

REMARKS

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and the Senate Democratic Policy Committee
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Good morning. My name is Wendy Puriefoy and I am president of the Public Education Network. PEN is a national association of local education funds and individuals working to advance school reform for public schools in low-income communities across the nation. Local education funds – or LEFs – serve over 10.6 million students in 16,500 schools in 31 states to improve standards and accountability, schools and community services, and teacher quality.

I am happy to be here today to address the House Budget Committee Democratic Caucus and the Senate Democratic Policy Committee. I want to begin by thanking you for your work in passing the legislation. Make no mistake. No Child Left Behind can be a true milestone for public education, a turning point in the struggle for equity and quality in public schools.

The law is a 1,000-page statement from the federal government recognizing that all students matter and can achieve. It is a tool to dramatically raise performance in communities that want to regain confidence in schools but have not known what to do or how to leverage the system to change. It is a statement that Americans will no longer let our most disadvantaged young people pass from grade to grade without being able to read and do math, without having quality teachers to help them succeed, and without taking bold steps to ensure steady improvement.

As we approach the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board*, NCLB works to shed light on minority kids whose low achievement has been hidden in district and state

average computations. NCLB helps address crucial rights issues in education by recognizing that minority achievement is a national and demographic imperative and by activating strategies to close the achievement gap between whites and African American and Latino students.

The Public Education Network and the American people unequivocally support the goals of the law. But unless the federal government provides more support – and meets its promise to fully fund necessary interventions to lift students up – this potential milestone will become a millstone for states and for young people. It will be a heavy burden that will impede – rather than accelerate – progress.

For the past four years, PEN has conducted focus groups and a national poll in partnership with *Education Week* to gauge public sentiment on key issues related to public education. This year, when we conducted the poll in late January, we asked the public to speak about their impressions of *No Child Left Behind*.

While 71 percent of the public said they were in favor of *No Child Left Behind*, three quarters recognize that more money will be necessary to make it a reality. The public does not want the promise of the law to go unfulfilled by the federal government. Americans believe that the federal government, not the state or the local governments, should take the lead role in ensuring that schools receive the necessary funds. And by a two to one margin, voters say they would vote against their senator or representative if the officeholder would not back sufficient funding for the law.

While most of the people in this room are Democrats, I want to remind everyone that quality schools and the desire to put our schools and every child on track for success is not an issue that any one group in this society cares about more than any other. This is

an issue that brings together young and old, rich and poor, white and black, Republican and Democrat. That's why Congress worked together to pass a bipartisan bill. That's why Republican governors for the first time in decades are trying to raise taxes and find new revenues to keep from cutting teachers and closing schools.

Thinking the good times would last forever, states and the federal government have cut taxes at the expense of quality education and young people. Now too many of our most disadvantaged young people will be paying the price – expected to know and do more, but without the extra help necessary.

We need to encourage Republicans in Congress to recognize what Republican governors such as Mike Johanns in Nebraska and Robert Riley in Alabama are doing to help the children in their states. Republicans and Democrats must work together to put some urgency behind their commitment to education by truly investing in the kinds of interventions young people need to succeed to pass tests – academic enrichment, summer school, quality teachers, better learning environments.

Yet these core investments are what tax cuts and underfunding are the first to strip away. What's the result of funding the law at billions of dollars less than what was authorized at a time when states and communities are in the worst budget crunch in 50 years?

In California, where we have six local education funds, more than 3,000 pink slips have been handed out to teachers, and 4,100 workers have already been fired by school systems. San Francisco has closed down summer school for elementary school students, Orange County has cut back its after-school services, and San Diego has laid off 400 school personnel.

One of our LEFs is located in Boston, where five schools are closing and notices have gone out to 2,800 of the district's 3,900 permanent teachers alerting them that they might be reassigned to another school or laid off.

Two thousand teachers in South Carolina, where we have five LEFs, have received pink slips for the new budget year, leading to average class sizes at the state maximum of 35 students in many schools, and many school staff and maintenance personnel have been laid off. The state's 2001 Teacher of the Year's position as curriculum specialist was eliminated.

In Portland, Oregon, where we also have an LEF, teachers agreed to work 10 days without pay in middle schools and across Oregon, schools closed 15 days early and some schools will remain closed, class sizes are increasing, and music, art, athletics, marching band, and other extracurricular activities are being cut.

What can we do? It's not enough to blast the Republicans for claiming victory while simultaneously underfunding education. Americans want No Child Left Behind to succeed, and the future of public education depends on it. While we can say that those who will not fully fund this bill are only perpetuating the rhetoric and inaction that has left millions of students behind, there is more to do.

First, we must scale back the tax cut. Democrats must show that they are the party that brought us not just a balanced budget but a surplus that has its own trickle down effect – a sense of confidence that we can tackle big domestic problems like education. That's what led to the passage of No Child Left Behind.

Second, to support this, we must draw attention to new lawsuits and problems we're witnessing in states to make the public aware of what underfunding

is doing to schools. For the first 30 days of the new school year, PEN will be blitzing the media and elected officials with information about what underfunding of NCLB and the tax cut are doing to classrooms.

Third, we must clean up some of the technical problems in NCLB. There is still more to do to ensure that homeless students are no longer invisible in schools and efforts to ensure that we improve the quality of testing to more accurately measure what students are learning.

Fourth, we must put another big issue on the table and turn the debate away from No Child Left Behind. There is too much support, and too many challenges to snipe at the law and its complex technical flaws that states and the federal government will be forced to address in the course of implementation. That's why the Public Education Network over the next several years will work to advance a constitutional amendment that guarantees every child the right to a quality education. This we believe will provide a new platform to create new energy for adequate funding in states and full funding of federal education programs.

Fifth, we can use the No Child Left Behind Law as new leverage to educate the public about what quality education means and requires. New requirements for public schools to publicly report their progress, identify how all categories of students are performing, and make public their teachers credentials, we have the opportunity to make the public more knowledgeable and active. Americans support public schools, and they want to do what's best for young people, but they don't feel knowledgeable about what is happening in schools and what should be done. NCLB is a vehicle to build a more educated education voter and to encourage public action.

At PEN and throughout our network of Local Education Funds, we are working to help voters take greater public responsibility for public schools. We want voters to understand the issues and hold elected officials accountable just as we hold schools and students accountable. We will continue to publish annual polls about what the public wants elected officials to do, and we will work to distinguish where candidates and elected officials stand on key issues and identify who's for kids and who's just kidding.

This past year, we launched GiveKidsGoodSchools.com, a web-based campaign that enables individuals to contact decision-makers to demand high-quality public education for all children in America.

The rapid growth of GiveKidsGoodSchools.com to over 60,000 members since its launch seven months ago is a testament to the depth of commitment and concern the American people have for critical public education issues. In that time, activists have used this web site to support improvements in the pay, power, prestige, and preparation of teachers, to demand that education be made a priority in tight state budgets, and to call for protection of threatened educational programs like afterschool. This outpouring of faxes and emails has provoked detailed responses from lawmakers, showing that, indeed, elected officials are eager to hear from their constituents.

And in turn, the American public wants to hold their lawmakers accountable for their decisions. GiveKidsGoodSchools.com gives citizens a quick and easy way to voice their support for stronger schools. As this community of public education supporters continues to grow, elected officials will be put on notice that they must back their campaign promises with sound education policies for America's children.

Finally, let me say that Congress has a powerful role to play. You've ratcheted up the federal role in ways we haven't seen since 1965. You've taken a bold step to address the needs of young people and to address some of the problems in the earlier federal law. For years, we've heard members of Congress complain that we're paying too much without any accountability. Now we're holding too many people accountable without providing the necessary resources. We hope we count on all of you – Democrats and Republicans alike – to ensure that no child is left behind and to make our investment in children more real than rhetorical. Thank you.