

**Statement of Wendy Puriefoy, President
Public Education Network
Before the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pension Committee**

**On Community Engagement and Parental Involvement
As Strategies to Assuring a Quality Public Education for All Children
Related to the Reauthorization to the No Child Left Behind Act**

March 28, 2007

Mr. Chairman and members of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, I am Wendy Puriefoy, president of Public Education Network (PEN), a national constituency of 80 local education funds (LEFs) in 34 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Local Education Funds work to build knowledgeable public demand and mobilize resources for quality public education. PEN is present in nearly 1,600 school districts that reach more than 11 million children (approximately 22 percent of the nation's public school population). PEN believes every child in America has the right to a quality public education. This is especially true for children from low-income families.

Many PEN members are located in states represented by members of this committee. Senator Kennedy knows about the excellent teacher professional development work of the Boston Plan for Excellence, along with the Mary Lyons Foundation in Shelburne Falls, and the Lynn Business/Education Foundation in Lynn. These funds represent the education reforms of both urban and rural low-income school districts.

Other LEFs in committee member districts are:

- New York:
 - New Visions for Public Schools
New York, N.Y.

 - Good Schools for All
Buffalo, N.Y.

- Maryland:
 - Delmarva Education Foundation, Inc.
Salisbury, Md.
 - Fund for Educational Excellence
Baltimore, Md.
- Washington:
 - Alliance for Education
Seattle, Wash.
- Ohio:
 - Center for Leadership in Education
Elyria, Ohio
 - KnowledgeWorks Foundation
Cincinnati, Ohio
 - Partnership for Education in Ashtabula County
Ashtabula, Ohio
- Tennessee:
 - HC*EXCELL
Morristown, Tenn.
 - Partners in Public Education
Memphis, Tenn.
 - Public Education Foundation
Chattanooga, Tenn.
- Georgia:
 - Great Schools Atlanta
Atlanta, Ga.
- Arkansas:
 - El Dorado Education Fund
El Dorado, Ark.
- Connecticut:
 - Bridgeport Public Education Fund
Bridgeport, Conn.
 - Hartford Education Foundation
Hartford, Conn.
 - New Haven Network for Public Education
New Haven, Conn.

Norwalk Education Foundation
Norwalk, Conn.

Stamford Public Education Foundation
Stamford, Conn.

And thank you, Senator Reed, for keeping parental involvement and community engagement issues alive in Title I, which is so important to PEN's members. Our Rhode Island PEN member, the Education Partnership in Providence, is working on issues of teacher and teaching quality.

The focus of the committee's hearing today is on parent involvement and public engagement. The committee has requested that PEN join our other partnership witnesses this afternoon in addressing this topic as it relates to reauthorizing the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Our local education funds thank you for this opportunity to showcase their work. As our other witnesses will validate today, there are many leaders at the local level, whether they be PTA members, the 50-member National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, Communities in Schools, the 150 organizations that belong to the Coalition of Community Schools, faith-based organizations, or our own local education funds, who are the unrecognized heroes that daily engage school districts, parents and communities in pursuit of quality public education for every child.

PEN specifically brings the experience of our local education funds to this hearing because they represent one of the most structured, strategic, and sustaining strategies for public engagement in service of quality public education. Our LEF members work in partnership with their school districts to create quality public schools as well as with their communities to build the knowledge of what good schools can do for the quality of communities.

A sample of their programs include: upgrading science and mathematics instruction; supporting high quality teacher professional development that leads to

measurable results; creating small high schools that enable students to graduate ready for work, college, and citizenship; and, providing scholarships for students to go on to college. Annually, they raise \$200 million from foundations, corporations and individuals in their community's reform and improve their local public schools. Local education funds also have been successful in engaging their communities to pass bond measures totaling nearly \$20 billion.

Mr. Chairman, I want to emphasize that local education funds across America represent two key components of successful public engagement: knowledge of what good schools should be and capacity-building with districts and communities to commit their citizens to excellent schools for America's children.

PEN's positions on NCLB and our recommendations emanate from the collective experience and knowledge of our local education funds and their constituents, within both school districts and communities. For our members, parent involvement and community engagement are not ends in themselves. Rather, public engagement is in service to achieve the larger goal of ensuring that every child has a qualified teacher, receives high quality instruction, and is provided the range of academic and social supports needed to complete high school ready for work and college. These goals constitute the "for what" of public engagement for PEN's members.

The following five areas surfaced through these public engagement efforts:

1. Improve competent teaching policies to better support teachers and assess their effectiveness;
2. Schools need a student-focused, comprehensive accountability system that rewards progress and encourages continuous improvement; and,
3. Improve the use of school and district data and analysis to lead to more effective teaching and learning.

Our members at PEN believe that the following two areas are necessary levers for achieving numbers 1, 2, and 3:

4. Expand the opportunity for shared accountability by including the community as partners
5. Strengthen the parental involvement provisions

When NCLB was passed in 2002, PEN wrote and distributed over 40,000 copies of *Using NCLB to Improve Student Achievement: An Action Guide for Community and parent Leaders*. In addition, in collaboration with NCPIE, PEN developed a special comprehensive online set of parent and community tools in an easy-to-print format comprised of over 22 action briefs, tips on how parents and community could be involved, information about the law and regulations, and a toolbox of resources.

During the past three years, PEN solicited feedback about the act's impact from its members, their communities, as well as through public hearings specifically aimed at parents, students, community activists and local businesses. Our work included:

- Two (2) surveys of all LEF directors across the Network;
- In-depth interviews with 12 LEF directors;
- Six (6) community focus groups
- A town meeting at PEN's 2006 annual conference that sought input from LEFs.
- 18 public hearings nationwide with local education fund partners, as well as others partners such as the YMCA, PTA chapters, and the Intercultural Development Research Association
- Two (2) online web-based surveys that received input from over 30,000 citizens and three (3) national polls that asked questions about NCLB

And most recently, a town hall meeting hosted by our member, Houston A+, was held last evening. I give you the report of that hearing today.

Based on the information we received from those sources, I would like address my remarks related to the following:

1. Background of community and parental involvement in past Title I reauthorizations and laying the context for our recommendations;
2. Assumptions and premises of parental involvement and community engagement;
3. Review of the NCLB national hearings that PEN has been holding since 2005, and a summary of support and concerns of community members around the country;
4. Identification of essential elements in building a community infrastructure and ownership for change, and developing needed leadership and capacity at all levels of the Title I program; and lastly;
5. Recommendations from PEN's members for building on the current NCLB Act.

1. Background of community and parental involvement in past Title I reauthorizations and laying the context for PEN's recommendations

PEN commends Senator Kennedy and Senator Enzi for holding this hearing.

During the various reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act over the years, it has been rare that a committee hearing has been entirely devoted to the issues of parents and the community. I am reminded, Senator Kennedy, that it was your brother, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, who in a Senate Education Committee hearing in the debates of the first ESEA passed in 1965, voiced the importance of low-income parents and the community in holding

schools accountable. Although he faced some stiff opposition, he persisted in passing a requirement that parents should be involved in the development and allocation of funds in Title I programs. Despite his belief in the goals of Title I, he raised questions about who would hold public schools accountable for change, how that accountability would be framed, and what mechanisms would ensure that, given the opportunity, low-income parents and communities would have the same status and power as more affluent parents to demand a quality public education for their children. Congress and the then U.S. Office of Education agreed and added the parental involvement requirements in both law and in regulations. As a result, a national Title One Parents organization was instituted, TOPACs (Title One Advisory Committees) were instituted at the local level, and parents were not only trained in parenting skills, but also in advocacy and organizational skills

In 1978, as part of the Educational Amendments of 1978, it was through your leadership that you understood that low-income parents and families needed help, and that as the number of school-aged children began to decline, the number of adults who had parents in public schools also declined. As well, the family unit began to change and communities needed to share in this effort of school accountability. That year, you proposed language, and Congress added provisions for community education and involvement to Title I. The Congress understood that the civic and service sector of each community was essential in partnering with the school if our children were to be successful.

But starting with deregulation of Title I (Chapter I as it was then renamed) in the early 1980s, parental involvement became a “permissible” activity. It was no longer a required element of the law and the community education provisions were almost entirely stricken from the law. As a result, parent involvement and community engagement decreased considerably, and many schools chose to bar parents and community from Title I decision-making, participation and partnership. When the Congress relented on Title I requirements, so did state education departments and local school districts. While there were exemplary school districts and schools that chose to continue parental involvement programs, the decade of the 1980s saw most districts pay lip service to parental involvement, or reduce parental involvement to a set of fundraising tasks at the expense of equal participation and partnership.

Even the 1983 *Nation at Risk* Report paid scant attention to parents or the role of the community in decision-making or sharing with schools the responsibility for accountability of performance and results. By default, the professional school community, education reformers, many policy makers, and special interest groups (with the exception of special education parents) relegated parents and community to the school public relations department, rather than making them equal partners in two major areas of public education: 1) advocates and supporters of quality public schools for all children; and, 2) active participants in holding themselves, their policy makers, and schools accountable for performance.

Interestingly enough, it was in 1983 that the first local education funds were established with funding from the Ford Foundation. The foundation recognized that the challenges defined by the *Nation at Risk* report could not be effectively addressed, especially in low-income urban and rural communities, unless there were intermediary entities, independent of the school district and reflective of the broader community, that brought knowledge and pressure for change both within the school district and in the community at large. Since 1983, LEFs have grown in numbers. Through major initiatives funded by the nation's largest philanthropies – The Ford, Walter and Lenore Annenberg, W.K. Kellogg, The Rockefeller, William and Flora Hewlett, Bill and Melinda Gates foundations, the Wallace Funds, and the Carnegie Corporation –these groups have evolved into a necessary player in their communities' civic infrastructure. They provide smart and critical knowledge about reform strategies, as well as partnerships to improve student achievement, while simultaneously building the case and the momentum for reform by engaging people within and outside of schools.

With the passage of the Improving America's School Act and the No Child Left Behind Act, parental involvement provisions such as the NCLB Section 1118, the parent compacts, and roles for parents at the state and local school district levels have been added. However, these sections are not enforceable, and as a result, many districts do not implement these sections well, if they do so at all. Many districts may inform parents about the NCLB law and regulations, but are often

deficient in implementing the intent of parental involvement effectively. The U.S. Department of Education reports that 10 of the 18 states monitored last year cited deficiencies in parental involvement implementations. Those deficiencies included: failing to include all of the elements of the parental involvement policies; schools using parent involvement policies without tailoring them to the needs of student and families; and, not having policies comply with Section 1118 at all. The department found that in too many states, school districts were using standard templates to communicate with parents without taking advantage of the parent engagement opportunities presented by the law.

Another area of deficiency often cited by the department's monitoring visits is a lack of either state or school district evaluation of their parental involvement programs. And when it comes to partnering with either individual community members or community organizations, school outreach drops off dramatically. While parents are mentioned in the law over 200 times, very little role is offered for community organizations to share in providing support to low performing schools, advocating for change, or holding schools accountable. Many districts say they do not have the time or resources to implement a fully developed parent or community engagement program. In reality, this lack of oversight predates NCLB and has been a chronic deficiency of the law since the days of deregulation. All of these factors are reasons why the Parent Information Resource Centers (PIRCs) are essential in providing states and local school districts with the assistance they need in developing effective parent involvement programs. They are part of the state

and local capacity needs that I will address later in this testimony, but they are well thought-out centers that help align the goals of NCLB with Title I districts that need the knowledge and benefit of parental involvement expertise.

2. Assumptions and premises of parental involvement and community engagement

- ❑ Federal policy can and does make a difference in the execution of quality public education policy, applied to the parental involvement and community education and partnership provisions, with enforcement. There are still too many schools that shut out the community and parents in meaningful decision-making.
- ❑ Public schools that are responsive to the needs of parents and families, as well as students, can play a significant role in raising achievement. Parents need to be recruited as active partners in the educational process, but also in the process of “learning together” and supporting the learning changes necessary to develop a 21st century democracy as well as a 21st century workforce.
- ❑ Parental involvement alone is inadequate to improve the most difficult schools. Community members must also be involved in and responsible for providing the resources and funding support services, parental assistance, political pressure and accountability.
- ❑ Quality and valid data play a critical part in empowering parents and the community in pressuring for improvement and change. But the information must be transparent, easy to understand, and most importantly, useful for purposes of school improvement, rather than to apply punitive consequences to schools. Senator Robert Kennedy raised this issue in 1965 when he commented on the balance between data and engagement.
- ❑ Providing data does not assure that the data will be used, or that the data will be interpreted accurately to make sound decisions about school

- improvement. But disaggregating data is essential in assuring that groups of low performing students will not fall off of the public radar screen of accountability.
- The re-authorization must recognize the role of community and community education in assuming responsibility for shared accountability and decision-making. Community educators, service agencies, local education funds, parent organizations and other groups need to coordinate efforts with the schools. They must be able to work across federal and state funding streams to converge in providing services to the neediest of our children.
 - Education based on high achieving results for all students cannot be accomplished by the school or the community alone. There appears to be a growing understanding on the part of both the community and schools that they need each other to succeed. Still, in many cases, community organizations and school districts do not know how to reach each other. Both need new models of practice, staffing, funding and behavior to be able to more effectively integrate their work to provide a seamless web of support for students.
 - The federal government, state education departments and local school districts currently do not have the capacity to implement a comprehensive program of parent and community involvement. Unless engagement becomes a priority in the various levels of government, staff members are allocated to serve as the advocates or point people for engagement programs. As such, the community and parents are NOT seen as equal partners in the education decision-making process. If involvement is not seen as vital to providing quality schools as it is in providing a means of democratic accountability, the goals of NCLB will not be met.
 - The “inside” or the school district, and the “outside”, the community needs each other to succeed. Each serves different roles, and to the extent that these roles are inextricably related and integrated is to the extent that we no longer will have to use the terms “outside” and “inside.”

3. Review of the public information PEN has gathered through the sources described on page 5

One of the benefits of NCLB was to provide the opportunity to bring communities together to talk about critical issues of education reform via town meetings, hearings, online surveys, public polls, as well as through the opportunities provided by our own constituency of LEFs. In the course of these dialogues, issues such as school quality, equity, funding, teacher quality, assessments arose. The perspectives of average citizens -- which are not usually sought in the policy making process -- are critically important for policy makers to understand as they consider amendments to the law. We promised the constituencies that we would compile their recommendations and concerns and bring them to Congress and the White House.

We have published reports on our findings for the past two years. Just last evening, one of our members, Houston A+, held a town meeting hearing. We promised the Houston participants that we would directly submit those recommendations to the HELP committee members. So Mr. Chairman, on behalf of Houston A+, I am attaching their recommendations to this testimony.

But in the composite, here are the results which offer a glimpse beyond the schoolhouse doors into some unintended consequences of the law and its implementation.

In particular, we heard the following:

- Citizens support the goals of the law, including increased accountability, but believe the existing NCLB accountability system is too thin. A single test shouldn't be used to judge school performance.
- We must (a) broaden accountability measures used to determine school performance, to include other indicators such as parent and community involvement, school funding, class size, services offered by the school, and, if the school is low performing, the measures that the school has taken to make improvement; and (b) explain to the public the meaning of the assessment results. Simply publishing a report of scores in a newspaper or website without explanation or context leads to frustration and skepticism.
- Participants liked the policy of disaggregating data, but many said they did not receive the data, or receive the data in a language or a format that they could understand.
- Many parents were not aware of Section 1118, or said that they were involved in the developed of the district or school parental involvement policies. Generally, most of the parents said that if they knew about Section 1118, they had no means of enforcement in case the school did not implement the provisions.
- Participants told us they believe that while primary responsibility for student achievement lies with schools, schools can not do the job alone. Support should be provided for closer relationships between schools and helping institutions in a community, and accountability should be expanded across the community so students and families get the supports they need.

- The label of ‘low performing school’ has unintended consequences. It is internalized by students, who feel their diploma is ‘worthless’ if it comes from such a school. In addition, instead of causing a community to rally around the school to address its deficiencies, such labeling leads to the abandonment of schools by teachers, students, and community members, just when the school is most needy. Districts should provide an explanation to the public of what various labels mean to the district and to the students, parents, and public in that community.
- Information required by NCLB is not reaching parents. This includes both information that parents need to make decisions about their children’s education, such as the availability of SES services. This often arrives too late to be useful, is full of jargon, and is not translated into families’ home languages.
- Schools are held accountable on the backs of students. Students feel enormous pressure that is passed along by teachers and administrators who are worried about school performance. This pressure causes many to say they have become ill. Some have even dropped out of school.
- The determination of ‘highly qualified’ teacher should be made on the basis of more than just paper certification. We heard over and over again that this is an inadequate proxy, and does not take into account the ability of a teacher to truly connect with and reach students so that they feel cared for, nurtured and motivated.
- Academic supports under the law are inadequate and offer false promises. First of all, parents want the option of tutoring services before the option to

transfer to another school, and most do not want the transfer at all. They want their own schools to work, and they want to be involved in the plans to improve their current schools. SES services often are not provided as advertised. Services should be evaluated and service providers should be held accountable just as schools are held accountable

- Several of the issues raised concern the law's implementation. These concerns may not require legislative changes, but they do require the federal government to help increase capacity of states and districts, which are simply not set up to carry out many of the data collecting, dissemination, parental involvement provisions, along with other responsibilities under the law.
- Finally, the issue of sufficient resources must be addressed. The requirements of the law add additional fiscal burdens to states and districts that they should fulfill. However, many do not always have the resources necessary for such fulfillment.

4. Identification of essential elements in building a community infrastructure and ownership for change, and developing needed leadership and capacity at all levels of the Title I program

In 2003, Public Education Network commissioned the independent research firm Research for Action (RFA) to conduct a study titled "*Crafting a Civic Stage for Public Education Reform: Understanding the Work and Accomplishments of Local Education Funds,*" on the roles and accomplishments of LEFs. They also were asked to capture what generic elements are essential, even in those communities that do not have LEFs, in bridging community development with educational reform. As noted by civic and community organizers, it is much

easier to build momentum for development efforts that focus on physical attributes---housing, downtown revitalization, recreational facilities that draw tourists---than it is to build momentum for education reform and change. The study also concludes that it is much easier for both the community and the school to demonstrate success if an effective LEF is present. To be sure, the role of the local education fund is two-fold (using the means of public engagement): 1) to build the demand for quality public schools by organizing the community to hold the major stakeholders, such as schools, school boards, policy makers, reformers, and the public accountable for quality public schools, and 2) to serve as the coordinator in providing or supporting the resources and funding necessary to assure that the school is successful. They create change through brokerage and relationship building, adding value to education reform and change. In short, they are vehicles for action.

The committee asked for strategies for effective community involvement. Instead of citing specific strategies, let me deviate a bit, and on the basis of the results from the RFA study cited above, let me review those components essential to community engagement and partnership. This is true for an LEF or any other intermediary organization. LEFs must possess the ability and expertise to do the following:

- Be recognized by the community and be able to define major issues and challenges that meet the needs of the public. As a result, there is no one model for engagement. For instance, regional LEFs such as the one in Mon Valley, Pennsylvania focus on the economic needs of their region, as well as in working with other LEFs in the state to bring students together and give their concerns voice. Others such as Achieve! Minneapolis focus on facilitating partnerships between businesses and schools, facilitating employee-student relationships, and creating mentoring programs.

- Develop a shared, focused school reform agenda that incorporates a wide agreement among the stakeholders about reform goals. Such an effort could include information gathering vehicles such as town meetings, hearings, community forums, and/or public opinion polls in valuing and acting on the public's concerns. The San Francisco Education Fund has concluded the first phase of a large scale community engagement effort to learn more about what the community wants from its schools. The LEF, the San Francisco Unified School District, and two parent organizations began working on this engagement effort late in the fall of 2006. In six months, they reached over 900 parents, youths and community members over the course of two-hour conversations. The groups were small and intimate – usually 8-20 people – and were conducted in English, Spanish and Cantonese. They were held in all but one residential zip code in San Francisco.
- Be independent from the local school district by organizing into a separate nonprofit organization and appointing a board that is reflective of the community, as well as representing the school district's diversity. This assures the idea that the LEF is not seen as part of the school bureaucracy and decision-making process, but does have expertise to link the community to work closely with the school district. An example is the LEF in Lincoln, Nebraska, which promotes family and community involvement in the schools through a series of grants that support the Lincoln Community Learning Centers. These grants encourage families, community organizations, and schools to work together.
- Coordinate and develop coalitions and cross-sector alliances around the shared agenda for reform based on civic and organizational trust. In some LEFs, these alliances consist of business partners and other “grass-tops” in the community. In other LEFs, grassroot representatives have joined the ranks of the LEF stakeholders. Building trusting relationships

and alliances in diverse communities assures that all voices in the community can be represented. For instance, the Philadelphia Education Fund recognizes that school systems-especially those that serve urban districts and low-income families-cannot succeed without the support and engagement of their broad civic community. Their community includes parents, government and business partners, community-based organizations, social service entities, communities of faith, and individual citizens. As a program area, the fund implements its civic engagement agenda through the initiation, staffing and support of the Education First Compact, a broadly diverse group of citizens committed to supporting and improving public education in Philadelphia. The compact meets monthly to learn about and exchange perspectives on reform initiatives in the Philadelphia schools, and to support policies and strategies that hold the best promise for improving the culture and outcomes of local schools. The compact also works to help community-based organizations use their social, intellectual and political capital to leverage school improvement.

- Ability to be both an insider and outsider related to education reform and change. As opposed to advocacy groups which play mostly an outside advocacy role, the LEF is sometimes in the school camp, and sometimes outside of the school camp. Navigating this complex terrain requires special skills and understanding of how a school district operates, as well as how the community and civic sector operates. For instance, the Paterson, New Jersey Education Fund has trained 55 Paterson parents to be part of the Ask the Right Question Project. Collectively, these facilitators have delivered workshops to 900 of their peers. They hold strategic thinking workshops for other parents in their local schools to help them support, monitor and advocate for education. Many of these facilitators now play a key role in school governance, serving as home school council officers and school improvement team members.

- ❑ More and more LEFs are becoming involved in affecting and shaping education reform policy. For instance, the Voice for Public Education in Tucson, Arizona has been supporting funding proposals in Arizona, and they will hold a community NCLB hearing to listen to the voices of their community. This LEF also is providing parent leadership training sessions in parent advocacy. In Mobile, Alabama, the Mobile Alabama Education Foundation encourages and trains parents to become effective advocates for improved achievement for all students in their communities. The foundation also sponsored over 50 town meetings and campaigned to pass one of the first funding increases for the Mobile Public Schools in recent history. The Education Fund in Paterson, New Jersey, is working with a coalition of state organizations to advocate for funding for the Abbott school districts through a major campaign of public information, advocacy, and media visibility.
- ❑ Ability to innovate and research new designs for increased student achievement. New Visions for Public Schools in New York opened 83 new, small New Century High Schools serving 38,155 students, or approximately 14 percent of the New York City high school population. The Public Education Foundation of Chattanooga, Tennessee has worked with the community to reduce teacher turnover by more than 50 percent, led a teacher professional development program responsible for 8 of Tennessee's 20 lowest scoring, highest poverty schools that has resulted in dramatic improvement in reading and mathematics, and have performed better than 90 percent of all of Tennessee's schools for three consecutive years.

6. Recommendations for the current NCLB Act

Mr. Chairman, PEN's members recommend the following issues regarding the reauthorization of NCLB:

1. Improve competent teaching policies to better support teachers and assess their effectiveness;
2. Implement a student-focused, comprehensive accountability system that rewards progress and encourages continuous improvement;
3. Improve the use of school and district data and analysis that leads to more effective teaching and learning.
4. Expand the opportunity for shared accountability by including the community as partners
5. Strengthen the parental involvement provisions.

I would like to thank the chairman of this committee and the members for the opportunity to testify on the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind.

###

