



Not a Moment to Lose: Why the Commission Urges Updates to NCLB **August 2009**

In early 2007, the Commission on No Child Left Behind published recommendations to strengthen and improve NCLB as it came due for reauthorization, following a comprehensive review with extensive public input.ⁱ Unfortunately, Congress has not yet acted to reauthorize the law. Despite the delay, education reform has continued through other avenues, including an influx of funding tied to a strong reform agenda under the stimulus law (the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act), and through innovative efforts in states, districts, and schools. There is now a need and opportunity to bring the Commission's recommendations up to date with recent legislative, administrative, and research developments and ensure NCLB will bolster and lead reforms, not hold them back.

An updated NCLB (also known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act) must become a top priority for Congress and the Obama Administration. The Commission hopes that Congress and the Administration will respond to the urgency for education reform and make the reauthorization of NCLB their first priority in 2010, working this year to set the stage for swift action next year. We have no choice but to act. Too many children continue to drop out of school or graduate from high school ill prepared for college or a career. In addition to tragic consequences and missed opportunities for individual students, there are also consequences for our collective standard of living: research has shown that the persistence of achievement gaps imposes the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession on our country.ⁱⁱ

Progress of *Beyond NCLB* Recommendations

Since the release of our report *Beyond NCLB* more than two years ago, there have been major strides toward adopting our recommendations. We called then for model national standards, and there is now a state-led effort to adopt common standards. States have made great progress in developing data systems that inform reform efforts, and stimulus funds will help accelerate that progress. Stimulus funding is also driving reform conversations in other key areas addressed by the Commission, including increasing teacher effectiveness, turning around low-performing schools, and improving standards and assessments.

Our new recommendations will build on those issued in *Beyond NCLB*. While the core principles and direction of our established work will not change, we will be taking a fresh look at the law in order to update and augment our recommendations to reflect progress made toward their adoption, new guidance, regulations, and pilot initiatives from

the U.S. Department of Education, activity generated by stimulus funding, lessons learned from additional years of NCLB implementation, and other changes to the landscape.

Moving Forward

As we move toward reauthorization, the Commission will build on our recommendations in *Beyond NCLB* by closely re-examining core issues at the heart of the law. The Commission will hold four or more nationwide hearings to further learn from experts about:

- *Taking Aggressive Action to Address Chronically Low-Performing Schools.* More than 12,000 schools failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in school year 2008-2009ⁱⁱⁱ, and the number of persistently low-performing schools required to “restructure” also continues to rise. While NCLB provides options for turning around low-performing schools, actions taken to date have not been nearly aggressive or effective enough. New strategies for intervention in the lowest-performing schools are critical to reauthorization—but which strategies will benefit struggling schools and the students in those schools the most?
- *Strengthening Accountability for the Achievement of All Students and Creating High-Quality Common State Standards.* By holding schools responsible for the achievement of all students, strong accountability systems encourage schools to take timely, data-driven steps to bring about improvements. Setting high common standards will help put all students on course to graduate prepared for college and a career, regardless of where they live. In 2005, NAEP results on eighth-grade math tests showed that students in more than half of states are the equivalent of an entire grade level behind their peers in Massachusetts, the highest scoring state.^{iv} Revisions to the law may be necessary to accelerate progress, improve the accuracy and use of data in driving decisions, and maintain accountability as states work to build and implement common core standards.
- *Transforming High Schools and Ending the Dropout Crisis.* Every year, 1.2 million American students^v—and approximately half of inner-city minority students^{vi}—do not graduate from high school on time. The nationwide graduation rate is shockingly low, hovering around 70 percent.^{vii} Even more shocking, a disproportionately high amount of these dropouts come from so-called “dropout factories,” 2,000 high schools that produce more than half of this country’s dropouts.^{viii} Among students who do make it to graduation, four in 10 aren’t ready for college or employment, according to professors and employers.^{ix} To ensure that America continues to compete at a high level internationally, schools have to produce graduates that are prepared to go to college and start careers. A reauthorized NCLB should include effective measures to raise the graduation rate and to ensure that earning diplomas means students are prepared for success. What strategies and interventions are needed to curb dropout rates and transform the nation’s high schools?
- *Improving Teacher and Principal Effectiveness.* One of the foundational principles of NCLB, supported by ample research, is the idea that teacher effectiveness is the single most important school factor in student success. Research also shows that effective teachers are unevenly distributed in schools, that the students with the greatest needs tend to have far less access to them, and that strong leadership is critical to schools’ success. While the need to put effective teachers and principals at the helm of every classroom and school is widely agreed upon, the disparate approaches to identifying, developing, placing, and supporting effective teachers and

principals are often fraught with controversy. Finding a strategy that works for teachers, principals, and especially students is critical to the reauthorization of NCLB.

Highlights of 2007 *Beyond NCLB* Recommendations

- Assessing the quality of our teachers and principals by their effectiveness in raising student achievement and ensuring they receive the targeted professional development and support necessary to succeed.
- Developing sophisticated data systems that can illuminate individual student achievement and teacher and principal effectiveness over time.
- Developing voluntary model national standards and assessments that will help ensure all students are properly prepared for college and the workplace.
- Improving the quality of assessments to ensure all states have in place sound, high-quality assessments that provide valid and reliable information.
- Improving the accuracy and fairness of adequate yearly progress (AYP) calculations by allowing states to include student achievement growth in those calculations.
- Undertaking more aggressive and effective interventions for chronically struggling schools.
- Empowering parents by providing better access to high-quality public school choice and supplemental educational services (SES or free tutoring) for students.
- Strengthening accountability for high schools.

ⁱ The Commission on No Child Left Behind (2007). *Beyond NCLB: Fulfilling the Promise to Our Nation's Children*. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute. <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/policy-work/no-child-left-behind/beyond-nclb>

ⁱⁱ McKinsey & Company (2009). *The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools*. New York: McKinsey & Company. http://www.mckinsey.com/client-service/social-sector/achievement_gap_report.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Department of Education (2009). "Data Reflecting the Number of Schools in Improvement, Corrective Action, and Restructuring in School Year 2008-2009." <http://www.ed.gov/programs/statestabilization/schooldata.pdf>

^{iv} Rocha, E. and Brown, C.G. (2005). *The Case for National Standards, Accountability, and Fiscal Equity*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress. <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/kfiles/b1164323.html>

^v Editorial Projects in Education (2008). *Diplomas Count 2008*. Bethesda, MD: Editorial Projects in Education. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2008/06/05/index.html>

^{vi} Swanson, C. (2008). *Cities in Crisis: A Special Analytic Report on High School Graduation*. Bethesda, MD: Editorial Projects in Education. <http://www.edweek.org/media/citiesin crisis040108.pdf>

^{vii} Alliance for Excellent Education, "About the Crisis," http://www.all4ed.org/about_the_crisis (accessed August 6, 2009).

^{viii} Alliance for Excellent Education, "Dropout Factories," http://www.all4ed.org/about_the_crisis/schools/dropout (accessed August 6, 2009).

^{ix} Achieve, Inc. (2008). *Closing the Expectations Gap: An Annual 50-State Progress Report on the Alignment of High School Policies with the Demands of College and Careers*. Washington, DC: Achieve, Inc. <http://www.achieve.org/files/50-state-2008-final02-25-08.pdf>