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School Officials Say Student Achievement is Improving, But That They Lack The Capacity To Reach All Schools in Need of Support Under No Child Left Behind

States, Districts Say Achievement Gaps are Closing But That Accountability Rules for Disabled Students & English Language Learners Should Be “Changed or Eliminated”

WASHINGTON – March 23, 2005 – A majority of state and district education officials say that student achievement on state tests is improving, but that they lack the capacity to reach all of the schools in need of improvement under the No Child Left Behind Act, according to a report from the Washington, D.C.-based Center on Education Policy tracking federal, state and local implementation of the law.

The report – the most comprehensive national study on the impact of NCLB to date – is based on an extensive body of original research and analysis, including a survey of education officials in 49 states, a survey of 314 nationally representative school districts, and in-depth case studies in 36 districts.

Of the states and districts surveyed by the Center (CEP), 36 states (73 percent) and a majority of districts (72 percent) report that student achievement on state tests is improving. A majority of states and districts also say that achievement gaps are narrowing between white students and other key subgroups including black students, Hispanic students, English language learners (ELL) and others.

However, states and districts indicate they do not have the capacity or the funds necessary to reach all schools in need of improvement, and while most officials surveyed generally agree with the law’s emphasis on accountability for all student subgroups, a majority say they would like to see the accountability requirements for students with disabilities and ELL students changed or eliminated. Officials also cite problems in implementing school choice and supplemental education services.

“After three years of No Child Left Behind, state and district officials have made it clear: student performance is up and achievement gaps are closing,” says Jack Jennings, president and CEO of the independent, nonpartisan CEP. “But those officials have also made it clear that the long-term success of the law is at risk unless the federal government can offer more support to bridge the capacity gap now preventing states and districts from effectively reaching all of the schools that need help.”

The report, *From the Capital to the Classroom: Year 3 of the No Child Left Behind Act*, is the third in a series of annual reports to be issued through 2007 by CEP, and offers a long-term look at how the law’s implementation is affecting states and school districts. The report’s case studies show that NCLB is reaching down deeper into the classroom and is influencing what and how teachers teach; how teachers are trained; and how students are grouped.

Officials are less confident in their capacity to provide support to schools listed in need of improvement under the law. Currently, about 6,000 Title I schools in the U.S. (13 percent of all Title I schools) have been identified for improvement in each of the past three years, according to the report.

The schools come from approximately 15-20 percent of all districts though the highest concentrations are in very large and urban districts. In addition, states now face the additional responsibility of carrying out sanctions for about 10 percent of Title I school districts identified for improvement under NCLB at the start of the 2004-05 school year, some of which may have missed AYP requirements for subgroups too small to be counted at the school level.

The Capacity Gap

Despite the challenges faced in helping all of the schools that have been identified for improvement, a majority of districts received less federal Title I funding in 2004-05 than they did in the previous year, and while the overall federal education budget has grown in smaller percentages in 2004 and 2005 than in previous years, it now stands to be cut in 2006, according to President Bush's budget request.

As a result, 42 of the 49 states surveyed by CEP indicate that providing assistance to all schools identified for improvement poses a serious or moderate challenge. Forty-five states say that staff size is a serious or moderate challenge, and 31 states report that staff expertise presents a serious or moderate challenge. Roughly equivalent numbers of states report that issues of adequate state funding (40 states) or federal funding (39 states) presented a serious or moderate challenge in carrying out NCLB last school year. Among the other key challenges identified by states and districts:

- **Ensuring equitable distribution of highly qualified teachers.** States and districts say all or most teachers are highly qualified as defined by NCLB, keeping states on track to comply with the law's requirement that all core academic classes be taught by a highly qualified teacher by the end of 2005-06. However, equitable distribution of highly qualified teachers remains a significant challenge for school districts with large numbers or percentages of poor and minority students.
- **Working with English language learners.** Districts report challenges in working with English language learners, a rapidly growing student subgroup often at risk of missing performance targets. Hiring and training qualified bilingual education teachers, testing ELLs in English language arts and other areas, and addressing the impact of student mobility on the ELL population all pose serious difficulties to local officials, many of whom would like to change or eliminate accountability requirements for ELL students.
- **Narrowing of the curriculum.** In response to NCLB, many districts have increased the mandatory amount of time spent on reading and math, though not radically, according to the report. Districts with greater proportions of low-income students were more likely to require a specific amount of time for reading and math. Some survey and case study districts report cutting back on time for social studies, science, and other subjects to make more time for tested subjects.

"No Child Left Behind has shined a spotlight on the areas that need the most attention, but the success of this effort will depend on whether education officials can fix problems, not just know where they are," says Patricia Sullivan, director of CEP. "Day to day changes in teaching, student services, and school climate for schools that consistently miss achievement benchmarks will be the difference."

Barriers to School Choice, Supplemental Services

Few school leaders show confidence in the law's more well-known provisions for helping schools – school choice and supplemental services – as a means of improving student achievement. A majority of districts (69 percent) surveyed say they don't know what effect school choice is having on student achievement, and only 3 percent believe choice is raising achievement even somewhat, according to the report. Similarly, 42 percent of districts say they don't know what effect supplemental services are having, though 20 percent believe services are raising achievement "somewhat or to a great extent."

Both options continue to be little used by students, according to the report, though supplemental services has been utilized more often than school choice. Even though about 15 percent of Title I districts are home to schools required to offer choice, only 1 percent of eligible students actually

transferred schools in 2004-05. In 2004-05, about 10 percent of Title I districts had schools required to offer supplemental education services, but only 18 percent of eligible students in districts surveyed actually participated in supplemental services.

Interestingly, the districts most likely to be affected by the choice requirement are those that have the most challenges implementing it. While 48 percent of urban districts and 89 percent of very large districts had schools that were required to offer transfers in 2004-05 (compared with 16 percent suburban, 10 percent rural, and 8 percent of small districts), more than half of the districts surveyed report moderate to serious problems identifying schools for improvement before the start of the school year to give families time to make decisions about transferring schools. About a third report moderate to serious problems keeping to class size limits in schools that could receive choice students and finding physical space in receiving schools. In addition, many states and districts express concern about their capacity to monitor the quality and effectiveness of supplemental service providers.

No Child Left Behind's Impact on 36 Districts

To further investigate the effect of the law's implementation on different types of school districts, CEP conducted in depth case studies in 36 school districts across the nation and found that the law is having a markedly different impact in various settings.

"Our research shows that the law is having some impact on nearly all of the 12,000 school districts that receive federal Title I funds," says Diane Stark Rentner, deputy director of CEP. "For some districts, especially smaller, rural districts, it is the highly qualified teacher provisions that are having the greatest impact; for other districts, such as those with diverse student populations, nearly all aspects of NCLB are affecting the way they educate students."

CASE STUDY DISTRICTS

Alabama, Calhoun County School District
Alaska, Kodiak Island Borough School District
Arkansas, Fayetteville Public Schools
California, Escondido Union Elementary School District
California, Grant Joint Union High School District
California, Oakland Unified School District
Colorado, Colorado Springs District 11
Colorado, Fort Lupton Weld Re-8 School District
Florida, Collier County School District
Idaho, Joint School District #2 – Meridian
Illinois, Chicago Public Schools
Kansas, Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools
Louisiana, St. John the Baptist Parish Public Schools
Massachusetts, Avon Public School District
Massachusetts, Boston Public Schools
Michigan, Harrison Community School District
Michigan, Willow Run Community Schools

Minnesota, Cloquet Independent School District # 94
Mississippi, Pascagoula School District
Missouri, Hermitage School District
Nebraska, Heartland School District
Nevada, Clark County Schools
New Jersey, Bayonne School District
New Mexico, Bloomfield School District
New York, Romulus Central Schools
North Carolina, Wake County School District
North Dakota, Napoleon School District
Ohio, Cleveland Municipal School District
Oregon, Tigard-Tualatin School District
South Carolina, Berkeley County School District
Texas, Cuero Independent School District
Vermont, Marlboro Elementary School
Vermont, Orleans Central Supervisory Union
Virginia, Waynesboro School District
Wisconsin, Sheboygan Area School District

From the Capital to the Classroom: Year 3 of the No Child Left Behind Act, and its case studies is available on the web at www.cep-dc.org.