

A Bright Spot On The Accountability Horizon?



Since its inception in 2001, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has been a lightning rod for educators and policy makers alike. The strict accountability measures in the legislation won both praise and scorn. Now, a decade into the legislation, we're able to take a more objective look at the law's provisions and see that, in fact, the legislation was able to accomplish a number of important goals for education. Chief among those goals was ensuring that minority populations, whether based on ethnicity, income level or English proficiency, were not left behind in the quest for educational success.

That being said, major flaws also exist in the legislation and threaten to create a situation where few if any schools in the country can be counted as successful. Of primary concern to educators are provisions that measure student success based on scores from a single test given on a single day, and that require 100 percent of students to have achieved proficiency in reading and math by 2014. These are among the provisions that need to be addressed through reauthorization of the legislation, something that was originally scheduled to occur last spring. Unfortunately, Congress has yet to consider the reauthorization and schools across the country still face the daunting and unrealistic expectation of achieving 100 percent proficiency in the next two and a half years.

In Kansas, we've been fortunate that through the dedication and hard work of our state's educators, students, parents and communities we continue to have more schools meeting the NCLB performance targets than not. In fact, we had more schools meet the targets this year than did the previous year. However, we also have a growing number of Title I schools and districts listed as "on improvement," which means one or more student subgroups did not meet the performance target for two consecutive years. These schools and districts cannot be taken off the "on improvement" list until they've achieved the performance targets for two consecutive years. Because the targets increase each year, that becomes increasingly difficult to do.

Fortunately, faced with inaction in Congress on the NCLB reauthorization, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan recently announced his intention to grant waivers to states meeting qualifying criteria that will allow them to revise their state accountability plan. The waivers envisioned through this effort would go beyond the waiver sought by the State Board of Education earlier this year that was ultimately denied. That waiver simply asked that the state's performance targets be held steady at their 2009-10 levels while the state worked to implement new Common Core Standards in reading and math, as well as the assessments tied to those standards. The waivers envisioned by the U.S. Department of Education would allow for a complete rewriting of the accountability plan, so that performance could be measured by student growth, rather than a single assessment score.

A waiver of this nature would be of tremendous benefit to our state. It would maintain a level of accountability that would ensure all students are learning to a standard and at a rate that will prepare them for college or a career, and it would apply a more appropriate and realistic measure in gauging school effectiveness. The qualifying criteria for the waivers will be released later this month, and together with the staff at the Kansas State Department of Education and our State Board of Education, I'll be looking closely at the criteria and our Kansas policies and initiatives. I believe Kansas will be in a good position to seek a waiver from our NCLB accountability plan, and I look forward to being able to announce that waiver before the year is out.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Diane". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr. Diane Debacker
Kansas Commissioner of Education