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December 22, 2006

Iris Salters: Labor Voices

Congress must fix faulty education law

Federal No Child Left Behind Act is underfunded and unreasonable



Here's a chain e-mail making the rounds that compares the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) to football. With my apologies to the original author, here's a condensed version:

All teams must make the state playoffs and all must win the championship, whether the players have any interest in football, whether they have any athletic ability or whether they can even practice. Oh, and all schools will have the same level of talent and all the teams will reach the same minimum goals. If not, the coaches will be penalized -- their equipment taken away -- until they are all winners.

If no child gets ahead, then no child gets left behind, the e-mail concludes.

When it comes to education, leaving no child behind is a laudable goal. All children need access to quality teachers. And we should certainly have high expectations and goals for all children.

But as a former special education teacher and speech pathologist, I also know that NCLB has serious flaws and unintended negative consequences. While it seeks to hold schools accountable, it does so at the expense of common sense.

Standards are unjust

Just as it would be impossible for all school football teams to win the championship, it is also unreasonable for 100 percent of students to be proficient in all areas by the same deadline.

Once again, what our federal legislators come up with in the nation's capital doesn't always translate well into the classroom.

So with the renewed hope for progressive change that comes with a new Congress, it is time to urge Michigan's delegation to ensure a quality public education for every child as they repair this necessary law in 2007.

Repair means a commitment to fully fund NCLB thus allowing cash-strapped school districts to have necessary resources to meet the letter and intent of the law.

While Congress and the president have required more and more of schools, they've not fully funded mandated programs. This school year, for example, Congress provided \$1 billion less for NCLB programs -- \$20.4 million less for Michigan -- than it provided last year. Further cuts have been proposed for the coming fiscal year.

It has been the expectation that Michigan will cover the shortfall -- but Michigan is broke.

Cuts have direct impact in the classroom. Willow Run Community Schools, for example, lost four teaching positions because of a lack of resources, including a \$70,000 cut in Title I funding -- for schools that serve large numbers of economically disadvantaged students -- according to a March 2006 Center on Education Policy report.

We must demand adequate funding for proven programs that help close achievement gaps, such as smaller classes, early childhood education, after-school programs, and improved professional development for teachers and other educators.

Give teachers the tools

Educators should have the resources and tools they need to get the job done. That means mentoring programs for new teachers, high-quality professional development opportunities and financial incentives to recruit and retain first-class teachers in hard-to-staff schools.

Let's stop shifting public dollars to the private sector through supplemental educational services such as tutoring and takeovers of public schools by for-profit companies.

Providing a quality education also means altering one-size-fits-all testing requirements that judge schools and children on a single test score. What we need is a law that includes common-sense flexibility and that supports educators in implementing programs to improve student learning, reward success and provide meaningful assistance to schools that need help the most.

Michigan should have the flexibility to decide how and when to measure student progress. Measurement should take into account that success can mean different things for different students, including those with disabilities and those still

learning English. And results should be used to improve student achievement -- not to penalize schools or teachers.

Parental support needed

What else is needed? Community involvement and engagement. Shared responsibility. High-quality teachers and support staff are the greatest factors in how well students learn, but even the best teacher can't control whether a child has access to a computer or whether his parents read to him at home.

We must all stress to the Michigan congressional delegation that we expect their commitment to provide a quality education for all children. Call or write your member of Congress. Tell him or her to fix and fund No Child Left Behind.

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Labor Voices

Labor Voices columns are written for The News on a rotating basis by United Auto Workers President Ron Gettelfinger, Teamster President James Hoffa, Michigan AFL-CIO President Mark Gaffney and Michigan Education Association President Iris Salters. The News hopes to provide a forum for discussing workplace issues that are critical to a large segment of Michigan's population, whether or not they are union members. Look for Labor Voices every Friday in The Detroit News.

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