

First District Education Advisory Council Meeting
April 17, 2009
University of Mary Washington
1:00 pm

The meeting opened with a legislative update from Rep. Wittman on current issues in Washington. He indicated that the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) will be on the agenda for this year and he requested input from the participants on their specific issues of concern regarding this legislation. He has had several meetings with other groups in the district and will be sending a request, along with notes from the meeting, to all participants to solicit their written input to include in the debate when the bill comes up for reauthorization. He stated that this meeting is the first in a series of gatherings that will constitute ongoing discussions and future planning for education issues in the First District. He then asked the meeting attendees for their input on No Child Left Behind and several categories of issues were raised, including the following:

INPUT ON SPECIAL STUDENTS: there are issues with ESL (English as a second language) and also with the population of students with disabilities. There are problems since these students are not being tested which results in their not being included in the test population. Challenges include those students who cannot write in English, but also cannot write in their native language. By the time they age out of the system, the system has not been able to achieve the results it is expected to achieve. If educators leave those students out, they are not getting a fair assessment of the overall situation. In discussions about the overall assessment requirements for NCLB, many participants stated that they are worried about the 2014 goals and how the 100% evaluation can be achieved as most attendees think this is an unrealistic benchmark. During the reauthorization debate, Congress can make these stated goals more realistic and take away the punitive aspects (in other words, not reaching academic goals and then having funding taken away) of the legislation.

In short, we need to reexamine standardized testing. Congress needs to look at issues such as the child's past experience, possible learning disabilities, and family culture. There needs to be a review of the student's path to success and overall issues that impact that particular child's educational experience.

INPUT ON HOMESCHOOL: Some urged that Congress keep in mind that there should be some flexibility to consider home and private school children and that we should keep the present language that is in ESEA to protect these groups. The SOLs should validate the progress we make with children and not penalize lack of progress in some areas. There is a push to the middle; students that progress quickly are held back and those that are slower cannot keep up. The students on both ends end up missing out as their success is not measured properly. In many ways, NCLB does not provide the resources to do what it needs to do and thus it becomes an unfunded mandate. Several suggested that Congress can make it easier for states to refuse federal money and thus

refuse the strings that come with it, especially in Virginia where we already have accountability. Many stated that we need to teach the students and not teach the test. Several teachers said that they do not have the time to do this; that they must concentrate on teaching the test. Others suggested that they would like to see a portion of the money be devoted to areas other than helping with the testing process, such as psychological tests, nutrition, health services, etc.

LOSS OF QUALITY TEACHERS: Several attendees stated that we are losing quality teachers because of the pressure and stress of paperwork to keep up with the requirements for SOLs. There was a good deal of discussion from the participants about the overall stress for students taking the SOLs.

There was a discussion of school choice issues—90% of parents who follow this are families with economic advantages. Many said that NCLB needs to establish a new set of national standards. Presently there is a patchwork of standards from state to state. Should the federal government tell the state exactly what they should be doing? Standards should be created for people to think, not to memorize and regurgitate facts. The emphasis for learning needs to be more on conceptual than factual. One attendee cited tests in New York State and Massachusetts as being more open ended. Topics such as measuring temporary retention of facts vs. applied knowledge, problem solving, critical thinking, and communications should be included in the overall assessment for a national standard.

TEACHING TIME ISSUES AND LACK OF TIME TO PREPARE FOR SOLS: Many of the attendees expressed concern that there is no time to prepare children for SOL tests and that we are doing a disservice to new teachers by placing them in the near impossible position of trying to prep their students to meet the test standards. Several said that they have observed an increase in the number of teachers who are removing themselves from being a part of the teaching process. Legislators need to talk with the classroom teachers to take a “pulsecheck” on what is happening in their schools. Presently, there is tremendous pressure on students and this is having the same effect on teachers. Most agreed that if we are going to institute an effective national policy, Congress needs to recognize this from the ground up and include those educators who are directly impacted by the legislation.

Several questions were asked from administrators on how to apply for extra money for programs under NCLB.

NCLB is very narrowly defined and educators have learned that one size does not fit all. Questions were raised as to how to create a more general framework for NCLB. Teachers and administrators would like to give hope to students to be able to get an education and go on to college if they wish. Colleges can work with elementary and high schools to help. We need to examine the overall purpose of SOLs. Has it been created to help our students compete with other educational systems and establish a pattern of continuity in student achievement? How do we make changes to make this system work?

Timeline for Reauthorization for No Child: will be in the fall, possibly October at this point. There was discussion on whether there could be a plan for having a subcommittee or task force for legislators who have deep concerns for No Child that could help initiate these changes to be considered during the reauthorization process. Rep. Wittman stated that legislators from all over the country are interested in changing the status of No Child. Several attendees stated that they want to incentivize an area of teaching that focuses on science or math to the detriment of English, the arts, and history. Rep. Wittman reminded the meeting participants that this is an ongoing discussion and that ideas will be included in future reference materials in the effort to affect NCLB.

SOLs. SOLS are a state standard. Many in the meeting pointed out that instructional time has been lost due to timing of the SOLs. Some asked if there was any way to improve the mechanics of the SOLs. Many observed that equating the SOLs with learning and progress may not be instructive. In many cases the SOLs set a low bar for students. Is annual yearly progress (AYP) a real marker for progress and academic achievement? Is AYP a true representation of what is happening in the school system? Others asked show fair the testing requirements are for specific grade levels.

There are many significant areas in the education field that are not being assessed. They are important because they promote the areas of critical thinking and problem solving that SOLs do not address. Some SOLs are not considered important if students are not tested. One attendee stated that students cannot participate in certain classes (ie., physical education, nutrition, or visit the library to read for pleasure) unless the SOLs are completed. Others emphasized that there should be a focus should be on enrichment and fun.

WILL THERE BE CHANGES AT THE STATE LEVEL TO CHANGE SOLS? As NCLB is reauthorized there will be discussions on the mechanics of implementing SOL testing at the state level and how it can be modified.

TEACHER SALARY ISSUES: There was discussion on establishing a system for continuity of pay for teachers from one county to another. Currently, there is inadequate compensation for teachers from county to county, as the dollars that come down to the state are not necessarily earmarked for salaries. One attendee suggested establishing a county stipend for a higher cost of living. Another pointed out that North Carolina has a statewide teaching salary scale—this type of arrangement would help level the playing field.

STIMULUS BILL—there are dollars in the stimulus package for IDEA and Title I, also for bricks and mortar type projects for school systems. Rep. Wittman asked for thoughts and ideas on policy implementation regarding these dollars and how we can achieve more flexibility in redirecting the dollars. Some observed that the interpretations on how these dollars can be used are slow in coming out. Rep. Wittman stated that he will investigate

parameters and our ability to redirect the spending to specific localities that need the funding.

Affordability/access to institutions of higher learning—Rep. Wittman stated that his office is hosting First District workshops to present financial avenues for college bound students. He stressed the need to connect students with available funds. He cited the recent Sallie Mae workshop held at Rappahannock Community College and the upcoming workshop scheduled for May 2 at Christopher Newport University. The President of Germanna Community College offered his site for an upcoming workshop.

K-12 Funding issues were discussed. States and localities have been the primary source of K-12 funding. Issues concerning Title 1 and IDEA, along with other NCLB programs were discussed further and Rep. Wittman reminded the group to continue dialogue on this with written input to the District office.

UMWedmins.doc

4/22/09