

**First District Education Advisory Committee Meeting**  
**Rappahannock Community College Warsaw April 13, 2009**  
**9:00 am**

Rep. Wittman opened the meeting with a request for feedback from those in the First District to discuss upcoming legislative initiatives concerning the challenges of education in Virginia's First District.

**The No Child Left Behind Act** comes up for reauthorization this year. Rep. Wittman asked for input from the meeting attendees on what needs to be changed regarding this legislation. He would like each of the three Education Advisory Councils that met during the week of 13 April to provide their comments to him to take to Washington and include in the reauthorization discussions for this legislation. Rep. Wittman emphasized that we cannot throw dollars at our education system; we have to be serious with funding for No Child Left Behind. Options can include the need to back up and be less prescriptive—if we have to do something we need the dollars to do it. We need more accountability and more transparency. If we put a requirement in place, we need to provide that money to fully fund it. Rep. Wittman's goals are to review the prescriptive elements and make them workable, practical; allow decisions to be made at the local level; the government should be able to provide funding for specific outlined goals. When asked about how other lawmakers feel about NCLB, the sentiment among congressional colleagues varies on how to improve NCLB. He said that despite differences in opinion on how to approach this, the legislation will be reauthorized; hopefully in a form that is workable.

Several points of discussion included the issue that the parent/teacher must evaluate whether each child is meeting their individual plan. There was discussion on whether we should continue to use the IEP (Individualized Education Plan) as the standard for how children are progressing academically. Should there be contingency planning in the event that the child doesn't meet the IEP criteria?

Congress can help with funding in specialized areas such as: special education, physical, speech, and occupational therapy. Another issue discussed is physically handicapped children and several attendees emphasized that there must be an individualized program for those children.

Several attendees stated that NCLB provides requirements but not the fiscal support for teachers to help them in meeting their goals; that many teachers don't know how to identify children that have certain issues as teachers are not trained to do this. We need to allow funding in the reauthorization process to include training for personnel in the schools to enable them to identify special education problems.

Several participants stated that we need to take a critical look at IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) and not just No Child Left Behind. Research needs to be made available that shows that our students are being educated on the same level as those

in Europe and Japan. Many participants added that No Child Left Behind doesn't allow for any contingency and it narrowly defines success.

One attendee observed that every child is required to be identified as black or white as a classification; there is no margin for error on testing forms. Teachers are concerned with being forced to make that determination and this creates polarization. Another attendee stated that she is seeing more children who come to school hungry and tired—and that instructors cannot teach students that are cold, hungry, abused; children who live in poverty cannot learn.

Rep. Wittman concurs with a possible federal standardization for education. He said that localities are aware of their needs. Others pointed out that just as special needs students have specialized issues, students that are gifted and talented can also be at a disadvantage in a learning environment. The legislation should also focus on gains for exceptional children. There are special children who still have to take standardized tests for their evaluations.

There were also concerns with Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)—and how well schools perform per these benchmarks. Are these benchmarks focused on improving education standards for low performing students and schools?

**SOLs.** Rep. Wittman asked for input on issues concerning Standards of Learning. Several attendees said that there is so much information that teachers have to deal with that students are losing out—not learning—because the SOL tests are overemphasized. On the other hand, it was noted by some participants that SOLs did level the playing field for teachers as all teachers are required to spend a certain amount of time on a variety of topics and not spend an inordinate amount of time on one favorite topic. Children are more well-rounded and it does standardize the amount of time that teachers spend on core subjects. Applied, critical, problem-solving types of thinking should also be reflected in evaluating our education system.

There was some debate on the status and utility of instituting year round schools. Several attendees discussed the need to examine the issue of shortening the summer break, extending the school year into the summer and also the need to put a more positive feature on summer school. Some pointed out that children learn during the summer when they are not in school. What is missing is educating the parents on how to help work with their kids. One attendee suggested establishing a yearly schedule of nine week school periods with two weeks off, rather than three months off in the summer.

Children also learn during the summer when they are not in school. What is missing is “educating” parents in the area on how to work with their children, as many parents cannot read: for instance, Northumberland County hosts workshops to help parents to help their children with their homework assignments. Someone pointed out that Wal-Mart is also making more learning games for children. Another attendee suggested that mentoring children through local organizations such as the YMCA is another avenue to consider to work with children during the summer.

**Stimulus Package:** Rep. Wittman stated that the Economic Stimulus bill provides funds to several programs administered by the U.S. Department of Education, including programs authorized by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and others including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Rep. Wittman discussed the need for dollars for “bricks and mortar” for school systems. He asked a county supervisor who was attending the meeting to address issues concerning dollars for the county from the stimulus package and how it has affected his district. He said that it has made jobs more manageable. Some stimulus dollars are not being used yet as there are timing issues on when to spend this money. It is also difficult to spend dollars for Title I and IDEA when it will be used up within two years. One attendee stated that there is a struggle with reporting requirements for funding and how to handle the paperwork. Rep. Wittman offered his staff’s help in navigating the reporting requirements for stimulus funding.

**Affordability and Access to Institutions of Higher Education:** Rep. Wittman stated that his office has hosted a seminar on financial avenues for students’ college education. The last financial aid workshop was held at Rappahannock Community College. The next college workshop will be held at Christopher Newport University on Saturday, 2 May. Rep. Wittman stated that there are millions of dollars that presently go unrewarded; we need to inform constituents on how to access the system to pursue these dollars. He asked for input from the participants on the best way to bring this information to the school systems in the First District. The RCC workshop had over 130 attendees and Rep. Wittman was encouraged by the level of attendance in that these seminars might help alleviate concerns that both students and parents have regarding getting information on financial aid for college education. It was noted by one attendee that the flagship universities in the state are less than 10% funded. The government is relinquishing responsibility for funding educational institutions.

Other issues discussed included resources for the non-traditional student, such as adults with child care issues, and full time workers attending school in the evenings. It was pointed out that there is also a lack of funding for technical school attendees.

Rep. Wittman also reminded the attendees of the service academy appointments and that these represent all areas of the Congressional First District. He stressed that he would like to see diversity in the applications.

**K-12 Funding Issues:** NCLB has initiated an increase in government involvement in K-12 education issues. Should this role continue?