

Miller-McKeon Discussion Draft of the Reauthorization of the Elementary and
Secondary Education Act

Testimony of Kathleen Rooker, Principal-Neil Armstrong Elementary School
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Two and one half years ago I was appointed principal of Neil Armstrong Elementary School in Charlotte County, Florida, a Title 1 school that had not made AYP for three consecutive years. The percentage of Neil Armstrong students on free and reduced lunch is the highest in the district. The school also is a center school for English Language Learners and students with cognitive disabilities such as autism.

There were no changes in staff made when I assumed the principalship. The staff focused on aligning their teaching goals with state standards. Teaching strategies were based on researched based strategies that have positive effects on student learning. At the end of the 05/06 school year, the school made AYP for the first time.

During the past school year (06/07) we continued our emphasis on power standards and researched based teaching strategies. On the state accountability tests the percentage of students meeting high standards in reading improved from 71% to 82% from the previous year. In mathematics the percentage meeting high standards improved from 62% to 87%. The percentage making learning gains in reading improved from 65% to 77% while the percentage making learning gains in math improved from 66% to 80%. The percentage of the lowest quartile making gains in reading improved from 69% to 80% while 74% of the lowest quartile of students made gains in math.

The excitement about the gains in student achievement grew as the state of Florida rewarded school grades to school districts and individual schools. Charlotte County is an outstanding school district and has consistently been awarded a grade of A. In order to receive a grade of A, the school must earn at least 525 points. Points are awarded based on the percentage of students meeting high standards as well as the percentage making learning gains and the percentage of the lowest quartile that make learning gains. Neil Armstrong was awarded 620 points, the highest number of grade points in the district and 17th among all public schools in Florida. The school was ready to enjoy the distinction of 2 consecutive years of earning AYP. Certainly, since student achievement was up by double digits from the previous year when the school made AYP, 06/07 AYP would be no problem.

Unfortunately, Neil Armstrong did not make AYP despite these double digit improvements in math and reading. Regardless of the significant academic improvement from the previous year when the school was judged as making AYP, the school was required to send a letter to every parent of a student at the school identifying it as a school "in need of improvement". Parents were offered an opportunity to send their child to another school and were offered Supplemental Educational Services. Our outstanding

staff was heartbroken. Should the school not make AYP this year, despite outstanding academic achievement, we will be forced to redesign our school.

Neil Armstrong succeeds when students succeed. Our students are succeeding. Yet the evaluation of our school is based on a flawed process. Success or failure is based on a single test score. Neil Armstrong students with disabilities and Hispanic students were not capable test takers. Students that are not capable test takers will label a school a “school in need of improvement.”

A school labeled as “in need of improvement” faces punitive sanctions. Instead of celebrating our academic achievements with the community, students and staff, we are busy transferring students to neighboring schools, finding new bus routes to get students there, trying to explain to some less than capable SES providers what an academic goal should look like, and chasing down parents until we can get a response from at least 51% of them as to whether they wish to use the service of an SES provider. Our community and students deserve a better use of our time.

Schools believe and value effective and comprehensive accountability systems. But an accountability system that is just keeping a single score and makes losers out of schools, is not an accountability system that gives much information about classroom teaching and learning or about teaching practices and curriculum. It is a system that ignores the indicators of a viable school curriculum.