



Two 9/10's

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On the morning of September 10, 2001, a couple of government relations consultants and I had breakfast at a favorite Washington haunt with a White House education policy advisor to discuss the range of options for determining Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in the latest draft of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. It was an open, candid and far reaching discussion about making ESEA accountability provisions stronger and more workable. Unfortunately there seemed to be problems with every model we considered: too complex or invalid or unreliable or arbitrary, or discriminatory. So we ended up talking not about the best alternative but rather about the least worst option. I began to believe then that the answer to identifying and addressing the needs of low performing schools probably lay somewhere beyond the boundaries of the statute.

We did not quite finish our discussion that day because the White House official had to leave a bit early to head off to Florida with the President for a day of touring schools to bring attention to his ESEA reauthorization proposal. All hell broke loose the next day and we never managed to meet with that official again until after the signing ceremony for the No Child Left Behind Act. A less than perfect AYP was a done deal.

Flash forward exactly six years later to a hearing room in the Rayburn Building on Capitol Hill. I along with a parade of 43 other panelists testified at a day-long hearing on the latest proposals for the reauthorization of ESEA. Most of the comments focused on ... you guessed it...that still confounding and still highly controversial issue of AYP. You would think that after six years of study and implementation and evaluation that we would have found the right mix of practicality and relevance in the accountability requirements to move the system forward to the next level of school change. But the debate over AYP --- as narrow as it may seem to outside observers--- remains highly divisive and a polarizing deal breaker for some. Like in 2001, I tend to believe that the answer to turning around low performing schools is not just about accountability. In equal measure it is about school improvement and building capacity using credible knowledge to scale and sustain change. Here are some excerpts from what I said at the hearing

"... We applaud the bipartisan effort thus far in sustaining the key goals of NCLB. The tricky part, of course, is how best to achieve those goals. To be sure, reaching consensus on new accountability provisions will be challenging. We hope, however, that there will be broad agreement on shifting more attention to supporting school improvement and to the proposals for sustaining and scaling improvement efforts.

“The (current House proposal ’s greater focus on school improvement moves the reauthorization in the right direction. It is important to put this reauthorization into historical context. For the past 20 years dating back to the first Bush Administration, federal education policy has been guided by a standards-based reform framework: Develop standards, align the system to those standards, create strong accountability measures, and at last and ultimately deliver solutions to schools. With NCLB’s heavy emphasis on accountability in 2002, the conditions are ripe to move to the next level and focus far greater attention on school improvement to meet the goals of that accountability. The next reauthorization should aim to balance needed sanctions with compelling solutions.

It is also vitally important to invest in building local and state capacity for school improvement. The House proposal draft is on the right track in emphasizing the need for building capacity. I will go so far as to recommend that the title of the statute reflect this emphasis: “Building America’s Capacity for Excellence for All Children Act”.

This next reauthorization can and should accelerate nationwide efforts to fulfill the promise of NCLB. Through a robust and rigorous system of school improvement the increasingly urgent needs for turning around low performing schools can and should be met...”

As in 2001, this September 11, national security overshadows ESEA reauthorization. But, it’s important to make sure this time that it leads to workable solutions for improving schools”