

No Child Left Behind in MASSACHUSETTS

Tough Questions from the Public

MASSACHUSETTS NCLB HEARING

YWCA Boston
January 11, 2006 • 4:00–7:30 PM
Local hearing partner: YWCA Boston

PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATION

Mary Lyon Foundation, Shelburne Falls

HEARING OFFICERS

Ellen Guiney, Executive Director, Boston Plan for Excellence in the Public Schools, Boston, MA • **Janet Helms**, Director, Institute for the Study and Promotion of Race and Culture; Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA • **Charlotte Kahn**, Director, The Boston Indicators Project, The Boston Foundation, Boston, MA • **Peter Kiang**, Director, Asian American Studies; University of Massachusetts Boston, Boston, MA • **Wendy D. Puriefoy**, President, Public Education Network, Washington, DC

STUDENT WITNESSES

Boston: **Sonia Alves**, Emily Narvarez, Teen Empowerment • **Julieann Dilbert**, Boston Adult Technical Academy • **Daisy Guerrero**, John D. O'Bryant School for Math & Science • **Jamal Hamilton**, Middle School Academy • **Ashley Periera**, Boston Latin School • **Damien Howard**, Madison Park Technical Vocational High School • *Shelburne Falls*: **Ally Footit**, **Erin McCloud**, **Amanda Schmidt**, **Kirsten Singley**, **Melanie Stevens**, Mohawk Trail Regional School

PARENT WITNESSES

Margaret Gilsenberg, Lowell Citywide Parent Council • **Leslie Lockhart**, Massachusetts Advocates for Children • **Phala Chea**, Lowell Parent Information Center • **Colin Reilly**, John D. O'Bryant School for Math & Science • **Justin Langlois**, New Bedford • **Caprice Taylor-Mendez**, **Maria Gomes**, **Lucia Santana**, Boston Parent Organizing Network

COMMUNITY WITNESSES

Michele Brooks, Boston School Committee and Transformative Solutions • **Daniel J. Losen**, Civil Rights Project, Harvard University • **Melissa Colón**, Iniciativa, Gaston Institute, Boston • **Linda Gerstle**, Executive Director/CEO, Atlas Communities, Boston • **Kathleen Boundy**, Center for Law & Education, Boston • **Laura Perille**, Executive Director, EdVestors, Boston • **Dianne Wilkerson**, Senator, Massachusetts State Senate • **Chu Ly**, Asian Community Representative, Boston • **Alexandra** (*no last name given*), East Boston Economical Council • **Madura Sociedad**, Boston Parent Organizing Network

In my deepest, darkest moments, I wonder what is going to be different. We have been doing this work for 20 years. We know what makes a difference.

Linda Gristle, Executive Director, Atlas Communities, Cambridge

Massachusetts students, parents, and community leaders gave passionate testimony at a standing-room-only hearing about the impact of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Commonwealth accountability policies. Emotional testimony came from students who saw friends and teachers leaving school because of changes being wrought by NCLB and state policies, and from parents whose most frequently used word was “fight” – fight for information, fight for quality programs, and fight for attention from school officials.

The Community Perspective

Technology and demographics have dramatically changed Boston's prospects, according to Charlotte Kahn, director of the Boston Indicators Project. With the majority of its school-age population now minorities, she said the area needs, “a ladder of opportunity that works for everyone.”

Boston School Committee member Michele Brooks reminded the audience that public schools “continue to struggle to compensate for the years of neglect, inconsistencies, and indifference” experienced by African-American children. NCLB, she said, heads in the right direction with its promises of a standards-based curriculum and universal highly qualified teaching, although teachers need help improving their ability to reach all children. Brooks believes assessment is necessary, but feels it has gone awry under NCLB. Testing mandates have changed how schools educate children, she said, resulting in less access to a broad range of subjects and higher dropout and push-out rates, while the achievement gap persists.

Kathleen Boundy, co-director of the Center for Law and Education and a national authority on the education of children with disabilities, endorsed provisions of NCLB that hold great potential such as parent involvement, inclusion of children with disabilities in mandates for high standards, and accountability based on multiple indicators. Massachusetts has failed to follow through, she said, and the emphasis on parent involvement is “virtually ignored.”

Dan Losen of the Civil Rights Project was concerned by the graduation rate crisis and called the lack of accountability for improving graduation rates “a total sham.” Melissa Colon of Iniciativa, a Latino student advocacy group, cited the exceedingly high Latino dropout rate in Massachusetts; at 30 percent, it is the second highest dropout rate in the country. Low Latino MCAS passing rates start early and don't improve, she said, while the high-stakes testing environment has narrowed teaching and made test scores “trump the educational needs of our children.”

Some witnesses felt the highly qualified teacher mandate falls short because it does not assure that teachers know how to, or want to, work with low-income children. Research about authentic instruction exists, so “why aren’t we doing it?” Boundy asks. Despite these criticisms, however, most witnesses said that NCLB provisions had the potential to be important supports for low-performing schools and students.

Statistics	Total Schools ¹	% fail to make AYP	% schools in improvement	# LEAs	% LEAs fail to make AYP	% LEAs in improvement	Graduation rate	Per pupil expenditure ²
Mass. 2003–04	1737	33.9%	21.7%	241	54.8%	54.8%	Not avail. ³	\$11,040
United States 2003–04	90237	24.7%	11.4%	13959	28.5%	12.8%	74.9%	\$8,308
Mass. 2004–05	1690	49.5%	24.2%	242	78.5%	64.5%	Not avail.	\$11,681
United States 2004–05	89493	25.6%	12.9%	13878	23.7%	12.4%	Not avail.	\$8,618

The Student Viewpoint

Students revealed resentment over unequal resources, genuine mistrust of the education system, and disappointment with how accountability is playing out. Emily Larvae spoke of students “who are made to feel like they aren’t smart enough to pass a test instead of getting an educational program that meets their needs.” Having to pass an English test before learning the language is unfair, she said, adding that “instead of testing children, we need to see that every student gets the opportunity to learn in the way that will help them be a success.”

Students were very aware of inequities. Sonia Laves, a Charlestown High School senior, said she was not challenged until she took advanced placement classes and worried that her peers won’t get the chance because so few AP courses are offered at Boston schools. “Every student deserves to be challenged,” she said, but many of her friends are not prepared to get into college or to succeed once they get there. An English High School student wondered what was the point of NCLB and MCAS when printers in his school don’t work. He added that “I don’t feel as if I’m wanted, like the state feels like I’m dirty or something. Just because I go to a public school doesn’t mean that they can’t fix the toilets.”

Mohawk Trail Regional High School students who studied NCLB concluded it was based on “distorted facts” from the “Texas miracle” model. Schools are lowering standards or purposefully holding students back in order to have higher test scores and avoid sanctions, said student Erin McCloud. There is not enough funding to meet NCLB goals much less cover courses and electives that are not being tested, students said. Other students said they were not informed about NCLB, and their testimony revealed an even broader lack of buy-in regarding the purpose of school or testing.

The Parent Perspective

Parents are equally frustrated. NCLB is an “empty promise” for children with disabilities, testified Leslie Lockhart of the Massachusetts Advocates for Children and mother of a disabled child. The laws may give guarantees, she said, but the focus on high test scores and low education costs shuts out the most vulnerable children.

Some NCLB intervention provisions are almost cynical, said Margaret Goldenberg of Lowell’s Citywide Parent Council. “Simply punishing the schools by labeling them...is not constructive and ultimately does not help the students,” she said. The transfer option is unrealistic; there is virtually no oversight of supplemental educational service providers, and the money paid to them could have been used to conduct summer school, said Goldenberg. Leslie Lockhart would like to see support based on what is known to work: “There’s a lot of information. We ignore it, and we legislate down the stuff, and it’s really distressing. It just seems like a whole, harsh penalty-driven system with more and more kids out on the street.”

The Massachusetts hearing was one of nine held on NCLB across the country from September 2005 to January 2006. This excerpt was taken from the full Massachusetts hearing report, which can be found on the PEN website, www.publiceducation.org, along with a national hearing report and eight other state reports.

Funding for the hearing was provided by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation.

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

² National Education Association, *Rankings & Estimates Update (2005)*. Figures are computed from NEA Research, Estimates databank. The figures are based on reports through August 2005.

³ Currently, Massachusetts does not calculate the graduation dates; it is gathering data to begin that calculation in 2006. In the interim, it publishes the state’s dropout rate. In the 2003-2004 school year, the dropout rate for grades 9-12 was 3.3%. The dropout rate for the 2004-2005 school year was not available. <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/staterc/>