



Santa Barbara County Education Office

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Statement of the undersigned superintendents of Santa Barbara County regarding No Child Left Behind

The second anniversary of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act provides an excellent opportunity to support the strength of its philosophical premise while calling attention to its serious implementation problems.

The underlying premise of setting high standards and providing equal efforts and opportunities for every single child is unquestionably the purpose and mission of public education in this country. While we strongly support this philosophical underpinning of the act, we feel obligated to point out its serious problems regarding implementation. It is our hope that these issues can be addressed in the immediate future. We ask you to consider the following points:

We agree philosophically with the underlying premise

We agree with the philosophical premise behind the No Child Left Behind federal legislation. The concepts of setting high standards and providing equal efforts and opportunities for every single child are twin pillars that have provided the underpinnings for our entire professional careers to date.

- The idea of supporting ALL children and helping every single child reach his or her highest potential is what public schooling in this country was designed to do. We wholeheartedly support that premise and that goal.
- We also enthusiastically support the setting of high standards and using every available resource and strategy to help all students learn the skills and knowledge needed to reach those standards. We believe that schools MUST be accountable to the students and the communities they serve.

We take strong issue with the implementation and the implications of No Child Left Behind for the following reasons:

- **Subgroup percentages:** The inflexible requirement that 95 percent of every subgroup take the test or else a school has failed to meet its goals is a direct contradiction to state law that enables parents to opt their children out of testing. We have seen numerous examples in this county where parents of special education students have opted their students out, claiming that taking a timed test is too upsetting and distressing for their children, despite our best efforts to have all students take part. Yet in a school that has 50 special education students, three opt-out students make that school fall below the 95 percent participation threshold for one of its subgroups and therefore makes the school fail to meet its goals. This contradiction undermines the premise behind both the parents' rights and the NCLB legislation, and the serious goal of addressing the needs of all students.

- **100% proficiency:** The current requirement that 100 percent of students taking the test eventually reach proficiency—including those with all but the most severe disabilities, those with no working knowledge of the English language, and those who are unable to demonstrate what they know through the mechanism of a written test—ignores what is known about human diversity in terms of test-taking skills, emotional fluctuations, or a variety of disabilities and gifts in other areas. In addition, various states have set the bar at such different levels that the sanctions have no consistency. Some states have set cut scores so that 70 percent correct answers are required to meet basic proficiency, compared to other states where the cut is set as low as 35 percent. States like California that set their goals high are punished for failing to have sufficient students meet them; states that set their bars very low are meeting with predictable success but may not be serving their students as well. The result is that schools in other states with lower academic achievement are designated as successful while higher-achieving California schools are designated as failing. Allowing states to set their own cut scores for their own testing purposes, but having a national cut score or a minimum percentage of correct answers for NCLB purposes, would perhaps be one way to approach this discrepancy.
- **English learners:** The mechanism to show improvement with the English Language Learner subgroup has not been sufficiently addressed. After three years of demonstrating proficiency in English, students are removed from the English learners subgroup—which means that only those without proficiency remain. Therefore, long-range progress of that subgroup can never be achieved because newer low-performing students are added and students who make significant progress are removed from the group.
- **Punitive focus:** The cut scores and growth targets are arbitrarily generated, and then used as the criteria for all that follows. The entire punitive nature of the consequences—not just using the data to better focus instruction and special attention, but the sequential sanctions even if progress is being made—shows an insensitivity to children who may be trying very hard and making progress but still are not meeting the arbitrary cut scores. It also implies that federal and state authorities far removed from any classroom know best, and that success, as measured solely by the way they define it, is the only success that counts.
- **Teacher morale:** Because of the nature of the sanctions, some of the very best teachers in our districts—competent, skilled individuals who any impartial observer would agree are excellent and accomplished professionals—are suffering low morale and considering leaving the profession. Their successes in the classroom, as measured by projects and results that can be demonstrated through tangible student work and outstanding student attitudes toward lifelong learning, are unacknowledged and unappreciated. The morale issue seems to stem from the fact that, according to the dictates of NCLB, no matter how hard they work and how much progress they achieve with their students, they get no reward or acknowledgment unless they are virtually perfect. If we lose more of these teachers, we are losing the essence of what can truly make our schools great places of learning.
- **Well-rounded citizens:** By judging accountability solely in terms of academic standards we ignore the egalitarian nature of public schooling and its role in crafting the entrepreneurial, creative, problem-solving, well-rounded, tolerant citizens that are required by a democracy. Our definition of accountability goes far beyond the requirements of NCLB—we believe schools must be held accountable for helping instill a sense of civic duty, of basic democratic values, of support for our nation’s rich diversity. Having teachers spend a disproportionate amount of time preparing students for a single high-stakes test undermines these critical goals.

Summary:

While we wholeheartedly support the philosophical premise that forms the basis of No Child Left Behind, the implementation and implications of the NCLB legislation have created counterproductive and in some instances inexplicable contradictions that we believe do not serve students well, or the schools they attend. They undermine the very goals we are all striving so hard to attain. We believe that NCLB legislation is a misuse of the concept of academic standards and standardized testing. The manner of implementation created nationally results in unequal comparisons between states; NCLB has neither created a level playing field for all students nor has it clearly defined the common achievement required of students on a national level. It is therefore an inappropriate method for reaching the desired accountability and it has become a political tool rather than an educational tool to help improve student learning. It is precisely because we so strongly support setting high standards and helping every single child improve that we take issue with NCLB, and we urge that these problems be addressed and corrected before reauthorization.

SIGNED:

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