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FIXING No Child Left Behind, March 9, 2007 Justice Event in Washington, D.C.



Justice advocates gathered in Washington, D.C., March 9, 2007 for FIXING No Child Left Behind, a full-day conference sponsored by the Committee on Public Education and Literacy of the [National Council of Churches USA](#).

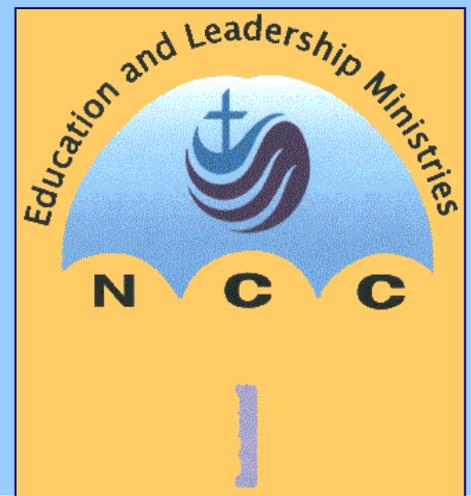
The message from faith based public education advocates to Washington lawmakers was clear: Fix No Child Left Behind.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), signed into law in January of 2002, is the most recent reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the omnibus federal legislation that governs the nation's primary and secondary schools. Because ESEA comes up for reauthorization every five years, Congress is now beginning to debate the scheduled 2007 reauthorization of NCLB.

Intending to prepare justice advocates for the reauthorization debate and requesting action commitments from each of the event's 95 participants from across the United States, the March 9 event featured speakers, including educators and education advocates – some of whom were also parents – working to repair this piece of education legislation, which sets standardized testing as the measure of schools' success. Participants from the faith community, including members of local churches, grassroots advocates, parents, teachers and church pastors, were urged to address NCLB's shortcomings and work to change the act before it is reauthorized this year.

Morning Message... "Wake up and dream..."

"Wake up and dream" of a new movement, said the Rev. Dr. Bernice Powell Jackson, President, North American Region, World Council of Churches, in her [morning message \[attached\]](#). "Public education is one of the most critical justice issues our nation is facing," but the plight of American public schools under NCLB is "indifference, isolation, and invisibility." "In the days of Ruby Bridges, those who supported school integration were in the streets. Those who opposed school integration were in the streets. Today, no one is in the streets..." proclaimed Rev. Jackson. "Schools labeled failing, facing closure. No one in the streets." "To get past the indifference, get past the isolation, get past the invisibility, we've got to wake up and dream."



Policy-Implementation Panel

A panel of policy experts addressed three central issues: over-reliance on high-stakes standardized tests, massive under-funding of the law's federal mandates, and mechanisms which operate through sanctions and thereby reduce the capacity of schools serving poor children and particularly children of color in big-city schools.

- Monty Neill is the Executive Director of [FairTest](#), the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, and Chair of the Forum on Educational Accountability, the group growing from the more than 100 signers to the "[Joint Organizational Statement on the No Child Left Behind Act](#)." Neill asserted that NCLB's "real effects are to reduce schooling to test preparation, particularly for low-income and minority group students, to declare most schools failing, and to attack public educators. NCLB degrades the quality of education offered to the most vulnerable students while it assumes that the way to improve schools is to undermine, threaten and bully educators." Neill said a combination of the impossible goal that every child will be proficient by 2014, along with high-stakes standardized tests, along with Adequate Yearly Progress requirements enforced by punishments for school districts that cannot comply are "creating a perfect storm of educational damage."

Neill directed participants' attention to a new report, [Redefining Accountability](#) from the Forum on Educational Accountability, that would shift from "test and punish to providing real assistance for improving schools" through intensive and carefully monitored professional development for teachers and principals, and scaled up efforts to involve parents in supporting their children's education. FEA advocates that schools be held accountable, and that schools unable to improve should be assisted to do so. FEA calls for 20 percent of federal Title I money and an equal amount of state money to be set aside for rigorous professional development, rather than funds being diverted (as NCLB now mandates) for transportation for public school choice and for Supplementary Education Services (tutoring services, often privatized) outside the school day. Assessments should include examples of student work in addition to a range of tests (some designed by teachers themselves) that provide useful feedback teachers can use to improve instruction, feedback for students and their parents, and finally feedback to improve schools and hold them accountable. Neill urged participants to mobilize others around demands to build capacity in public schools rather than testing and punishing schools and educators who face the greatest challenges.

- Molly A. Hunter is the Director of the [National Access Network](#), an organization whose mission seeks to bring together school funding litigators and advocates from across the fifty states to share strategies for securing adequate and equitably distributed school funding. The National ACCESS Network, a division of the Campaign for Educational Equity, is now located at Teachers College, Columbia University. Hunter recounted a parable: "An employee is given a list of things to buy and the money to buy them. He cheerfully sets out to purchase everything on the boss's list. Soon, he realizes there is not enough money. When he tells this to his boss, he is told to try harder. He continues searching for the best prices and even uses experienced shoppers to identify creative ways to get everything on the list, but when the employee reports that the items cannot be obtained with the resources supplied, the boss calls his efforts into question and labels him 'failing.'" "Our schools do not receive funding adequate to meet what is required of them, but like the boss in the parable, we have decided to label them 'failing' and to demand more." "Funding gaps create the opportunity gaps that must be closed before society can overcome achievement gaps."

Hunter complained that federal funding for NCLB has been so meager (somewhere between \$40 and \$70 billion less than authorized back in 2001 depending on what years and what promises and allocations are counted) that the federal contribution does not even cover the administrative costs across the states. She advocated for a "costing-out study" as part of the NCLB reauthorization—a study that would identify the amount needed to support such improvements as smaller classes, and that would additionally name needed investments to support children who suffer the ravages of poverty. Needed social investments to support school investments, Hunter said, would include the "benefit of health care, stable housing, and safety that would enable children to give their school work the attention it deserves." Finally Hunter reminded participants that over 90 percent of all school funding comes from state and local sources, which are very unequal from place to place. Federal education funding is a thin slice, only 7-9 percent. The federal government has enforced NCLB's mandates and regulations without providing resources to enable the poorest school districts to meet the requirements.

- Monique L. Dixon, is Senior Attorney at [The Advancement Project](#). Dixon traced the history of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, that was originally passed in 1965 to bring opportunity and needed resources to the schools educating low-income and minority students. Dixon then explored the civil rights paradox embodied in ESEA's 2002 reauthorized version (NCLB), touted by its creators as the civil rights solution to low achievement rates among poor and minority children: "In theory, NCLB has some admirable goals, namely raising the achievement of all students, making schools accountable for the progress of every student; providing every child with a qualified teacher and requiring states to develop parental involvement policies and plans. These are goals civil rights activists have demanded for years. In practice, however, NCLB's emphasis on high-stakes testing has caused schools to narrow their curricula. Some schools are pushing low-achieving students out of school. Sanctions imposed on schools that do not make adequate yearly

progress apply only to schools receiving Title I funding. Therefore, the very students who were supposed to benefit from NCLB—disadvantaged children—find themselves in schools that are labeled ‘in need of improvement’ where qualified teachers do not want to teach.”

Dixon presented stark evidence that test scores demonstrate a continuing wide gap in reading and math between white and African American children. Several popular school policies conspire with the pressures of NCLB to accelerate dropout rates and reduce lifetime opportunity: zero tolerance discipline based on suspension and expulsion; high stakes testing used to retain students in-grade; and high stakes graduation tests that deny some students a diploma despite high attendance and passing grades. Dixon called participants to elevate the stories of parents, students and teachers who have experienced the negative impact of such policies along with the effects of NCLB, and then to return to the roots of the civil rights movement by organizing multiracial coalitions and alliances with teachers and administrators.

Practitioners and Representatives of Affected Cultural Groups Speak

A panel of educators recounted personal encounters with the implementation of NCLB in regard to challenges for: schools educating children in concentrated poverty, English language learners, students with disabilities, and students who are not of the dominant culture.

- Anita Harmon is principal of William W. Carter Elementary School, in the Chicago, Illinois, Washington Park neighborhood. Harmon has served the Chicago Public Schools for more than 30 years, and Carter School since 1997. Carter School is what Chicago calls a general elementary school, not one of the selective magnet schools. Harmon grieves that as her school succeeds with particular students and raises their scores, these successful students are often recruited away by the selective magnets, who get the credit for her students' improved scores. Today, Carter School's students are 98 percent poor with a family mobility rate of 56 percent. Many grandparents are raising children, and a significant number of students are wards of the state. Harmon works 14, sometimes 16, hours per day, and during her tenure, she has been able to turn around her school with innovative programs including an attendance intervention program staffed by senior-citizen church volunteers who undertake to mentor the most vulnerable parents; a quiet-lunch reading program in which students are expected to bring pleasure reading with them each day to enjoy while they eat or to listen while staff and visitors read aloud; and an eighth grade mentoring program in which every adult at the school meets weekly with assigned eighth graders to provide personal and academic support. “How can NCLB be fixed?” asked Harmon? “I know I do not have the resources I need in my school. The tutoring program is a joke. The curriculum being tested is watered down. We are working hard and doing our very best at my school, but there is so much work to do.”

- Carmen Sol Cotto, a 33-year public school educator, is a multicultural-English Language Learner coordinator for the School District of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Cotto shared the challenges posed by standardized testing in English for children and adolescents whose home language is not English. It is difficult to measure subject-matter learning when the test is in English, said Cotto, because you don't know if you are measuring subject-matter learning or if the test score reflects problems with academic English. Cotto noted that because of low test scores, schools serving mostly English language learners were on the list of schools taken over and privatized in Philadelphia several years ago, but that recent analysis has shown that the takeover by private operators has not significantly raised achievement in the buildings turned over to private operators. An advocate for investing in the city's vulnerable public schools, Cotto affirmed the need to improve the quality of tests used for assessment of English language learners, to direct additional resources to public schools serving English language learners, and to improve measures of accountability. She emphasized that schools must honor the language and culture of students at the same time increasing academic expectations.

- Heather Dawn Thompson, Director of Governmental Affairs at the [National Congress of American Indians](#), spoke to unique governance challenges for schools serving American Indians. Thompson described 560 native tribal governments and the lack of state jurisdiction in reservation schools. Thompson told the gathering that many American Indians view education as “a weapon” against their culture, their languages, and their communities because that has been their historical experience with education dating back to the time of the boarding schools. She also related the dire circumstances of the many native communities that struggle with abject poverty—12 percent of households lack plumbing and 30 percent lack telephones—and extremely high unemployment. Native communities are trying to cope with high teen suicide rates. Emphasizing the connection between low self esteem among American Indian children and efforts to undermine their indigenous cultures, Thompson called the federal education law, “No Culture Left Behind.” Citing a major study by the National Indian Education Association, [No Child Left Behind in Indian Country](#). Thompson spoke for more and better education in native languages and culture and the funding needed to support these goals, as well as better support for teachers of native students, and better measures of progress. Thompson sees an urgent need to improve public schools across Indian Country, but she does not view NCLB as the solution to the problems presented.

- Daryl Gates is a special education teacher at Robinson Middle School, in the Cado Parish School District, Shreveport, Louisiana. To prepare for his presentation, Gates had asked colleagues to share the concerns they wanted him to present at our event to convey how NCLB looks and feels to the teachers at his school. One story concerned a 16-year-old sixth grader, held back by low test scores and now creating challenges for the student himself, for his classmates, and for his teachers. Another story traced the dilemma of a 25-year-certified teacher recently rated by NCLB, “not highly

qualified.” Gates assured those gathered that a peer review of this teacher’s work would rate that teacher indeed highly qualified, based on the accomplishments of former students, one of whom is a state official devising the current rating system for teacher qualifications. Robinson Middle School, a high achieving school, was forced to accept a large number of students from a neighboring school “in need of improvement,” only to see its own test scores decline. Gates grieves that funding is being cut from art, music, and field trips and being re-directed to drill programs aimed at raising basic test scores. He described the importance of a field trip for his school’s students to a nearby college, because so many Robinson Middle School students do not have a realistic understanding of what college is and what steps need to be taken to prepare for higher education.

He reminded participants that changes in society must cause us to expand our work with children, and asked churches to establish or expand after school programs. According to Gates, federal efforts to improve public education should tie federal funding to incentives for states to equalize funding; invest in staff development for teachers so they keep teaching; switch to multiple measures of achievement, not just standardized tests; remove the blaming and labeling of Adequate Yearly Progress; increase efforts to reach parents and connect communities more closely with schools; and support other needs for the most vulnerable children such as health insurance. As a teacher, Gates referenced the recommendations in the Forum on Educational Accountability’s new report, [Redefining Accountability](#) Gates concluded: “Dream, mobilize and organize, and thank you for your support for teachers working in difficult circumstances.”

Afternoon Keynote... “Looking for Reform in All the Wrong Places”

George Wood, a rural Appalachian Ohio high school principal, former professor, and director of the [Forum for Education and Democracy](#), delivered the afternoon keynote address, bringing a practitioner’s experience and an academic’s keen analysis to the audience. Believing that high schools are “democracy’s finishing schools,” Wood has introduced a non-tracked core academic program for all students at Federal Hocking High School, a First Amendment Program, and a required senior project and portfolio for each high school senior. His biggest worry the day he addressed our gathering, however, was the Ohio Graduation Test that would take up every morning in the week beginning March 12, for all tenth graders and any in eleventh or twelfth grades who haven’t yet passed. This test will limit the lifetime opportunities for some of Wood’s students by denying a diploma. Wood was quick to point out that he believes he has improved Federal Hocking High School, whose college matriculation rate has grown from 20 percent to 70 percent in the fifteen years he has been principal, but that, “Tests don’t improve school quality.”

If Congress were to “look for reform in the right places,” what reforms would Wood suggest?

First, equalize the financial investment in schools from place to place. “The primary purpose of ESEA when first enacted was to reduce inequities in school resources. Today, America operates one of the most inequitable educational systems among industrialized nations. What we have is an educational debt that has accrued over years of neglect. Any federal legislation must address this debt and insure that every child has access to equitable school resources, facilities, and quality teachers.” Wood specifically urged support for the Student Bill of Rights Act, which has been introduced in the last few Congresses by Pennsylvania Congressman Chaka Fattah and Connecticut Senator Chris Dodd.

Second, although we need to know how schools are serving our children, our current reliance upon high-stakes standardized testing is designed not to educate, but to punish. “Testing is not investing. Rather than a punitive and narrow view of schools, legislation should provide for a richer, more sophisticated and more honest view of what and how our children are learning.” “Assessments should include multiple measures, be performance based, and rely upon local involvement in development, administration, and scoring.” We must substitute measures of continuous improvement for the punitive Adequate Yearly Progress system.

Third, reauthorization of NCLB should insure that those closest to children, their parents and teachers, have the most to say about life in the classroom. “Current legislation gives too much authority over the lives of our children to testing firms, textbook companies, and government bureaucrats. The appropriate federal role is to insure equity, not to run local schools.” We also need to find ways to develop an adequate supply of excellent teachers and to change working conditions to keep good teachers in the classroom.

Finally, “Schools alone are not responsible for student achievement. Any federal program which is focused on school success must also be accompanied by programs that provide adequate health care and nutrition, safe and secure housing, and healthy communities that support a healthy childhood for all children.”

Interest of the National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy in the Federal Education Law

Believing that Christian faith speaks to public morality and the ways our nation should bring justice and compassion into its civic life, the NCC’s Committee on Public Education and Literacy has called its advocates to speak to needed reform in public education, America’s largest civic institution, where enormous achievement gaps alert us that some children have access to excellent education while other children are left behind.

In the introduction to the March 9 event, Committee Chair, Jan Resseger, of the United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries, acknowledged that by disaggregating achievement score data by race, ethnicity, economic level, disability, and English language learning status, NCLB has accomplished one of its important stated goals: to make transparent the magnitude of achievement gaps among America's children. NCLB, she said, "has also proclaimed the lofty goal that our nation will quickly and finally close those gaps." She continued, "Advocates from faith communities have become increasingly involved in the conversation about NCLB, however, as the law's implementation has not lived up to its goal of rectifying injustice." Because NCLB operates through high states testing, through sanctions, and with inadequate investment, on March 9, 2007, the NCC's committee called together advocates, church leaders, and local pastors to learn exactly how the law is hurting the public schools serving our nation's most vulnerable children.

Late in 2005, the NCC's committee released a statement, "[Ten Moral Concerns in the No Child Left Behind Act](#)," which proclaimed, "As people of faith, we do not view our children as products to be tested and managed, but instead as unique human beings to be nurtured and educated." The statement's ten moral concerns include shaming and labeling children; judging children by one annual test; pressuring and blaming their teachers and their schools; moving federal funding out of in-school programming to external, largely privatized services; massively under-funding the requirements of the law; and dangerously undermining support for the institution of public schooling.

In a short advocacy resource, "[Fixing NCLB Talking Points](#)," (attached) distributed at the March 9 event, the NCC's committee declares, "We affirm that the law should uphold high expectations for all children but honor every child's accomplishments; shift the focus from punishing public schools to strengthening them; reduce high stakes testing; and fully fund the law." "We call on our political leaders to invest in developing the capacity of all schools."

Who Are the Members of the National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy?

All members of the Committee on Public Education and Literacy helped plan and/or lead sessions at the March 9 event, FIXING No Child Left Behind. They are:

African Methodist Episcopal Church: Ms. Frankie Batts, Fort Worth, Texas;
American Baptist Churches USA: Mr. Curtis Ramsey-Lucas, Washington, DC and Valley Forge, Pennsylvania
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ): Rev. Billye Bridges, Indianapolis, Indiana
Christian Methodist Episcopal Church: Ms. Phedonia Johnson, Chicago, Illinois
Episcopal Church: Rev. Debra Kissinger, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: Ms. Donna Braband, Chicago, Illinois
Presbyterian Church, USA: Rev. Elenora Giddings-Ivory, Washington, DC
Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc.: Ms. Brenda Tribett, Washington, DC; Rev. Nathan Schaffer, Chicago, Illinois
United Methodist Church General Board of Church and Society: Mr. Bill Mefford, Washington, DC
United Methodist Church, Women's Division: Ms. Julie Taylor, Washington, DC
United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries: Ms. Jan Resseger, Cleveland, Ohio
National Council of Churches: Rev. Garland Pierce, Associate General Secretary for Education and Leadership Ministries Commission; Rev. Brenda Girton Mitchell, Associate General Secretary for Justice and Advocacy

The work of the NCC's Committee on Public Education and Literacy is grounded in several policy statements passed by the NCC's General Assemblies:

["The Churches and the Public Schools at the Close of the Twentieth Century,"](#) November 11, 1999.

["The Churches and Public Schools,"](#) November 5, 2003

["The Church and Children: Vision and Goals for the 21st Century,"](#) November 11, 2004.

The National Council of Churches is the ecumenical voice of America's Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican, historic African American and traditional peace churches. These 35 communions have 45 million faithful members in 100,000 congregations in all 50 states.

This report was prepared by Jan Resseger, United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries, with reporting assistance by Debra Kissinger, The Episcopal Church; Barbara Wheeler, Women's Division, United Methodist Church; and Molly Hunter, National ACCESS Network, Teachers College, Columbia University.

