



National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA

475 Riverside Drive, Suite 800, New York, NY 10115-0050 ■ www.nccusa.org
Office of the General Secretary ■ P: 212-870-2025 ■ F: 212-870-3112 ■ E: mkinnamon@nccusa.org

Comment to the U.S. House of Representatives Education and Labor Committee on the Upcoming Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

**Submitted on behalf of the National Council of Churches of the Churches of Christ, USA
by Rev. Dr. Michael Kinnamon, General Secretary
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The National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA is a community of 36 Christian denominations with a combined membership of 45 million persons in more than 100,000 congregations across this country. Our member churches – ranging from Greek Orthodox to Quakers, from Episcopalian to Baptists – do not agree on all things! We stand united, however, in our conviction that the church is called to speak for justice in public education. We affirm that each life is infinitely precious, created in the image of God, and, therefore, that every child should be given opportunity for fullness of life, including a quality and affordable education.

The National Council of Churches and its Committee on Public Education and Literacy have spoken since 2005 to the injustices in the federal education law, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, whose most recent (2002) reauthorization is called No Child Left Behind. In 2005 (and revised in 2008) The Committee on Public Education and Literacy released a statement “Ten Moral Concerns in the No Child Left Behind Act,” that pointed to the law’s serious injustices that: radically increased standardized testing; demanded rapidly increasing test scores for all children; punished the schools unable to raise scores quickly; blamed teachers; failed to accommodate the needs of English language learners and children with special needs; narrowed the curriculum to the subjects tested; imposed a rigid and utopian 2014 deadline when all children would score proficient or their schools would be labeled “failures”; and remained silent about opportunity gaps by making demands on states and school districts without fully funding reforms that would build capacity to close achievement gaps.

Four of these priorities have dominated the NCC’s continuing critique of the No Child Left Behind Act. We would like to see the following injustices addressed in the upcoming reauthorization of the law.

1. Develop the unique gifts of each child, created in the image of God, rather than worshiping accountability, data, testing, and standardization.

While in the churches we do certainly support high standards and while we believe we must all be accountable as citizens for ensuring that public schools serve all children well, we have not supported the yearly standardized testing scheme of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), because it has pressured educators to shift the focus from meeting the needs of each child to preparing children for multiple choice tests. NCLB’s testing pressure has narrowed the curriculum to the tested subjects, when in the church we believe that schools should help each child reach her/his God-given potential through intellectual, civic, ethical, artistic, and physical education. Finally, high stakes have been added by many states to the required high school examination, a combination of federal and state policy that has raised the dropout rate in many places by encouraging students whose scores are likely to be low to drop out.

In the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act we in the churches ask Congress to reduce the amount of standardized testing and reduce the pressure that NCLB's test-and-punish scheme has imposed. Ensure that schools once again can bring the humanities, the social studies, the arts and the sciences back into prominence in school curricula.

We further ask Congress to eliminate the utopian and unrealistic deadline by which all children will test "proficient" or their schools be declared "failing." We believe that the 2014 deadline and the declaration of nearly one third of America's public schools as "failing" by 2010 has already undermined support for public education. A strong system of public education is essential if our nation is to remain a vital democracy.

2. Congress should allocate federal resources for equity and use its power to press states to close opportunity gaps. It is time to address the glaring resource inequities across the states and guarantee for all children in the United States a comparable opportunity to learn.

In a major 1999 policy statement, the National Council of Churches General Assembly named opportunity gaps as a primary injustice:

"The wide disparities among public schools exist largely because schools reflect the affluence and/or the political power of the communities in which they are found. Within virtually every state there are school districts that lavish on their students three or four times the amount of money spent on other children in the same state. Most tellingly, the schools that offer the least to their students are often schools serving poor children, among whom children of color figure disproportionately, as they do in all the shortfalls of our common life."

The NCC's Committee on Public Education and Literacy released a new statement in January 2010 to advocate that Congress address long-standing resource inequity when the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is reauthorized. The statement asks Congress to ensure that every child, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status has an opportunity to learn that includes:

- **a quality early childhood education**—Some states give all children the right to publicly subsidized, quality pre-school; in other states children lack pre-school and all day Kindergarten.
- **highly qualified teachers**—Some school districts can afford well-qualified, experienced teachers; in other districts where salaries are lower or conditions challenging, students are too often taught by a succession of substitute teachers.
- **a curriculum that will prepare students for college, work and community**—Some high schools offer Calculus, advanced lab sciences, and Advanced Placement. Others lack lab sciences even though these courses are required by their state universities.
- **equitable instructional resources**—Some schools have adequate libraries, computers, enough counselors to assist with college placement, and small classes. In other over-crowded schools personal attention is not guaranteed, and important programs and equipment are unaffordable.

According to the statement: "NCLB's test-and-punish strategy has distracted our attention from the opportunity gaps beneath the achievement gaps. By mandating higher test scores while remaining silent about unequal resources, federal policy makers framed an agenda that can only be interpreted as an attack on educators themselves, passing the buck from Congress to the

schools and demanding that teachers and children work harder and thereby compensate for society's structural injustices. NCLB's silence about opportunity to learn—about the public's responsibility to invest in equity—is among the law's most serious flaws.”

In the upcoming reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Congress should allocate federal resources for equity and use its power to press states to close opportunity gaps by:

- fully funding Title I in accord with the current formula.
- providing strong federal incentives for states to reform inequitable school funding formulas;
- establishing a comprehensive school funding indicator system under which states report data about spending;
- requiring states to develop plans for overcoming resource inequity and document their progress toward the goals they have themselves established;
- creating a transparent, regular federal report that exposes the scope of unequal access to opportunity.

3. It is time for Congress to accompany aggressive school improvement with reforms outside the school day that will help children challenged by poverty and insulated from opportunity in our poverty-and-racially-segregated cities be able to learn at school.

As one of the original signers of the Broader, BOLDER Approach to Education, I have personally endorsed the need for aggressive school improvement accompanied by:

- developmentally appropriate, high-quality, affordable early childhood and pre-school education;
- more accessible health care including prenatal care for mothers, pediatric and dental care for children, and universal health coverage for children and families;
- cultural, organizational, athletic and academic enrichment activities for poor children that middle class families take for granted.

We in the churches are grateful for Congress's recent actions to expand health coverage for families; we know that this action will make the work easier for educators in public schools who serve too many children whose families have lacked access to the privilege of health coverage. It is now time for Congress to support quality early childhood education and other enrichment activities for children who currently lack these privileges.

4. We ask Congress to make every effort to support and improve struggling public schools and to frame school reform in a way that stops the scapegoating of public school teachers.

In a 2003 resolution, the NCC's General Assembly grieved that, “our nation's teachers are asked to change lives and solve problems with resources nowhere near commensurate with the task while facing constant criticism by politicians, the public, and the press for their alleged failures and inadequacies...”

A 1999 policy statement affirmed the role of parochial schools and recognized that many desire school choice, but continued:

“We do not purport to resolve our differences over this issue, but we do affirm our conviction that, as a general rule, public funds should be used for public purposes.... Yet with our eyes focused by our faith on the needs of all children in our public schools, we call upon our members to direct their energies toward improving the schools that the majority of children will continue to attend. The long-range solution is to improve all schools so that families will not be forced to seek other educational alternatives.”

As a council of religious communions committed to life in community, we are alarmed by proposed school turnaround plans that are likely to damage community institutions and further destabilize our nation’s most vulnerable neighborhoods. We protest proposed turnaround plans that would close schools, fire entire staffs of teachers, and move toward expanded privatization that threatens the future of public education itself in our large cities.

The National Council of Churches has historically supported the institution of public education as foundational for healthy democracy. We ask Congress to make every effort to support the most vulnerable public schools and the educators who serve there. While process improvements to struggling public schools may not produce a quick fix, we believe they are the only way to confront the racial and economic injustices that are manifesting themselves in struggling schools across our large cities. I restate today the charge of the 1999 NCC General Assembly:

“Too often, criticism of the public schools fails to reflect our present societal complexity. At a moment when childhood poverty is shamefully widespread, when many families are under constant stress, when schools are often limited by lack of funds or resources, criticism of the public schools often ignores an essential truth: we cannot believe that we can improve public schools by concentrating on the schools alone. They alone can neither cause nor cure the problems we face. In this context, we must address with prayerful determination the issues of race and class, which threaten both public education and democracy in America.”

On behalf of my colleagues at the NCC, I want to thank members of the committee, for your careful attention to this critically important issue. May God bless your efforts.

Below are links to two resources of the NCC Committee on Public Education and Literacy.

“Opportunity Gaps in Public Education Must Be Closed”

<http://www.nccusa.org/pdfs/elmcoppportunitygaps.pdf>

“Ten Moral Concerns in the No Child Left Behind Act”

<http://www.nccusa.org/elmc/2009moralconcerns.pdf>