

**Statement of
Denise Greene-Wilkinson
Principal
Polaris K-12 School
Anchorage, Alaska**

**And
Co-Chair
National Association of Secondary School Principals NCLB Task Force**

**Before the
Aspen Institute Commission on No Child Left Behind**

September 25, 2006

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to address the Commission today. My name is Denise Greene-Wilkinson. I am the principal of Polaris K-12 School in Anchorage, Alaska and the Co-Chair of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Task Force.

Polaris K-12 School is an urban 13 grade-level school in Anchorage, AK. We have approximately 500 students with an emphasis on integrated curriculum, multi-age elementary and secondary classes, as well as an emphasis on community and self-directed learning. I also represent all secondary principals on our Alaska state board and share issues with colleagues both in large comprehensive urban high schools and small K-12 isolated rural schools.

NASSP's 12-member practitioner-based task force made up of principals throughout the country studied NCLB over a two-year period. Principals can no longer just speak to narrowing the achievement gap. They must be able to make decisions that will improve teaching and learning for all students. Closing the achievement gaps and increasing student achievement are certainly secondary school principals' educational priorities and we accept accountability for results. We have seen gains in student achievement that can be directly related to the law and to the emerging conversations around student achievement.

Concerns remain with the implementation of the law, which must be more fair, consistent and flexible. In addition, the law must help schools build capacity. The result of our work is a set of 21 legislative recommendations that we believe will strengthen the implementation of NCLB. Since my time is limited, I have chosen four recommendations that are grounded in my own personal experience as a school leader and illustrate the four themes mentioned earlier:

Fairness – Growth Models

NASSP recommends that states be allowed to measure Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for each student subgroup on the basis of state-developed growth formulas that calculate growth in individual student achievement from year to year. Not only would an accountability system based on growth models be more fair to schools, but it makes sense for our students.

Using a single score to measure whether a student is making progress ignores too many issues, primarily whether that student is truly making progress. Any student may be proficient from year to year. However, proficiency does not necessarily translate into individual progress. As a principal of a 13 grade-level school, I have seen variances in my own students' progress as they have moved from elementary to middle to high school. A lot of this can be correlated to both developmental and curriculum changes, and though these students may continue to be proficient year after year, the law requires that I focus on individual grade-level growth as opposed to individual student growth.

Achievement, or improvement, models allow schools and districts to chart performance for different groups of students each year. For example, we compare this year's seventh-grade scores to last year's seventh-grade students. Such systems do not take into account the differences in the

groups of students and do not tell us whether we really made any improvement in our instruction or in the outcomes for individual students.

In addition, focusing on that cut score encourages schools to focus only on those students who are close to meeting that goal and not on those students who may have the greatest need. Individual student growth, reported over time from year to year, gives teachers and administrators the best possible information about whether the instructional needs of students are being met.

NASSP was encouraged when the U.S. Department of Education (ED) announced a pilot program in December 2005 that would allow up to ten states to develop and implement growth model accountability systems. North Carolina and Tennessee were the only states approved to implement their systems during the 2005-2006 school year, but we believe this breakthrough will show that schools need this information to provide the best possible opportunity for the improvement of student academic achievement for every child.

The growth model in particular is very appropriate in recognizing achievement gains of students with disabilities and English language learners. We would like to see additional room granted in the law for growth models beyond the current safe harbor provision, which in itself does not track individual student growth.

Consistency - Multiple Assessments

NASSP's NCLB Legislative Recommendations also state that AYP should not be based on the results of one test, but should be based on the results of multiple assessments and multiple opportunities to retake the test. We strongly believe that students should be tested on a regular, consistent basis to analyze what they have or have not learned, and that schools be measured based on these assessments. Teachers can use the data to develop effective strategies to address individual student academic weaknesses and build upon student strengths.

Assessment practices that use diagnostic data, and not the "score," give educators an impetus to prepare, plan, and focus on student success. To view testing narrowly, as simply a measurement of a school's success or failure, misses the broader point. Simply stated, the purpose of testing is to inform instruction and improve learning. High-quality assessments that are diagnostic in nature are the key to improving instruction and thus student achievement. Hold educators accountable, but ensure that they have the resources, the preparation, the training, a strong curriculum, and useful assessment data to get the job done. If we can do that, then our students will achieve, and our schools will have truly passed the test.

Many of my colleagues have also expressed concern regarding the requirement that 95% of a school's students must be in attendance for testing. Depending on the subgroup size designated in a particular state and a school's average daily attendance, that single requirement could mean not making AYP. Other factors such as mobility rates during certain times of the year, migrant movement between states and outside the country, and student delinquency may also play a role in school participation rates.

For schools with astounding mobility rates—as much as a third of the student population—participation rates pose an even greater concern. Many of us, myself included, have staff who call missing students at home, and at times have literally driven to their houses to pick them up on test day just to meet the attendance requirement.

Flexibility – Graduation Definition

NASSP advocates that the graduation rate be extended to at least five years of entering high school. Currently, NCLB requires states to graduate students within the “regular” time. Most often, this has been determined to mean within four years, although the U.S. Department of Education has allowed some states to extend beyond this traditional timeline.

NASSP wholeheartedly believes that designating a four-year timeframe within which students must exit and graduate from high school goes against what we know. In fact, we should be moving in the opposite direction, allowing students additional time to graduate if they require it, or less time if they have reached proficiency.

Students that graduate in advance of four years should be rewarded. This would be an area in the law to actually encourage excellence. The recognition of high-performing students could help schools that are nearing the target of 100% proficiency. Student performance should be measured by mastery of subject competency rather than by seat time currently imposed by NCLB. States that have implemented end-of-course assessments are on the right track and should be encouraged to continue these efforts.

Ultimately, individualized and personalized instruction for each student should be our goal. NASSP has been a leader in advocating for such positive reform strategies through its practitioner-focused publications *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform*[™] and *Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle School Reform*.

Capacity Building - Funding

NASSP believes that full funding of the law is critical to provide the capacity required for success. We recommend that funding not be taken away as a sanction for Title I schools that are not meeting proficiency. One of my fellow task force members, Brent Walker from New Hampshire, offers a compelling story concerning this issue.

Brent’s rural middle school was one of the first identified as a “school in need of improvement” in his state. As a Title I targeted-assistance school, he was fortunate to have access to a sizable portion of grant money that was distributed by the state to the identified schools to fund their respective school improvement plans. As a result, the school’s staff members were able to conduct a needs assessment and pursue an aggressive professional development program that included two years of school-wide one-to-one consulting. Thanks to this intensive professional development, Brent’s school has made AYP each year since being identified for improvement. However, other schools in his state have not had access to the same professional development funds. This is an even greater issue when considering low income schools that have not achieved Title I status.

To their credit, many states are beginning to recognize the importance of adequate funding for high standards, but that recognition needs to trickle up to the federal level. A March 2006 report issued by the Center on Education Policy found that in 2004 and 2005, nearly two-thirds of the states did not have sufficient funds to provide technical assistance to schools in need of improvement.

In addition, many school districts said that some NCLB administrative costs were not covered by federal funds, or that federal dollars were not sufficient to cover the costs of NCLB-required interventions such as implementing public school choice or providing remediation services for students performing below grade level. We request that the federal government increase administrative funds associated with this law. Increased costs for schools include items such as Title I site administrators; training and professional development; and assessment and evaluation.

NCLB funding is being reduced at a time when schools are poised to implement the new teacher quality and science standards, required by NCLB law. And Title I funding for high schools is a paltry 5%—or less—and around 15% when factoring middle schools. If we are truly serious about improving our schools, we must provide the resources that address the problems and challenges of school reform in a comprehensive manner from pre-kindergarten and elementary through high school and even beyond.

Closing

A few final thoughts: Principals and staffs in the vast majority of schools are working hard to improve and meet the standards of NCLB. They are implementing new strategies, improving teaching methods, and working with their students' parents toward higher student achievement. Many schools are taking action on what has been asked of them.

According to the Southeast Center for Teaching Quality, high-quality leadership was the single greatest predictor of whether or not a high school made adequate yearly progress (AYP) as defined by NCLB—more than either school size or teacher retention. Principals are responsible for encouraging the continuation of school reform programs that are working while discouraging practices that disrupt good reform programs already underway. I encourage you to inquire about their experiences as you produce your own recommendations for Congress. Too often, the practitioner is left out of the discussion.

NASSP's full set of legislative recommendations are available on the Advocacy pages of our web site (www.principals.org) Thank you for your time and for the commitment and thought you are providing to make NCLB a better law. I am happy to answer any questions you may have regarding my statement or the NASSP NCLB Legislative Recommendations.

NASSP promotes the improvement of secondary education and the role of principals, assistant principals, and other school leaders by advocating high professional and academic standards, addressing problems school leaders face, providing a "national voice," building public confidence in education, and strengthening the role of the principal as instructional leader. NASSP promotes the intellectual growth, academic achievement, character development, leadership development, and physical well-being of youth through its programs and student leadership services, including the National Honor Society™, the National Association of Student Councils™, and the National Association of Student Activity Advisers™.

