Testimony for Hearing on No Child Left Behind Act, May 22, 2006

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The following testimony is submitted on behalf of Gwinnett County Public Schools to the No Child Left Behind Commission in conjunction with the commission’s hearing to be held on May 22, 2006, at 9:30 a.m. in Atlanta, Georgia.

1 • An overview of how Gwinnett County Public Schools has implemented Georgia’s system for determining adequate yearly progress.

Prior to No Child Left Behind, Gwinnett County Public Schools had embraced an accountability model that included a comprehensive, coherent curriculum approved by the community, professional learning opportunities for teachers based on scientifically-based research, and an assessment system that measured students’ progress in learning the essential curriculum. The requirements for adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act are tightly aligned with Gwinnett’s accountability model. The impact of NCLB on GCPS’ vision of becoming a system of world-class schools includes the following.

• In Georgia, AYP-AMO is based on performance on two state assessments, the Criterion-Referenced Competency Test, or CRCT, and the Georgia High School Graduation Test, or GHSGT. Gwinnett administrators and teachers use the data provided by the CRCT and GHSGT to help target instruction to meet the needs of all students.

• The Georgia Department of Education adopted and is currently in the process of implementing the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS), a curriculum that more closely aligns with the expectations for learning outlined in Gwinnett’s curriculum, the Academic Knowledge and Skills (AKS), in the core subject areas. The CRCT and GHSGT are being revised to align with the new GPS curriculum. The revised state assessments are expected to promote higher expectations for students and, therefore, will be more closely aligned with Gwinnett’s expectations for performance. The data provided by the enhanced CRCT and GHSGT assessments will further inform instructional practices for all Gwinnett students. For example, annual assessment results on the CRCT for grades 1-8 help teachers determine if their students are making improvement on the curriculum strands from one year to the next.

• Under Title I Part A, the focus on subgroups has expedited GCPS’ delivery of a technology tool that puts student data on the teacher’s desktop, enabling the teacher to better plan instruction. This tool provides data at the individual student, class, teacher, school and system levels.

• School leaders have developed initiatives to target improved attendance and graduation rates, Gwinnett’s second indicators. Teachers and schools are provided with focused reports on these indicators in order to evaluate the success of their initiatives. In Gwinnett schools, attendance rates have dramatically improved, while graduation rates are improving more slowly.

• Schools have developed and/or implemented multiple, focused intervention and acceleration strategies that include the AKS Continuous Improvement instructional model, instructional coaches, Reading Recovery, Parent Involvement Programs, after-and before-school tutorials, mentor programs, and others to meet the varied needs of their diverse learners who are not successful.
• Georgia has convened teams to craft a Single Statewide Accountability System that specifies one system of rewards and consequences for all schools. The consequences have stretched the limit of local resources for implementation in non-Title schools. For example, funding has not been provided for transportation services for families in non-Title schools who choose to exercise the “choice” option afforded under NCLB.
• In implementing Supplemental Education Services, the system has experienced early struggles with the quality of providers approved by the State Department of Education.
• GCPS’ Human Resources Division has led the effort to ensure that all teachers and paraprofessionals are highly qualified according to NCLB mandates. The requirements for special education staff are proving to be significantly challenging.
• The flexibility allowed for “Katrina students” has helped to relieve the stress on the district to provide appropriate services for these students in crisis. Currently Gwinnett has approximately 900 students from the Gulf Coast region remaining in the district. They are making significant progress but some still struggle academically.

2 • GCPS’ views on the current system of AYP that is required by NCLB, including any barriers or successes created by such system.
• The intent of the law is closely aligned with the mission and vision of Gwinnett County Public Schools.
• The law demands accountability for results for all students. The greatest challenge is found in meeting the expectations as currently outlined for Special Education students and English Language Learners. However, the high expectations for special education students have resulted in most of Gwinnett’s students with disabilities meeting grade-level expectations with additional support.
• Guidance provided by the U.S. Department of Education has been interpreted differently by the departments of education from state to state. This has created uneven expectations for students across the nation. For example, the subgroup sizes for which schools and systems are accountable vary, as do the quality of assessments and the performance standards that equate to proficiency.
• Providing the choice option for students after the second year of “needs improvement” status creates a burden on a system of over-capacity schools. Providing Supplemental Education Services before choice could increase student achievement, thereby meeting the goals of NCLB.
• Measuring graduation rate is a challenge. The implementation of an effective student information system that allows for easy tracking of students from school to school, including across states, and that includes their performance records would provide more accurate data reporting and instructional planning for the students’ success.

3 • GCPS’ views on the impact which AYP has had on achievement in Gwinnett County Public Schools.
• In 2005, 11 of 101 schools did not meet AYP: 1 elementary school, 7 middle schools, 1 high school, 1 alternative middle/high school, 1 special education facility. This was a
decrease from 14 schools not meeting AYP in 2004, despite increased AMO requirements.

- Gwinnett County Public Schools’ graduation rate has increased by more than four percentage points since 2003. The rate for graduation of GCPS Hispanic students has increased by nine percentage points, and for African-American students, by ten percentage points, in the same time period.

- Achievement rates for students at all grade levels are on an upward trend since implementation of NCLB, despite already high levels of achievement prior to NCLB’s enactment, and despite increasing populations of students at-risk for academic failure.

- The achievement gap between white students and minority populations is decreasing at most grade levels and in most subject areas.
  - The percentage of African-American grade 6 students scoring at the “meets and/or exceeds the standards” level of proficiency on the state’s criterion-referenced reading assessment has increased 16 percentage points since implementation of NCLB, while the percentage of Hispanic students has increased by 19 percentage points, as compared to a gain of 4 percentage points for White students.
  - Similar results are evident in English/Language Arts and Mathematics, and in all three areas for elementary and grade 7 and 8 students, as well. On the grade 8 mathematics assessment, the number of African-American students meeting or exceeding standards has increased by 24 percent, and Hispanic students by 22 percent, compared to an 11-percent increase for White students.

- There is evidence of improved student learning for special populations of students since implementation of NCLB, including students with disabilities and English Language Learners, at all elementary grade levels.
  - As an example, Grade 3 criterion-referenced results for students with disabilities show an increase in mean score just within the past three years of 16 points in reading, 8 points in English/language arts, and 14 points in mathematics.
  - Grade 3 criterion-referenced results for English Language Learners show an increase of 16 points in reading and 9 points in mathematics during the same period, although English/language arts scores have remained stable.

- However, students with disabilities and English Language Learners in the middle grades are not performing as well as their age-counterparts, with much more variability in their achievement scores.

- There is an increase in the number of students with disabilities and English Language Learners failing the AMO instrument at the high school level, the Georgia High School Graduation Test, in most content area subtests.

- Overall, the requirements of NCLB AYP have served to spur Gwinnett County schools toward increased student achievement across the board and closing of the achievement gap for minority student populations. However, there is some indication that increased achievement for students with disabilities and English Language Learners is not maintained from elementary to secondary school. This could reflect the increasing challenges these students face as the rigor of the content increases. It also indicates that these students who enter GCPS at an older age face the disadvantage of not experiencing the consistency of instruction Gwinnett provides students who are with the system their entire academic career.
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4 • GCPS’ views on aspects of existing AYP that should be changed or modified.

• Include special education diplomas as regular diplomas for AYP purposes. This inclusion is fair and should be strongly encouraged since the IEP determines the graduation goal of the student. Not counting special education diplomas, in reality, penalizes high schools for meeting the needs of the special needs student.

• Revise the requirement of content certification for “highly qualified” for special education teachers.

• Include students with disabilities in the AYP subgroup only if they are enrolled in the program and have received services comparable to other students for a Full Academic Year. This will allow the legally required placement of students to occur without concern as to AYP impact.

• Approve the request to include a mathematical adjustment for students with disabilities in Georgia’s AYP Plan, as this offers a practical approach to promote reasonable expectations for academic achievement. While not knowing what the adjustment might be will cause some concern among schools, the calculation based on actual performance of the subgroup is reasonable and fair. A similar approach should be considered for the English Language Learner subgroup.

• Exclude English Language Learners from AMO calculations for the first three years they are in the U.S. or until their language acquisition assessment (as required by Title III) indicates they have reached a level of proficiency that would result in valid content assessment on the state criterion-referenced instrument, whichever comes first.

• Reverse the order of consequences for failure to meet AYP by using Supplemental Education Services first, and then require school choice.

• Encourage the development of a standardized assessment battery for English language proficiency/language acquisition that would give valid, reliable, and quick results to systems in order to more effectively and efficiently meet the requirements of Title III. The ACCESS test, now required for many states, is time-consuming to give and score. As a result, scores often are not available in a timely manner.

• Consider including gifted as an AYP subgroup. Maintaining a high percentage passing, or improvement in the percentage passing, could be the criteria. This would help focus attention on improving education for all students.

• Consider providing flexibility for the calculation of AYP for special entities such as special education centers and alternative schools.
  o Make attendance the default second indicator for 9-12 schools in which students do not graduate from the school (alternative schools).
  o Provide flexibility within the attendance indicator for special education centers in which a high percentage of the population is medically fragile.
  o Allow additional years for students to graduate from non-traditional high schools.