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97% of Minnesota Principals Say No Child Left Behind Requirements Unattainable by 2014

NCLB Diverts Resources from Classroom, According to New Report

(St. Paul, MN)—Ninety-seven percent of principals surveyed said Minnesota schools will not be in compliance with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) guidelines by 2014, according to a new report released by nonprofit think tank Minnesota 2020 today. Based on the survey and independent analysis, Minnesota 2020 recommends that Minnesota drop out of NCLB unless the stringent rules are altered.

“This report reinforces what principals and education leaders have known for years—No Child Left Behind is an unrealistic law that hurts Minnesota schools and the students we teach,” said Richard A. Oscarson, principal at Eastview Elementary School in Lakeville and president of Minnesota Elementary School Principals’ Association. “It can tie a principal’s hands having teachers teach to a test that some students will never be able to pass.”

The report is based on a statewide survey of elementary, junior high and secondary school principals. More than 740 principals were surveyed, and nearly every respondent said that NCLB’s main goal—100 percent proficiency in tests by 2014—is unattainable. The survey was conducted by Minnesota 2020 in partnership with the Minnesota Elementary School Principals’ Association and the Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals in December 2008.

The report “Boxed in by Bad Policy” also found that NCLB forces schools to focus resources on the annual test—the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment II (MCA-II)—and diverts resources from other subject areas.

- More than 70 percent of principals surveyed said they are spending more time and resources on test preparation under NCLB rules.
- Forty percent said they have taken away class time from the arts and other subjects.
- Approximately 60 percent of principals said they have reallocated professional development monies to focus on NCLB test subjects.
- More than 30 percent of principals said they have added NCLB –mandated teachers and tutors at the expense of other subjects.

“NCLB forces principals to make draconian choices to meet NCLB requirements,” said Matt Entenza, Minnesota 2020 board chair. “These choices are made more difficult in Minnesota’s atmosphere of declining funding for our kids. As our principals grapple with fewer resources due to ongoing lack of investment at the state level, programs like NCLB that force educators into corners are only adding to the problem.”

The No Child Left Behind law, signed in 2001 by President George W. Bush, requires every school to reach certain standards, measured through testing, each year. This philosophy called “outcome based education” assumes that high standards and measurable goals will result in improved education in Minnesota and around the country. Students at every grade level are tested each year, and when a school shows proficiency in the test, it is said to make “adequate yearly progress” or AYP. The number of students that must show proficiency grows each year until the 2014 goal of 100 percent proficiency.

Failure to meet AYP leads to an ever-increasing set of punishments including diverting money to private tutors and restructuring the leadership at schools that receive Title 1 aid—those schools that serve low-income students, or about 40 percent of Minnesota public schools.

“We embrace high standards and want to be held accountable for the education of our students, but because of NCLB’s unrealistic goals, increasing numbers of strong, quality Minnesota public schools have been stigmatized as ‘failing’,” said Joann Knuth, executive director of the MASSP and former St. Paul principal. “We think it’s a bad policy that labels schools and students and causes principals to divert precious resources and time from the classroom in order to ‘make AYP’.”

Minnesota education officials developed the MCA-II as their NCLB measurement. While some students have done well on the test, the “rising bar” has spotlighted NCLB’s failure: In 2005, 247 Minnesota schools did not meet AYP; in 2006, 483 schools came up short; in 2007, 729 failed; and in 2008, nearly half (937) of the state’s 1,920 schools didn’t make AYP. Only 15 percent of principals surveyed thought the MCA-II was an effective assessment of student achievement.

"The use of the current annual test to determine a student's achievement and a school's progress is simply not efficient or effective: results are received after the school year is finished," said P. Fred Storti, executive director of MESPA and former principal. "We recommend Minnesota use assessment tools that both chart individual student growth and provide immediate results. With this timely feedback during the school year, teachers can redirect instruction to effectively increase student learning."

“When 97 percent of Minnesota principals are telling us that 100 percent proficiency will not be met and more and more schools continue to fall behind, it’s a clear indicator that NCLB doesn’t work,” said John Fitzgerald, Minnesota 2020 education fellow and author of the report. “NCLB mandates that special education students and non-English speaking students are tested at grade level, and that’s just not realistic.”

“While this survey did not include school superintendents, I’m guessing the results would have been similar to principals’ responses if it had,” said Tom Westerhaus, superintendent of the River Falls, Wisconsin school district and an education advisory board member at Minnesota 2020.

“Superintendents are discouraged with the repeated labeling of failure of their district’s schools through NCLB, when the realities of their district successes would clearly demonstrate otherwise.”

More than 87 percent of principals surveyed said these two groups shouldn't be tested at grade level as required under NCLB.

The report finds that NCLB compliance is unattainable, and unless the 2014 compliance requirement is changed, Minnesota 2020 recommends that Minnesota drop out of NCLB. The report also finds that the MCA-II is not an effective measurement of student growth and should not be used as a measure of teacher, administrator or school performance.

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MN 2020 is a nonpartisan, progressive think tank that focuses on the issues that really matter: education, health care, transportation and economic development. New content and analysis can be found daily at www.MN2020.org.

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