to exit Program Improvement status this year, but as the level of expected proficiency sharply increases over the next few years, we may become labeled a failing school again. So I feel qualified to speak to you today about what NCLB means to the “field experts” in our educational system, the teachers, principals, paraprofessionals and support staff who practice our craft in schools – with students – every day of the year.

First, I want to assure you that I, along with my teaching colleagues, all recognize that accountability is a necessary component of our school systems, both statewide and nationally, and it is fitting that you make that the focus of your hearing today. NCLB has been a driving force for schools to take a deep look at our students, and in particular, to focus on our students by subgroup. We recognize that there is an achievement gap, especially for students with disabilities, English learners, and economically disadvantaged students. We embrace the opportunity to work to close that achievement gap and consider that task our responsibility as educators. That is why California instituted the Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA) in 1999, well before the reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2001.

Unfortunately, accountability under NCLB has been reduced to a matter of test scores and little else.

Currently, a one-time high stakes test often determines whether a school is considered to be making Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) and is succeeding under NCLB, or whether it is a school in need of improvement and therefore faces sanctions. This snapshot approach fails to discriminate between schools that are truly in need of intensive and sustained intervention and those that may have missed the expected proficiency level by just a small amount. At Sonoma Valley High, we fell into PI status because a handful of students did not take the required test and we failed to meet the 95% participation threshold of one subgroup.

I've seen the consequences of an unfair testing system on the English Language Learners at my school and in my district. In our area, we have students from many countries who arrive every year with their families who are agricultural workers in our vineyards and service employees in our tourist industry. In a sense, these students have twice as much to learn; they must master core academics and English. Our EL students work hard and they deserve enough time to acquire academic proficiency in English. Requiring an absolute performance measure does not recognize my students' achievement. It punishes the students and the schools for, in essence, not learning fast enough. I've seen the discouragement of students in this situation and, unfortunately, it happens across all grade levels, elementary through high school.

The current assessment model is inadvertently penalizing our students in other ways. In Sonoma we have an active and generous community, supplementing our core curriculum with music, drama, art, video productions, community involvement opportunities, career preparation and more. But children with low test scores cannot access this rigorous and enriching curriculum because they are tethered with additional language and math classes. This punishes students who are deemed "low performing" by this one, single measure. They are the ones most in need of job skills and a relevant curriculum that will keep them connected to the school community and learning. So the very students we seek to support are the ones disenfranchised by this "one test fits all" model of assessment. I know my students would be better served with a multiple-measures type of assessment that recognizes improvement and ongoing student achievement.

Moreover, our current measure of AYP does not reward the growth in student achievement as measured by test scores that IS occurring every day in schools. Many students in our Program Improvement Schools are moving up in levels as measured by the test. Yet only the students who achieve the level of "proficient" or above are recognized as making progress. California's Education Coalition which includes CTA, the PTA, the California Schools Boards Association, the Association of California School Administrators and many others, are united in advocating that academic growth among all segments of the school population should be acknowledged as making progress.

Our state's accountability measure, the Academic Performance Index (API), is designed as an improvement model that sets targets for all students, and all subgroups of students, to meet achievement goals that move them closer to proficiency. At the same time, California's system recognizes the advances made by students and schools and contains provisions for intervention for schools that repeatedly fail to make those targets. I urge you, on behalf of CTA, on behalf of my students, and on behalf of my colleagues, to allow states to decide the type of accountability model that best fits their particular needs and context. At the same time, I support maintaining the requirement in federal law that such systems analyze student achievement data by subgroup, so that the achievement gap remains a focus of attention.

We know, through the current research and through our own daily experiences in schools, that NCLB is not narrowing the achievement gap. We know that the current accountability system further disadvantages English Learners and poor students with its over-reliance on sanctions rather than support and assistance to schools and students that need it. Let me give you an example from Sonoma, El Verano Elementary. El Verano has over twice the state average of economically disadvantaged students and English language learners. The majority of families speak a language other than English in the home. New children arrive every year. Scores from one test cannot begin to reflect the quality of community and powerful learning that is occurring. The problem is not the students, the teachers or the schools. We need an accountability system that acknowledges all student improvement, uses multiple measures and that is funded at a level that makes proven reforms such as class size reduction and sustained teacher collaboration time feasible. If we continue as we are doing now, the number of schools labeled as failing will only grow larger each year.

Teachers welcome accountability when it means that students can feel welcomed into schools, knowing that they have a chance to succeed there, not that they are destined to fail. The reauthorization of NCLB gives Congress the opportunity to build an educational accountability system that encourages students and teachers to reach their highest potential; I hope that you will work with us, the field experts, to build an accurate and fair accountability system for students in our schools, our state and our nation.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.