

**Concerns of the National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy  
Reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act  
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Our serious and ongoing concerns about the No Child Left Behind Act cause us to ask you not to rush through a quick fix but instead to take the time to reauthorize NCLB with care, by discerning and implementing major structural reforms.

A primary concern is that the law operates by holding schools and school districts responsible for outcomes measured by standardized tests without equalizing inputs—all the resources that help children learn. When the very small amount of funding in the federal law is laid as a very thin veneer upon a very thick block of state and local funding that has not been successfully equalized for many, many years, what happens is that the big city school districts with enormous needs and responsibilities find they are sanctioned for being less successful than rich suburban districts. We are therefore concerned that what was proposed as a civil rights law has, in reality, undermined the capacity of demographically complex urban school districts serving the mass of our nation's poorest children. NCLB has punished city school districts with sanctions that have re-directed Title I funding away from educational programming to pay for transportation and supplemental services. NCLB's requirements have been tragically under-funded, increasing demands on city districts with diminishing tax bases.

We are concerned that NCLB blames teachers instead of supporting them. Problems in NCLB were brought to our attention when pastors began to report growing despair among the public school teachers in their pews, teachers who feel trapped by demands they cannot meet even while doing the best they can. We are troubled by reports of teacher burnout and decisions among experienced teachers to leave the profession.

We are concerned that NCLB fails fully to honor children's growth and accomplishments by relying on scores on a single annual standardized test and on fixed Adequate Yearly Progress benchmarks. The law increases pressure on schools to compel low-scoring adolescents into GED programs and to focus only on children whose scores are close to the passing rates. NCLB narrows the curriculum by reducing time for the arts and social studies, and it disproportionately punishes special needs children and English language learners. NCLB's labeling of schools and districts is driving racial segregation in metropolitan areas where the press identifies affluent, white suburban districts, according to standardized test scores, as the only good place to raise a family.

We are concerned that a production target of "all children proficient by 2014" is unrealistic and counterproductive. As people of faith, we do not view our children as products to be tested and managed but instead as unique human beings, created in the image of God, to be nurtured and educated. While we emphatically support improving public schools, we fear that as many schools come to be rated "failing," NCLB will erode public support for public education, our largest civic institution, and one that is foundational to our democracy.

We are concerned about NCLB's sanctions. While poorly operated schools must be improved, the law should focus on leadership development among principals, staff development for teachers, and support for stronger professional assistance from state departments of education. Instead NCLB redirects federal Title I money from school programming to provide unregulated, privatized, supplementary tutoring for which there is no quality control, and which may not be well coordinated with school programs.

While the law sets reconstitution of staff, charterization, and state takeover as the final sanctions in the fifth year, there is no evidence that the disruption caused by staff reconstitution improves schools in the short run. Neither has any state department of education ever successfully operated a big city school district, while this has been tried on a number of occasions. Nor have charter schools proven themselves more effective on the whole than their companion public schools. Surely we should not encourage people to look to institutions outside the public schools as the key to overall child wellbeing, as there is no other alternative institution of a size and complexity to educate the nearly 50 million children currently enrolled.

These concerns have led the NCC and many of our member communions to join the now 138 national agencies to sign a "Joint Organizational Statement on the No Child Left Behind Act." We believe that the many interests represented among the signing groups speak to serious problems in NCLB.

As NCLB is reauthorized we hope Congress will: set ambitious and yet reachable goals; end labeling of children, blaming of teachers and stigmas for schools; develop programs that support teachers and improve leadership in struggling schools; fully fund federal requirements; and use the power of the federal government to press the states themselves, whose funding systems provide the bulk of all school finance, to address school funding inequity.