



Tommy G. Thompson, Co-Chairman

COMMISSION ON
NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

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THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
www.nclbcommission.org

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Dear Chairman Harkin and Ranking Member Enzi:

The Aspen Institute's Commission on No Child Left Behind has called for Congress and the Administration to build on the education reform momentum that has energized the country by working together to enact bipartisan legislation this year to reauthorize and improve the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). We are therefore pleased that the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee has launched a bipartisan effort to revamp the law, and that the Administration followed President Obama's State of the Union call for ESEA reauthorization with a blueprint that could help advance that critical process.

NCLB initiated a national commitment—and sustained national dialogue—to hold schools accountable for the achievement of *all* students. Students who often had been overlooked are no longer invisible, and many are now receiving the attention, resources, and interventions they need to succeed. Indeed, students have made gains under the law's disaggregated accountability policy—but they have not been large enough or fast enough to meet the significant challenges we face, and troubling achievement gaps remain pervasive. Achievement gaps matter to all of us, with tragic consequences not only for individual students, but also for our collective standard of living. A sense of urgency must compel us to act.

Once groundbreaking, NCLB must now be updated and improved to help drive the dramatic progress our students and schools need. *[Don't Leave Accountability Behind](http://www.nclbcommission.org)* (available at www.nclbcommission.org), a report the Commission co-released in March with the Alliance for Excellent Education, outlines additional reasons that a timely ESEA reauthorization is necessary to support sustained reform and ensure strong accountability for student outcomes and improvement. Among them:

- ESEA must be updated to reflect, encourage, and support the changes underway in communities, states, and federal law, including progress spurred by the Race to the Top Fund and state-led common standards efforts;
- NCLB and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) have inconsistent accountability goals and measures that send mixed signals to educators and parents and have the potential to confuse local administrators and increase bureaucracy at the state and federal levels;
- While ARRA's programs rightly prioritize the lowest-performing schools, too many low-performing schools and students will not receive the attention they need; and
- The NCLB accountability framework must be updated to recognize the transition to the use of growth models; meaningful high school accountability, and more rigorous standards for students—while continuing to hold schools accountable for the progress of all students.

The Commission is pleased that the Administration's ESEA "Blueprint for Reform" contains top-line priorities aligned with those that have been advanced by the Commission, including teacher and principal effectiveness measures primarily focused on student achievement, more aggressive interventions in chronically low-performing schools, and higher expectations for students. However, congressional leadership will be critical in developing important details of these priorities—and in updating the law's accountability provisions to maintain a strong framework for driving improved performance.

We particularly want to emphasize the need for the next ESEA to maintain urgency to take timely action to improve the academic performance of all kids—not just those who attend the lowest five or ten percent of schools. If it does not, higher standards, stronger teacher and principal effectiveness policies, and other worthy reforms will be empty aspirations—and far too many students will be shortchanged. It is worth noting how grim the statistics are—a school in the bottom twenty-five or even fifty percent will still have a significant number of students who can't read or do math and who are unlikely to graduate from high school.

If the pressure to continuously improve performance for all students fades, if most schools can avoid taking real action to remedy their shortcomings, and if options for students in struggling schools disappear, then we will return to a time when disadvantaged students were essentially invisible and low performance was excused or swept under the rug. While we hope that is not what the Administration intended, we must all work together to guard against this potential outcome. Simply put, strengthening efforts to help the lowest-performing schools must not result in lowered accountability for all other students. Instead, the next ESEA must update current accountability provisions, take into account student growth, and give states and districts the flexibility to better target assistance and interventions to each school's most compelling needs while driving improved performance for all students in all schools.

Commission Agenda and Hearings

With a diverse group of new commissioners representing national civil rights organizations, state legislators, successful principals and teachers, business leaders, state chiefs, school superintendents, higher education leaders, researchers and school board members, the Commission is currently conducting a series of nationwide hearings to inform the development of an addendum report with new ESEA recommendations that build upon and update those in our 2007 publication, *[Beyond NCLB: Fulfilling the Promise to Our Nation's Children](#)*. In the three years since the release of our report, there have been major strides toward adopting some of its recommendations, including significant progress on the development of common standards and improved data systems to inform reform efforts, and greater support for undertaking more aggressive interventions in chronically low-performing schools, improving assessments, measuring teacher quality based primarily on effectiveness in increasing student achievement, and strengthening school leadership and principal effectiveness. The Commission will capitalize on this progress and bring additional ideas to bear in advancing effective education reform and an improved ESEA.

The first two hearings in the series featured expert testimony from local, state and national leaders and practitioners on the topics of school improvement and teacher and principal effectiveness. (See www.nclbcommission.org for summary reports that present hearing highlights and emerging issues.) The Commission's most recent hearing, held last month in New Orleans, Louisiana, examined the current state of accountability under NCLB, including the impact of the common standards movement and Race to the Top

activity and their implications for ESEA reauthorization. Witnesses emphasized the importance of strong, transparent, and coherent accountability systems in driving continuous improvement toward college and career readiness for *all* students. Central to that effort, according to witness testimony, are: generating increased capacity to create and *use* high-quality, actionable data to inform decisions among all stakeholders; implementing higher, common standards and aligned instruction, interventions, and assessments; and expanding the use of rigorous growth models that better reflect students' individual progress toward college and career readiness. (For video and testimony, see <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/events/2010/04/05/working-together-student-success-accountability-data-high-standards>. A summary report presenting highlights of testimony emerging issues is forthcoming.) Subsequent hearings will examine high school reform, innovation, and other critical issues.

Following each hearing, commissioners develop core principles to guide the development of related policy recommendations, based on hearing testimony, research, and their own varied expertise. What follows below are the principles upon which the Commission will build its updated school improvement and teacher and principal effectiveness recommendations. While the Commission has not yet developed updated accountability principles and recommendations, it is important to note that the principles below presume a strong, data-driven accountability framework that requires timely action to address schools' shortcomings in order to ensure all children get the excellent education they need.

Principles to Guide System Change and School Improvement Policy

Continuous Improvement for All: Ensure that states and districts have the flexibility to better target assistance and interventions on each school's most compelling needs—as identified by reliable data—to drive continuous improvement and increase the academic achievement of all students in all schools.

Effective Interventions: Require that states and districts address persistent low performance through a variety of intensive interventions, including school closure, and provide disadvantaged students with additional educational options such as effective tutoring as their schools undergo improvement or transformation.

Actionable Data and Research: Streamline and improve data systems to ensure that data collected is both necessary and actionable for educators, parents, policymakers, and the public; and reliable data is consistently used to drive effective decision making and reform and appropriately identify schools that need assistance, while maintaining strong privacy and security safeguards. Ensure that the federal research infrastructure generates timely, high-quality research that yields reliable, actionable, relevant information, and expand awareness and use of research-based practices among educators.

Remove Obstacles: Incent states and districts to increase flexibility and remove any regulations or barriers that limit the ability and autonomy of school leaders to pursue innovative ways of achieving the bottom line—college and career readiness for all students—and allow states to propose waiving certain federal requirements in exchange for strong accountability for results.

Diversified Delivery Options: Challenge states and districts to reorient the delivery of education in a way that ensures all parents' ability to choose the educational environments and supports best suited for their children through a broad range of high-quality options, including:

- charter schools
- theme-based schools and other targeted programs
- alternative formats, such as online delivery of AP courses, early college high school, or multiple pathways to graduation

Principles to Guide Teacher and Principal Effectiveness Policy

Prepare Future Teachers for Success

- Improve teacher preparation in colleges of education by requiring more transparency on the effectiveness of graduates in improving the performance of their students.

Measure Teacher and Principal Effectiveness Well

- Ensure states have firm guidelines to measure and act decisively on teacher effectiveness so that every classroom has an effective teacher.
- Alleviate unnecessary federal burdens by eliminating the Highly Qualified Teacher requirements.
- Measure teacher effectiveness primarily through student achievement but also through peer and/or principal evaluation, school-wide achievement, and locally developed factors.
- Measure principal effectiveness with school-wide student achievement as the primary factor, and including peer and/or superintendent evaluation, 360-degree teacher review, and locally developed factors when necessary.

Use Data to Drive Improvement and Support Success

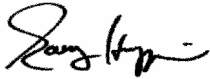
- Drive strategic resource allocation and decision-making with teacher effectiveness data in key areas including:
 - Supporting teachers when and where they need help, through targeted high-quality professional development informed by student performance data.
 - Rewarding successful teachers with additional pay, recognition, and career or leadership opportunities.
 - Evaluating professional development initiatives to determine their impact on teacher performance.
 - Promoting equity by ensuring that disadvantaged students have access to effective teachers.
 - Instilling value in tenure status by ensuring it is awarded only to teachers who demonstrate effectiveness over time.
 - Removing persistently ineffective teachers from the classroom.

Drive Reform by Better Targeting Resources for Effective Teacher and School Leadership Strategies

- Restructure Title II to incent states to develop and implement comprehensive, action-oriented plans for improving teacher and principal effectiveness that incorporate all of the above principles.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the Commission's initial policy principles as the Committee shapes its reauthorization priorities. We will keep you informed as our policy development process progresses, and look forward to continuing our work in support of a strong, bipartisan reauthorization that maintains strong accountability for improving the academic performance of *all* kids and that results in closing achievement gaps and putting all children on the path to college and work readiness.

Respectfully,



Gary Huggins
Executive Director
Commission on No Child Left Behind