

Suffolk County Superintendents “Weigh In” on NCLB

Submitted by Gary D. Bixhorn, Chief Operating Officer, Eastern Suffolk BOCES

Several school superintendents in Suffolk County recently participated in a study on the impact of the “No Child Left Behind” legislation. The survey study was conducted by Eastern Suffolk BOCES in order to develop recommendations for the upcoming reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This brief outline will serve to provide a summary of the study. The full report, with detailed recommendations, is available on the Eastern Suffolk BOCES website at www.esboces.org.

BACKGROUND

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was signed into law in 2002. The primary goal of the NCLB Act, the seventh reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), was to close the achievement gap among the varying populations of students and school districts across the country. The legislation was designed “to ensure all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (Title I of ESEA). Every student is expected to meet State proficiency levels by 2014. The act has additional goals to periodically assess student learning and report these results publicly to hold states and local school districts accountable for reaching proficiency among all students.

Suffolk County school districts educate a diverse population of students, ranging in wealth and student performance, as well as in access to resources pertinent to students’ educational growth. Many school districts in this region have struggled to meet the challenges of implementing NCLB mandates. To better understand these challenges, Eastern Suffolk BOCES collected information from superintendents about their experiences related to the implementation of NCLB legislation in order to formulate recommendations directed toward improving the law when ESEA is again reauthorized.

METHODOLOGY

A seven item questionnaire was administered by phone to 12 local school district superintendents representing a diverse group of Suffolk County school districts (four large districts with 5,000 or more students, four medium-sized districts with 2,000-5,000 students, and four small districts with under 2,000 students). Three Eastern Suffolk BOCES evaluators each contacted four superintendents. Superintendents were asked to provide information about specific challenges their school districts have experienced in relation to NCLB, positive/negative outcomes resulting from NCLB implementation, and recommendations for the reauthorization of the act. Each interview ran approximately 30 to 45 minutes.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

While Suffolk County school districts represent some of the highest performing school districts in New York State, the findings of this report suggest NCLB high stakes testing and sanctions are not working as planned. Many of these school districts have made gains in closing achievement gaps among subgroups; however, this is often at the expense of diversified curriculum and other educational opportunities. The narrow focus on measurement via the state assessments has greatly altered the learning process. Testing, drilling, and rigidly programmed curriculum has replaced the advancement of critical thinking and team development skills in the classroom. Additionally, English Language Learners (ELL) and special education students are both being forced to take examinations without having adequate time to learn English, or as in the case of special education students, not being developmentally ready to pass state assessments. The legislation is well intended and provides many important and beneficial mandates, though such mandates are unfunded and because of this, cannot possibly be fully implemented as intended.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

In accordance with our findings, we have developed the following recommendations for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Acceptance of these recommendations will result in a level of federal involvement in education that better aligns with federal support of education.

- 1. Continue to collect disaggregated data, disclose the data, and establish targets for subgroups.***
- 2. Overall school and school district performance should be evaluated by measurement of the entire student population. As an alternative, consider adding a new subgroup, “Students served by Title I.” Performance of this subgroup would be the only one that would trigger federal sanctions.***
- 3. Fully integrate the requirements of ESEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Higher Education Act (HEA), and state accountability systems. Approve all state systems against standard criteria.***
- 4. Fully fund ESEA and IDEA to support local efforts to implement mandates. Federal requirements are disproportionately intrusive when measured against federal support.***
- 5. Consider the recommendations of the Forum on Educational Accountability.***



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A Message from *Neil Lederer, President*

The recent efforts of advocacy groups such as the Suffolk County School Superintendent's Association, the Association of School Business Officials, the Nassau County Council of School Superintendents, and the Nassau-Suffolk School Boards Association have resulted in improved State Aid allocations to Long Island school districts. I truly believe that without this effort, the increases in aid above the Governor's allocation would not have occurred.

Although we can be proud of this improvement, we cannot lower our guard, become complacent, and have our unified voices that spoke emphatically for increased State Aid now become a whisper. We must sustain our vigilance in monitoring gubernatorial, legislative, and federal initiatives that will impact the public schools of our county and the Island as a whole.

If NCLB is to be reauthorized, it must be amended so that many of its mandates are rewritten in an equitable manner, such as assessing overall school and district performance by measuring the entire student population, not simply a single subgroup.

In addition, the requirements of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students to be tested after only one year and the 95% participation rule should be carefully reviewed. Serious consideration should also be given to a child's overall progress, not simply the level he/she has attained. It is most important that you share your feelings with the Congressional Delegation from Long Island. As with our State budget, we can make a difference if our combined voices are heard. Please do all you can to contact those of influence to insist that NCLB becomes legislation that we can all be proud of and not one that is abusive to our students by its unrealistic and unfair demands. May I refer you, for talking points, to the excellent publication prepared by Eastern Suffolk BOCES entitled *Regional Perspectives on NCLB: A Survey of Eastern Suffolk School District Superintendents with Recommendations for the Upcoming Reauthorization of ESEA*. Congratulations to Mr. Gary Bixhorn, Chief Operating Officer of Eastern Suffolk BOCES, for leading this effort. The document is extremely informative and an excellent resource of NCLB.

STATE COMPTROLLER MEETS WITH SCSSA MEMBERS

New York State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli met with Suffolk County superintendents who attended the April SCSSA general meeting at Dowling College. Mr. DiNapoli encouraged those in attendance to use the Comptroller's office as a resource and welcomed the opportunity to collaborate with the members of the SCSSA on statewide issues. He also spoke about the importance of financial accountability as well as the importance of providing a safe and secure learning environment for all students. He also acknowledged that the Comptroller's office must also be held accountable for its actions.

The Council of School Superintendents Legislative Counsel and Assistant Director, Douglas E. Gerhardt, also spoke and presented a PowerPoint presentation on *Trends and Cautions on the Road to a Strong Superintendent Contract*. He reminded members of the association to use his office as a resource when negotiating contracts.



POSITION PAPER ON THE REGENTS POLICY ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Recent research into the developing brain supports the compelling need for all members of the educational community to share responsibility for the education of our children. According to the Institute of Medicine in *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* (2000), "The pace like no other... The supporting structures of virtually every system of the human organism, from the tiniest cell to the capacity for intricate thought, are in place by the time four-year-olds are in State-funded prekindergarten programs (BEDS data), and 92% of 680 school districts have full-day kindergarten or more."

"ELEVEN COMPONENTS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION POLICY"

Component 1 - Service for Children Birth Through Age 2

The Regents states the need for high quality prenatal care, health services, and educational programs to children prior to their entering school from birth through age 2. However, no implementation plan or funding has been established to ensure that expanded outreach and statewide coordination for early intervention with children from families at or below poverty level can be assessed. Who will be responsible to effectively communicate with the bilingual families who have limited English proficiency and/or disabilities? Who will provide the funding?

Component 2 - Statewide Prekindergarten

The Regents is proposing the availability of a prekindergarten program for every three and four-year-old through a variety of providers across New York State. By 2008, the Regents plans to amend Section 3602-e of Education Law to include eligibility for three-year-olds. The instructional programs must be designed to accommodate the developmental needs, pre-academics, and social/emotional skills for each child, including children with limited English proficiency and special learning needs. This is a colossal endeavor. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000) there are approximately a half million three and four-year-olds in New York State. Where are the resources needed to support educating this population? A regional study of the districts and their capacity to accommodate increased preschool enrollment would have to be completed. Several options have been discussed by the Regents (NYS Ed. Depart. Memo to EMSC-VESID dates Dec. 21, 2005) for consideration: expansion of local school districts to include preschool, cross-district collaboration, BOCES as a provider, incentives for community-based organization expansion in coordination with the Office of Children and Family Services, and partner with the University of the State of New York to become licensed settings for the provision of prekindergarten programs. These suggestions by the State Education Department (SED) are all contingent upon monetary support.

The Regents suggests that to raise the quality of pre-school education, the SED will proceed to establish a technical assistance system to provide support for programs, expand professional development, provide guidance to local educational agencies to ensure adequate funding is available, establish uniform prekindergarten performance indicators and student outcomes, and work with the Schuyler Center for Advocacy and Analysis to implement its Workforce Incentive Initiative to raise the quality of staff working in early childhood programs. Where is the support for the resources needed by the local school districts to accomplish these tasks?

Component 3 - Compulsory School Age From Six to Five and

Component 4 - Full-Day Kindergarten

The mandatory school age would be lowered from six to five years of age on or before September 1. A provision would be provided for parents, who seek to delay their child's entrance into school for one year only to obtain a waiver. The local Superintendent would have the authority to grant approval of the waiver requests. According to the SED (memo Jan. 5, 2006) 13,000 children currently not attending kindergarten in public or nonpublic school will enroll once the compulsory school age is lowered to age five. This requirement would be phased in over a three-year period: 2006-2007 - planning year, and 2007-2008 - one third of eligible students would be phased-in, with all eligible students attending full-day kindergarten beginning September, 2010. The Regents is proposing a combination of grants and State Aid to support full-day kindergarten (detailed in the memo):

- *Start-up planning grants of \$10,000 for each additional classroom required to provide full-day kindergarten for all students (New York City will need 100 additional classrooms and the rest of the State will need 750 classrooms).*
- *Full-day Conversion Aid equal to the Regents Foundation Formula Aid amount would be paid to the district in the first year for general education instruction needed to meet State Learning Standards for students pre-kindergarten through 12. Foundation Aid would continue to be paid for full-day kindergarten students after the first year for teacher salaries, operation and maintenance costs.*
- *State Building Aid would be provided for all new classrooms and leased classrooms.*
- *Textbook Aid would be expanded to include kindergarten textbook substitutes (i.e., developmentally appropriate games and hands-on manipulatives).*

Private providers including community-based organizations operate the majority of pre-kindergarten programs. A consolidation of funding for prekindergarten education programs and funding for elementary and secondary education programs is not realistic. In order to provide simplified and adequate funding for educational programs, while emphasizing the importance of early childhood education, two parallel funding programs need to be established to support prekindergarten programs and K-12 elementary and secondary education. Prekindergarten grants could be appropriated based on a State share of the general education foundation amount multiplied by the number of prekindergarten children. Grants between school districts and private providers would give a portion of the funds to nonpublic program providers.

Component 5 - Strengthened Pre-kindergarten - Grade 4 Programs

The rigors of the kindergarten curriculum have increased over the past few decades as research has supported more education at an earlier

POLICY STATEMENT ON EARLY EDUCATION IN A GLOBAL COMMUNITY



responsibility and use scientific knowledge to promote the health and development of all young children. Between the first day of life and the first day of kindergarten, development proceeds at a lightning pace. Close, intimate relationships, are constructed during this age period." Yet, 30% of approximately 250,000 children are offered full-day kindergarten. Therefore, the Regents has proposed the following:

With the increased testing means schools have to prepare children for high-stakes exams. With the shift in the "starting point for learning," alignment among State standards, curriculum, instruction and assessment will have to be reviewed and revised to reflect scientifically-based research needed to develop instructional programs and classroom practices. This initiative will have to be funded, but not to the point that it is unfair to districts who have already created these programs. The State data system will have to be expanded to include preschoolers in an individual tracking system - more \$\$\$!

Component 6 - Integrated Programs and Services

The Regents states that school districts must assure that the individualized education programs (IEPs) of preschool students with disabilities are developed collaboratively between early childhood and preschool special education staff to reflect students' expected achievement of the State's learning standards. They also emphasize the increased importance of well-planned integrated programs due to the wide range of language and cultural backgrounds of children with disabilities entering preschool programs. More responsibility is placed on the school districts to provide and monitor preschool programs. The school districts will be responsible to identify, screen, plan, evaluate, and track children with disabilities to ensure their social, emotional, physical, and cognitive growth in a least restrictive, integrated setting.

Component 7 - Family Partnerships

The Regents policy charges local educational agencies to collaborate with their University of the State of New York (USNY) partners, businesses, health providers, and community-based organizations to provide information to parents and caregivers in their primary language and that prekindergarten - grade 4 programs develop strategies to foster high levels of parent/family participation. School districts must also provide more productive opportunities for parents and caregivers to be involved in supporting young students' learning, and strengthen outreach to those living in non-traditional settings: homeless shelters, hospitals, correctional facilities, and from wide ranges of cultures. In order for school districts to facilitate this, social services personnel would have to be hired to train parents and caregivers in educating their children.

Component 8 - Interagency Collaboration

The Regents states that agencies and organizations at the State and local levels must have a more focused commitment in order to close the achievement gap by using their resources collaboratively to develop an understandable and effective system of early care, and education. To be successful, a realistic assessment of the resources already present in communities and states needs to be determined so that public investments can adequately support the capacity for organizations to collaborate in supporting children's readiness for school, and the funding necessary to fill in the gaps (Ackerman and Barnett, 2005).

Component 9 - Professional Preparation

The Regents adopted higher standards for teacher education programs. Part of the new requirements mandated that school districts provide a mentor program for new teachers. The mentor/mentee partnership costs school districts time, not only in mentoring hours, but in scheduling time for collaboration. School districts also assume the stipends for the veteran mentor teachers as negotiated with the local teacher unions.

Component 10 - Resources of the University of the State of New York (USNY)

The Regents recognizes the University of the State of New York (USNY) as a critical resource available to support implementation of the revised early childhood education policy. Through expanded community outreach, families in the high-need category can be empowered to access available programs and services. SEEING IS BELIEVING!

Component 11 - Fiscal Support

The local school districts can no longer provide for non-funded mandates. In order for the board of Regents to implement its policy, the State Aid formula needs to be revised to establish funding for districts in support of Regents policy. The current system is an overly complex and inefficient process. A simplified formula would offer greater educational flexibility and understanding.

Summary

Research supports the need for early childhood education in a global community with a changed educational climate: an emphasis on higher standards, assessment and accountability systems; focus on maintaining and establishing a high quality teaching force; increased inclusion of students with disabilities; and a higher degree of collaboration among statewide partners. This is an aggressive initiative that will require significant reform and funding at a time when our public schools are burdened with tax increases and a need for state aid formulas to reflect regional cost differences. The public schools are heavily burdened and need relief. Why not relieve the K-12 public school systems by creating an early education agency to carry out the mission of early childhood education in a global community? The agency could direct public funds to the existing network of private preschools and nurseries, and develop a comprehensive network so that all children have access to preschool. A strong newly formed agency would support the current mandated K-12 public school system rather than enlarge their mission. High-quality early childhood education will secure the educational foundation needed to ensure that all children are prepared for their future.