

No Child Left Behind in FLORIDA

Accountability Creates Confusion

FLORIDA NCLB HEARING

Academy for Teaching, Learning and Leadership, University of Central Florida • Orlando
December 14, 2005 • 4:00–7:30 PM
Local hearing partner: Foundation for Orange County Public Schools, Orlando

HEARING OFFICERS

Tobi L. Allen, Manager Community Relations, Lockheed Martin—Central Florida, Orlando, FL • **Ronald Cowell**, President, Education Policy & Leadership Center, Harrisburg, PA • **J. Charles Gray**, Founding Director, GrayRobinson Law Firm, Orlando, FL • **Latha Krishnaiyer**, Past President, Florida PTA, Coral Springs, FL • **Ada V. Rodriguez**, Director, Developing Hispanic Leaders, Central Florida YMCA, Orlando, FL

STUDENT WITNESSES

Ben Parker, Edgewater High School, Orlando
David Lopez, Jones High School, Orlando

PARENT WITNESSES

Ivette Mendoza, Hernando County • **Santiago Fernandez**, Gamal Mack, Orange County • **Gladys Moreno**, Hillsborough County

COMMUNITY WITNESSES

Christine Stilwell, Regional Coordinator, Informed Families/The Florida Family Partnership, Orlando • **Mark Havard**, Human Resources Director, Hyatt Regency Grand Cypress Hotel, Orlando • **Lisa Nason**, VP, Communications & Organization Development, Enterprise Florida, Orlando • **Tim Huth**, Deputy Superintendent, Volusia County School Board • **Conrad W. Marshall, Jr.**, Youth Worker, Orange County • **Gregg Wiederer**, Resident, Orange County • **Dorina Sackman**, Teacher, Orange County • **Margaret Gentile**, Senior Director, Student Services, Orange County Public Schools • **Terri Steck**, **Molly Piveral**, Parents, Orange County • **Marjorie Murray**, Special Projects & Title I Coordinator, Seminole County Public Schools, Sanford • **Tony Bland** (*no affiliation given*) • **Joie Cadle**, Member, Orange County School Board

The Florida hearing was one of nine hearings on NCLB held across the country from September 2005 to January 2006. This is the second set of hearings organized by PEN to convey the public's concerns and recommendations to policymakers in advance of the scheduled 2007 reauthorization of the law.

Schools should be held accountable for education, but we must do so in a meaningful way.

Christine Stilwell, parent advocate, Orlando

Florida residents are accustomed to test-based accountability, but they are more concerned about making Florida's state policies work than about complying with the mandates of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). In fact, the far-reaching federal law's primary impact has been to spread confusion and redirect the use of resources that could be better spent on Florida's reform agenda.

This theme characterized a Florida hearing that gave students, parents, and community leaders – audiences very much affected by the law, but usually left out of the policy debate – an opportunity to tell their side of the NCLB story.

Hearing witnesses were as anxious to voice their opinions of Florida's A-Plus accountability system and its related test, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), as they were to discuss NCLB. Both are test-based accountability systems, with A-Plus preceding the national legislation by several years. Though progress is being made in student achievement, it would be difficult to credit either reform with the results.

LaBron Chance, chair of the Foundation for Orange County Public Schools, the local hearing sponsor, opened the hearing by noting the positive aspects of school reform in Florida: an increase in high school graduation rates, a decrease in dropout rates, more students taking Advanced Placement and higher-level math and science courses, higher scores on standardized tests, and greater per capita expenditure on students. The hearing, Chance said, was an opportunity to see how Florida's efforts fit with NCLB and its standards.

The FCAT Dilemma

High school students shared heart-felt stories about the effect of test-based accountability on unprepared students. Just as the adequate yearly progress (AYP) measure of NCLB does not take improvement into consideration when judging school performance, the high-stakes FCAT, in effect, judges student achievement with a single test. The FCAT is "chopped up things you have already covered in class to see if you have improved," said Ben Parker, a tenth-grader at Edgewater High School in Orange County, but even if students improve their grades to acceptable levels but fail the FCAT, they cannot get a diploma and go on to college, he said.

Students can take the FCAT several times but, without tutoring and other supports, many still fail. "A lot of my friends have dropped out," he said, because they do not

believe they will ever be able to pass the test. David Lopez of Jones High School also told the hearing that dropout rates at his school were high because the FCAT was getting harder, and students weren't getting enough help. He wanted his friends to stay in school "to become what they can be," adding:

I think schools should encourage the kids to go on and be what they want to be so they won't have bad feelings of failure like they usually have. They're really trying. I would like to see the teachers help them out a little bit more instead of always leaning on the kids that already have good grades. I want to see more teachers take the time to help people that are down in the "Ds" and the "Fs" so they can get their grades up and not feel like failures..., so they can go on to college and be professors and doctors.

Statistics	Total Schools ¹	% fail to make AYP	% schools in improvement	# LEAs	% LEAs fail to make AYP	% LEAs in improvement	Graduation rate ²	Per pupil expenditure ³
Florida 2003–04	3,068	76.5%	31.4%	67	100.0%	100.0%	71.9%	\$6,708
United States 2003–04	90,237	24.7%	11.4%	13,959	28.5%	12.8%	74.9%	\$8,308
Florida 2004–05	3,105	64.2%	32.3%	67	100.0%	100.0%	Not avail.	\$7,035
United States 2004–05	89,493	25.6%	12.9%	13,878	23.7%	12.4%	Not avail.	\$8,618

Their friends who are dropping out of school are idle on the streets, the students said, and they thought it would be better to invest in more counseling, night school, afterschool academic programs, and community supports. These student witnesses were also worried about young people who did not have supportive families and said they need places to go in their communities where they can get guidance and direction. "Kids need more people to build their souls up," said Ben Parker, an Orlando high school student.

Many adult witnesses also had criticisms of FCAT. Because it is used to determine if schools meet AYP, it is narrowing curriculum and teacher instruction, said a representative of a children's advocacy group. Tim Huth, a Volusia County school administrator, underscored students' concerns that improvement was not being recognized. He wants NCLB to change from a static AYP goal to a value-added model, noting that "we have students who have gone from maybe a 30 percent proficiency to a 60 percent proficiency, and there's no reward for that learning gain. We think it's tremendous for a school if it can move students in a positive direction." Student witnesses mentioned that they appreciated the emphasis on reading and writing in all of their classes "because if you don't understand it in one class, you can get it in another."

The FCAT and NCLB requirement that children with disabilities – except those who are severely cognitively impaired – and English-language learners take the same tests as other students was considered unfair by parent and child advocates. It is painful, they said, to see students who are making progress in their classes struggle with an inflexible test. Joie Cadle, an Orange County school board member, explained:

A child who is struggling and is in exceptional ed and is working very, very hard, to put them in that situation and make them feel like a double failure makes me wonder where that child will be in five years because a child with special needs usually is his/her own worst enemy. They learn very, very differently, and they can't understand why their very best friends next to them get it so easily. They know they have it up here, they've processed it, they've worked on it, but they can't spit it out. They can't get it to the piece of paper.

Gladys Moreno, who came to the USA from Colombia, spoke of her struggles to get her children accepted in schools and to have contacts with teachers. She expressed the sentiments of many non-English speaking parents who do not receive the information they need about FCAT and whose children are "terrified" of the test. "They have to have the same expectations of the kids born here," she said. "What about the child who comes to second grade here, and the

¹ Title I Report, Vol. 7 Iss. 4 (LRP Publications 2006). Data for columns 1-6 were taken from this report.

² Florida Department of Education, Education Information and Accountability Services. <http://www.firn.edu/doe/eias/eiaspubs/2005grad.htm>.

³ National Education Association, *Rankings & Estimates Update (2005)*. Figures are computed from NEA Research, Estimates databank. The figures are based on reports through August 2005.

next year, because they only get one year of instruction, they have to be performing like a regular child who's been here all his life? I don't think that's fair. I don't like that part of the No Child Left Behind.”

The conflict between FCAT and NCLB's AYP requirements gave witnesses the most problems. FCAT alone is confusing to parents, according to Huth, the Volusia school administrator. Still, he said, FCAT has been around long enough that parents are beginning to understand how it works. The different standard used by NCLB means that a school can be progressing satisfactorily under FCAT yet does not meet AYP under NCLB. A Volusia high school that scored an “A” on FCAT for four years in a row is now in its fourth year of sanctions under NCLB. The school is being threatened with losing its principal and teachers, even though its IB students scored the highest in the country.

Marjorie Murray, a Seminole County school official, said the disconnect between the two tests is causing serious perception problems. The performance of a subgroup under NCLB can cause a school to be labeled “needing improvement,” even though the school was considered proficient under FCAT. “We have principals and parents saying they don't want ‘those’ kids in their school,” she said. Florida's schools appear to be making good progress on improving student achievement under FCAT, but the dueling accountability measures reveal that they are also among the lowest-performing schools in the country when it comes to AYP measures. “It's very difficult to explain not only to the parents, but also to the economic development purposes within our communities as to why there's a disconnect,” she testified.

	Student Enrollment ¹ 2004-2005	Per Pupil Expenditure 2004-2005	Students in Title I Schools ²	Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch	Students with IEPs	English Language Learners	2002 Graduation Rate ³			
							All	Black	Hispanic	White
Florida	2,630,229	\$7,035	37.7%	46.3%	15.4%	7.6%	59%	49%	50%	67%
US	48,367,410	\$8,618	49.7%	36.3%	13.6%	10.6%	71%	56%	52%	78%

Other NCLB Concerns

NCLB requires several interventions for schools that persistently fail, starting with allowing students to transfer out of schools not meeting AYP, followed by supplemental educational services (SES) if the schools' test scores do not improve. In a state where school populations are exploding, these interventions are almost impossible to provide, several witnesses said.

In Seminole County, providing these interventions – which costs the school district \$1.8 million a year – has meant fewer services for Title I schools. What is particularly disillusioning, said Marjorie Murray, the county school official, is that the more proficient students are taking advantage of the transfer policy and supplemental services, while the harder-to-teach students are left behind. “A school that was struggling before, is really struggling now,” she said. Joie Cadle of the Orange County school board said the requirement to move children around “means that we are moving children into already-crowded classes” because the district is expanding by 7,500 students a year. She added:

We need to be able to work with children at the schools they're at, their neighborhood schools. That's where their base is, that's where their friends are, that's where their parents' support networks are. When we start moving children, and they ride 45 minutes on a bus to a school, the likelihood that they're going to get involved in any remediation after school does not exist because the bus only goes once and we have to use our buses three times a day. So, keep them in their home schools, allow us to give them the remediation they need, and allow that parent network to stay there for them.

¹ National Education Association, *Rankings & Estimates Update (2005)*. Figures are computed from NEA Research, Estimates databank. The figures are based on reports through August 2005. This source provided the Student Enrollment and Per Pupil Expenditure data.

² Hoffman, L. and Sable, J. (2006). *Public Elementary and Secondary Students, Staff, Schools, and School Districts: School Year 2003–04* (NCES 2006-307). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Data were taken from this source for the following columns: Students in Title I Schools, Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch, Students with Disabilities, English Language Learners.

³ *Public High School Graduation and College-Readiness Rates: 1991-2002*, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research (2005). Figure calculated using the Greene method, which estimates the number of students who enter a ninth-grade class, makes some adjustments for changes in population, and divides the resulting number into the number of students who actually graduated with a regular diploma. It is not a four-year graduation rate; as long as there is not a substantial change in the number of students in each class that graduates in more than four years, such students are included in the calculation.

Parental involvement and communications about NCLB are also concerns. Gamal Mack, a parent active in his school and in the county PTA, said that from discussions with people in his community, he found that “you’re talking way over our heads a lot of the time when you talk about studies and data and so on....You can take all the data you want, you can throw it at us all you want, but if we don’t understand it, it is useless data.”

The parent involvement coordinator for Title I in Hernando County, Ivette Mendoza, said the law failed to emphasize investment in parent leadership even though it says parents should be involved in decision making. What most schools do, she said, is prepare documents and distribute them a school meeting, at which point parents are asked to take a look at them, but that is not parent involvement. Since real parent involvement is what families do at home, she called for building parent capacity in the home for learning, leadership, and volunteering “because these are all areas of parental involvement, and they’re all important, but not every parent can meet all of them.”

Concerns About the Future

All witnesses, including students, favor higher standards. One Orange County citizen, who is active with the Count Me In! Initiative sponsored by the Foundation for Orange County Public Schools, said the passing rate on the FCAT test is unacceptably low (47 percent in reading for eleventh-graders) and that the test, available on the Web, is not particularly rigorous.

Business community representatives, while supporting the basic accountability in the Florida and federal reforms, argued for a more expansive view of the skills that students need. Lisa Nason, a representative of Enterprise Florida, a public-private partnership that promotes economic development, said an educated workforce was critical to the businesses that will make Florida competitive in the future. Nason said that employers recognize that the students who can read and who have a love of reading “are students who develop strong imaginations. Imagination leads to creativity. Ultimately, creativity is what funds innovation, and innovation drives the economy.” A love of reading, she said, “is the sole factor employers look for in cultivating today’s students to be future workers.” True depth of understanding in core subjects, she added, “not how students test out,” is essential.

Similarly, Mark Havard, human resource director for a major hotel chain, told the hearing that 70 percent of his management staff started in entry-level jobs and that good grammar, communication skills, and basic employability skills allowed them to advance. He worries that such skills are lacking in a lot of young people and need to be fostered by the public schools. Simple standards about attire and knowing how to handle money, he said, are basic skills that young people need today. The goal of schools and businesses, he said, is to have productive citizens. If educators understood the role of accountability in the business world, he added, they would be more rigorous about seeing it happen in education.

When schools fail to meet accountability standards, communities and businesses have an obligation to rally around the needs of a school, according to Lisa Nason of Enterprise Florida. Citing examples in central Florida, she said the effort to help schools “becomes an opportunity for communities to pull together and develop a shared sense of mission.”