

Testimony of Edward J. McElroy
President, American Federation of Teachers
Before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
and the House Education and Labor Committee
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Thank you for this opportunity to testify before the education committees of the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate. My name is Edward J. McElroy, and I am the president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). On behalf of the more than 1.3 million members of the AFT, I am here today to tell you that the number-one concern of AFT members is how to strengthen and improve teaching and learning in our public schools. We believe that an important part of accomplishing this is to ensure that appropriate changes are made to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) during its reauthorization.

The AFT has been preparing for the reauthorization of NCLB by gathering feedback from our members on the impact of this law in their classrooms and their schools. We established an NCLB task force composed of our teacher leaders from across the country to study the effects of this law and to develop recommendations to revise NCLB. The other AFT officers and I have held a series of town hall meetings with our teacher and paraprofessional members nationwide to discuss how NCLB has affected teaching and learning in their classrooms.

The attached set of recommendations for the reauthorization of NCLB is comprehensive and reflects the real experiences of educators throughout the United States. My testimony today will focus both on key concerns that I hear repeatedly about the impact of NCLB and on our recommendations for addressing these concerns.

No discussion of NCLB can begin without first addressing the flaws of the current adequate yearly progress (AYP) system. Senators and representatives, many schools in your congressional districts and states are making meaningful academic progress with students, but the current AYP system does not capture these gains. Instead, it misidentifies as failing thousands of schools that are making real progress. It's demoralizing for students, parents, teachers and communities when they know that their schools are making

solid academic progress, yet still see them listed in the local paper as “not making the grade.”

At one recent town hall meeting on NCLB convened by the AFT, the comments of a fourth-grade teacher from Boston reflected this demoralization: “The entire reputation of our school hangs on one test,” she said. “It’s not about balanced curriculum, enrichment or learning anymore. It’s all about avoiding that ‘failing school’ label.”

We welcomed the U.S. Department of Education’s pilot program, which allowed a small number of states to experiment with growth models as a way to make AYP. Unfortunately, we believe that the department’s definition of growth is too narrow. States should be permitted to submit and implement a variety of proposals that allow those schools serving students who are the furthest behind to receive credit for their academic progress.

The AFT wants an accountability system that is fair and accurate—one which ensures that no group of students is ignored. A sound accountability system must serve another important purpose: It should distinguish between schools that need intense and multiple interventions and those that need only limited help. This will ensure that struggling schools get help when they need it and schools that are improving will not be unfairly penalized.

Educators also tell us they are required to administer test upon test upon test, including school, district and state tests. This layering of tests leads to an excessive amount of what should be instructional time being diverted instead to testing and drill-and-kill preparation, which results in a narrowing of the curriculum to only those subjects being tested. Students should have science, social studies, the arts, history—and recess. If students are very far behind, they should be provided opportunities for additional intensive math or reading instruction that is integrated with other content areas, rather than stealing time from these subjects.

Another thing we are hearing from our members and confirmed in a July 2006 AFT report titled “Smart Testing” is that the standardized assessments teachers give to students often are not aligned with the curriculum they teach all year. This is not the teachers’ fault. Our report revealed that only 11 states had assessments fully aligned with their standards. Our recommendation is simple: State tests must be aligned with the state standards and the

curriculum being used in classrooms. If schools are going to be judged on the basis of test scores, the tests should measure what teachers are being asked to teach.

We also hear from our members that schools which are struggling academically don't get the kind of help they need and don't get the help *when* they need it. Frankly, NCLB's choice and supplemental educational services requirements are unproven interventions, and they drain resources at the very time these schools need them if they are to improve. And under the current system, these private entities are not being held accountable for student achievement. We know that schools with difficult teaching and learning conditions need intensive and ongoing support. Educators tell me that help only arrives after their schools are identified as not making AYP for a number of years. And then that "help" is often in the form of unproven reforms like state takeovers of schools or private management interventions that don't connect to what is happening in classrooms. Any entity that provides services to students must use research-based methods, have a proven record of effectiveness and be held accountable for results.

The AFT has a proven track record of collaborating to turn around truly low-performing schools. From our work in places like the former Chancellor's District in New York City, the Pilot Schools in Boston, Miami-Dade's Zone Schools and the ABC Unified District in Southern California, we can share strategies that we know really work. First, the "assistance" should not punish students and their schools; it should help them. Too many NCLB sanctions are punitive, ideological, not logically sequential, and neither research- nor evidence-based. Second, interventions should reflect each school's unique challenges. One or more of the following interventions have increased student achievement in places where some had thought persistent low achievement to be intractable:

- Immediate, intensive reading instruction based on diagnostic tests beginning in prekindergarten and/or kindergarten;
- Intensive reading and math instruction and enrichment programs;
- A rich and sequenced curriculum for all students;
- Quality assessments that are aligned to the curriculum;
- Extended school day and summer programs for students who need extra academic help;

- Reduced class size so that teachers can individualize instruction and meet student learning goals;
- Early childhood education programs;
- Research-based professional development; and
- Enhanced induction and mentoring programs.

Finally, I want to discuss NCLB's requirements for teachers. When NCLB was enacted in 2002, it mandated the "highly qualified teacher requirements" for the first time. Five years after the law's enactment, more than 90 percent of teachers have met their requirements. This is a tremendous success, and the teachers, along with the institutions that support them, deserve to be commended. They were told what they needed to do, and because they value their jobs and love teaching children, they met the mandated requirements. Let me remind you that when Congress debated enacting the highly qualified teacher requirements, they were heralded as *the* way to ensure that all students received a quality education. Five years later, we are hearing proposals that would require teachers to jump through an additional hoop to prove they are worthy of teaching our nation's children. Let me be clear: NCLB in its current form is burdensome and demoralizing to teachers, and yet they continue to teach and continue to adhere to requirements that allow them to teach because they have chosen the teaching of children as a career. But it is unacceptable to ask them to meet yet another unproven federal requirement.

Teachers want to be effective. And schools must be places where teachers feel they *can* be effective. We ask too many teachers to teach and students to learn in conditions that frankly are shameful—in dilapidated school buildings, without the basic materials they need, and in unsafe conditions that are hardly conducive to teaching and learning.

The AFT believes that NCLB's stated goal of closing the achievement gap cannot be fulfilled without improving conditions in schools. Districts should be held responsible and accountable for ensuring adequate facilities, a safe and orderly school environment, and the instructional supports necessary to help students succeed. Additionally, federal, state and local resources must be marshaled to provide competitive compensation and other incentives to attract well-qualified teachers to low-performing schools—and keep them there. Finally, meaningful professional development and strong instructional leadership are essential to meeting the goals of NCLB.

Long before NCLB became law, the AFT championed high academic standards, disaggregation of data so that we can close the achievement gap, a qualified teacher and well-trained paraprofessional in every classroom, and instructional supports for struggling students and the public schools they attend. The No Child Left Behind Act is only the latest iteration of the federal commitment to our nation's students. The AFT looks forward to working with Congress to strengthen this commitment as NCLB is reauthorized.

Thank you again for the chance to share teachers' perspectives on the impact of NCLB in our nation's classrooms.