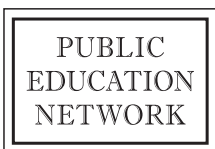


# Open to the Public

Students Speak Out on "No Child Left Behind"

A Report from 2004 Public Hearings



Public involvement. Public education. Public benefit.



## Public Education Network

Public Education Network (PEN) is a national organization of local education funds (LEFs) and individuals working to improve public schools and build citizen support for quality public education in low-income communities across the nation. PEN believes an active, vocal constituency is the key to ensuring that every child, in every community, benefits from a quality public education. PEN and its members are building public demand and mobilizing resources for quality public education on behalf of 11.5 million children in more than 1600 school districts in 33 states and the District of Columbia. In 2004, PEN welcomed its first international member, which serves almost 300,000 children in the Philippines.

### Our Vision

Every day, in every community, every child in America benefits from a quality public education.

### Our Mission

To build public demand and mobilize resources for quality public education for all children through a national constituency of local education funds and individuals.



## Students Speak Out On *No Child Left Behind*

Public school students across the country believe *No Child Left Behind* got their issues about access to a quality education right. They object to many of the solutions in the law, however, and see few, if any, positive results so far.

At hearings on the massive federal law held by Public Education Network in eight states, students presented candid, provocative testimony on teachers, testing, and the conditions for learning in their schools. Few knew many details about the law, but from Massachusetts to California, young people told their stories about why schools needed to be improved. They came from urban, suburban, and rural high schools to be witnesses, along with parents and community leaders, at formal hearings that produced more than 1,000 pages of testimony.



Even more than most of the adult panelists, the students could personally respond to the real or perceived effects of the federal law on their schools and experiences. They did so with remarkable agreement, no matter what state or what kind of school they represented at the hearings. The students said:

- The NCLB definition of a “highly qualified teacher” does not assure them of having competent teachers. More than paper certification is needed to make sure their teachers have the skills to teach them.
- The extreme emphasis on preparing for a single test to comply with either the state and/or federal accountability policies is skewing the curriculum and use of time inside schools, and creating cynicism among students.
- Rather than help to engage students in the goals of schools, the testing and narrowing of school offerings are further alienating them.
- Students cannot meet higher expectations as long as budget cuts and long-term underfunding of schools prevent them from having necessary resources.
- Students object to the stigma associated with having their school labeled as “needing improvement,” and view punitive measures as counterproductive.

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“I feel as though maybe the money that they spent on giving us for coming to school to take the test should be for up-to-date textbooks and things like that.”

—Mary Wells,  
West Philadelphia  
High School

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## Why the PEN Hearings?

The PEN hearings, conducted in the spring and fall of 2004 with a local partner or partnerships at each site, specifically included students as witnesses because, ultimately, they are more affected by the reforms mandated under NCLB than any other group. The PEN hearings provided opportunities for students and others who ordinarily do not have access to policymakers to speak up about the impact of NCLB. Parents and business and community leaders joined students to share their opinions, and suggestions at each of the nine hearings (two were held in California).

The hearings were an extension of PEN's focus on the importance of NCLB to parents and communities. Shortly after NCLB was passed in 2001, PEN issued *Using NCLB to Improve Student Achievement: An Action Guide for Community and Parent Leaders*. Since its publication, 10,000 copies have been requested by organizations throughout the country, with more than 40,000 copies downloaded from the PEN website. In addition, a series of NCLB Action Briefs, developed by PEN in partnership with the National Coalition for Parent Involvement In Education, have been downloaded more than 25,000 times.



With this demand for information on NCLB as background, PEN decided to hold the series of state hearings to give the public a structured way to enter the debate on NCLB and its effects, both positive and negative, on schools and students. The nine hearings were a formal process, with witnesses giving their testimony to panels of state and national hearing officers. From them, PEN has prepared a national report directed at policymakers and eight separate state reports. Because the student testimony was so revealing and compelling, PEN believes the students deserve this special report of their own.

While NCLB may be focused on low-performing schools, the students who testified attended diverse high schools. Some lived in affluent neighborhoods, one lived in a homeless shelter. A few had studied parts of the law or state education policy, others belonged to student groups organized by advocacy organizations and were informed about certain issues. The student witnesses perhaps were more engaged and focused than most of their peers; nevertheless, they understood the reasons for the lack of engagement by others and pleaded for changes that would benefit all students. They testified on a range of topics, but, as with the national and state reports, their testimony generally fit within the three aspects of NCLB that PEN believes are essential to its success—accountability, teacher quality, and building strong communities.



## What Students Said About Accountability

Students believe testing is necessary “to figure out where students are,” as a Sacramento student said, and to prepare for the future where testing will be an expectation, as a New York City student expressed it. What they unanimously objected to was the response of teachers and administrators to the pressures of test-based accountability. Students felt they were losing out on the learning experiences they wanted and needed; that the focus on a single test performance was unfair and failed to capture what students know, and that their teachers were being forced to abide by directives that were not what teaching was supposed to be about. Seeing adults struggle against an irrational situation where they would not answer students' questions because they were not pertinent to the test preparation was frustrating to students, as well as teachers.

Jamie Smith, a student at Austin Community Academy High School in Chicago, described changes in testing policy that increased with each change in principal, something that happened every year at the high school. With the low level of reading achievement at the school, this student wondered why so much time and so many resources were being spent on test preparation instead of on literacy:



"I think most of the students feel as if all we do is go to school to learn to pass this test. Please stop teaching me the strategies to pass the test. Teach me how to solve the equation. Teach me the formulas. Teach me how you came to the conclusion that this is the right answer. I can pass the test. Teach me what I need to know so that I can understand what I'm doing."

Students are receiving all sorts of messages about the required testing—except the context that would help them make sense of accountability. In Pennsylvania, the assessment officially is not used to make individual student decisions, but "the way it's being put to students is that there's a lot of consequences if they fail. The principals and administrators are telling students that their lives are basically over if they fail," said a West Philadelphia High School student. A fellow student, Mary Wells, said students considered taking the tests a bribe. "The principal and everybody else was going crazy on how to bring up test scores," she said, "so they spent millions of dollars for test classes....The first test was a writing test, and if we came to school for the first three days of testing, we would receive \$5. For the state test in March, which was for six days straight, you would receive \$30 if you took it without having to do any make-ups. Anybody receiving proficient and above would receive \$200." The money, she said, would have been better spent on up-to-date textbooks.

Several students said that because the purposes of state testing were not clear, students did not take the tests seriously. "They just mark anything," said a Los Angeles student. Others believed students did not show up for tests, or were casual about them because they considered them unfair measurements. "Some of my friends are really just amazing with what they can do with their time and the kind of activities they have been doing," said Dean Lee, a recent graduate of a Los Angeles high school, "but you look at their SAT-9 scores, and they are so opposite of what they can do and have been doing." What the state defines as proficiency in its testing, said an Ohio student, misses the mark. "What the state says constitutes proficiency really isn't the true nature of the subject for people to actually learn," he said. "It has turned into a numbers game instead of what education really is—teaching students."

Students recommended greater use of portfolios and other kinds of alternative testing; more emphasis on testing as a means of diagnosing the help students need earlier, and broader measures of school performance. Student participation in community service, for example, ought to be used as an indicator of quality, a Los Angeles student said.

The accountability provisions of NCLB were not too complicated for some students. A student attending a traditionally high-performing high school in Memphis, which failed to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals, went on a fact-finding mission. He learned that the school was put on the "needs improvement" list because it houses the district's classes for hard-of-hearing students. Abbreviated sign language, said Michael "Davis" Lawyer, does not prepare these students for writing tests. This incident led him to conclude



that the NCLB standard of total proficiency is irrational. An Austin, Texas, student feared the consequences on alternative schools, which give students more time to finish, a strategy penalized under NCLB. Ashley Avey said students attended Garza High School because “our previous high schools were not helping us achieve our common goal to graduate.” Losing this opportunity would be devastating, she said, explaining:

“For most, graduating doesn’t seem like too daunting of a task, but for those of us who are homeless, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or of transgender, a teen parent, parent-to-be, who have emotional or mental illness, who have one or more parents in prison, one or more parents deceased, who are dealing with or have parents dealing with an addiction or disease, who, for those of us for which English is not our first language, or for those of us of lower socioeconomic standing, graduating from high school seems to be impossible.

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) will ruin alternative high schools and send the students back into a four-year box. Education shouldn’t be about prioritizing schools and making money, and education shouldn’t be about political platforms.”

Students were just as aware—if not more personally so—than adult witnesses about the lack of accountability for adequate funding. At every hearing, students described what this does for their opportunity to learn. They told of overcrowded classrooms, sharing of outdated textbooks, broken computers, and the turnover of unprepared teachers. Teacher assistants taught core classes all year, because there were no regular teachers. Because of the lack of money and a priority on test preparation, honors classes had been cut, art and music eliminated. The West Philadelphia students even said cooking instruction was all from a textbook, because the ovens were never turned on.

All students—not just those in low-income communities—were well aware of the unfairness of the situation. Appearing on the student panel at Bedford Heights, Ohio, Sam Kay, a student at Beachwood High School, said: “I have a great feeling when I go to school every day that I’m going to get a lot out of it,” but he knows that his district spends twice the state average per pupil and he believes he would have “a weird feeling if my school were not so good.” On the same panel with him was Afrisha Lavine from Roswell Kent Middle School in Akron, who compared the paltry offerings in her school with a wealthier school nearby. “If they...put the same programs in the failing schools, then they would be good schools,” she said. “The failing schools are not bad, it’s just that they have a great disadvantage.”



Robert Cunningham of West Philadelphia High School summed up in one word what needs to happen to turn his school around: resources. "You can be the best basketball player in the world, but nobody would know you unless you have a court and a basketball. That's how it's been in my high school career," he said. "We've got a lot of smart students in West Philadelphia High School. It's just that they don't have a lot of resources to show that."

A recent graduate of Belmont High School in Los Angeles, Jasmin Iraheta, asked: "How can you measure students...with a test they are not prepared for because they were not given the proper supplies, time, and efficient teachers?" Across the country, Lauren Adams, a student at Hempstead High School on Long Island, echoed her remarks:

**"Stop talking about problems and do something. Talk is very cheap. The NCLB Act seems to be another solution that will help our schools, but, unfortunately, it is now underfunded in New York State by \$801 million, and a total of \$17 billion for the whole act. There is no way that students are not going to be left behind without getting proper funding."**



## What Students Said About Teacher Quality

The NCLB definition of a “highly qualified teacher,” based on certification and testing of content knowledge, set off a candid, if not blunt, response from students about what a good teacher does. They did not have confidence that this definition would ensure quality teaching.

The students expressed sympathy for teachers stressed by test-based accountability, “doing things I’m sure they don’t believe are right,” said a New York City student. They knew teachers often did not have enough supplies and appreciated teachers who dug into their own pockets to provide students with basic resources. Students at several hearings believed NCLB had increased teachers’ attention to individual students’ needs. They noticed honors teachers doing more work with low-performing students.

For the most part, however, students were anxious to talk about the difference between a teacher who was “good,” and one who was merely certified. Dismissing the former because he/she did not have the right paperwork, and keeping the latter even if that teacher could not get the material over so students understood it, was inexcusable to them. The student testimony, in fact, challenged many policies and assumptions about the role and impact of certification as an endorsement of being a qualified teacher.



Students reported extremely uneven teaching abilities within their schools. Those who had transferred from other schools, such as Chris Bliss of Hiram W. Johnson West Campus High School in Sacramento, notice “a major difference between the teaching qualities. At West Campus, the teachers seem like they’re there to care about you and your education, and they want to do more than just teach you. They want to see that you’re going to be successful, not only in school, but in life.”

Here are some other comments about the competency of teachers:

“It’s kind of like a false advertisement when we say ‘highly qualified.’ Beyond the paper trail and the credentials, highly qualified to me, and I think with a lot of other students, is the interaction....The highly qualified teachers show the zeal of wanting to teach their students and not just come in from eight to five. I think many students can testify to the fact of seeing some teachers getting there when the bell rings and leaving right behind the students when the bell rings. I think that’s very common nowadays. We don’t see that extra mile.”  
—Lamont Jones, recent graduate, Hiram W. Johnson West Campus High School, Sacramento

“I define quality teaching by how much I actually remember the next year. Last year I took Latin, American history, physics, and pre-calculus, and I don’t remember anything from pre-calculus.... You come away with a much better experience from a teacher who doesn’t necessarily teach to a test or is too locked into a certain mode that the teacher has been teaching for many years....I’m sure one of the reasons why I learned so much more in Latin is because there was no Latin Regents to take, so we learned more and it was a lot more effective.”—Paula Kinev, LaGuardia High School for Music and Art and the Performing Arts, New York City

“As I have progressed through the grades, the work has become more difficult, and the knowledge I obtained in the lower grades should have allowed me to freely learn at a steady pace....But not all of my previous teachers taught me the required curriculum for each grade level. The students may have had a lot of fun, but the question is: Did they learn anything? Fortunately for me, teachers with higher qualifications made my education a better experience. I believe a major part of the qualifications that highly qualified teachers should have are the training and the professionalism to understand that teachers need to devote quality time with their students. From past experiences, I know everyone does not learn at the same pace. It is helpful and much appreciated when teachers take extra time out of their schedule to help students in need.”  
—Coretta King, White Station High School, Memphis

“We come to school for one reason only and that’s to learn. Do we care whether our teachers are qualified (certified) or not? You could teach me what one-plus-one is, but unless you could teach me in a creative way, in a way that I can understand it, in a way that I will want to come back and learn what two-plus-two is, I do not care....My algebra teacher is an excellent teacher. He’s engaged. He’s nosy. He’s (demanding). Everyone shows up to this class on time....But I go to another class, and it’s a snooze fest. This teacher acts like a spokesman for the ‘Clear Eyes’ commercials.... Half the students in the class are sleeping....If my algebra teacher was not qualified but he’s teaching me what I need to know for me to graduate, would I care? To keep kids in school, there has to be something else. Something is not clicking in the students’ heads that says we need to come to school....You can’t sit up in front of the class and lecture to us because it will not click for most of us. It won’t happen.”—Richard Guss, Harlan Community Academy, Chicago



The students wanted teachers to have opportunities to learn how to clearly present material. They said the lack of understanding about how students learn in different ways turned students off. And, asked how NCLB funding could be better used, Meredith Carter, a student at the Mohawk Trail Regional High School in Buckland, Massachusetts, suggested that “perhaps we should look more at the classroom, like going to the actual classrooms and watching teachers, making sure that they are really good teachers instead of just certified teachers because who knows what that means?”



## What Students Said About Building a Committed Community

Good teaching, as students described it, could go a long way toward creating student buy-in to the academic demands of schools. So could adequate resources that provide all students with the tools they need, smaller classes, and extra help when needed. While some described increased parent involvement in their schools, most said their parents were not well informed about NCLB.

Because of these barriers, the consequences for failure that are part of the NCLB accountability are more likely to make building community within a school more difficult. Students described the “panic” brought on by test score pressures that are taking away opportunities for students to become more engaged in school, such as high-level teaching and content. Being labeled as “needing improvement” creates an immediate stigma. Said Carly Schlotterer of Edison High School in Milan, Ohio:

“When they are labeled failing, the first thing everybody does is freak out, as you would if you got an F on your report card. Parents go haywire, and they call the teachers, and the teachers have to explain what they are doing and stuff. I see not only the students leaving, but the parents are saying: ‘Oh, no, you are not staying in a failing school. You are getting out of here!’ And the teachers ask: ‘Well, why would I want to teach in a failing school when I can make much more money if I’m over there teaching at this passing school...!’ It just takes away from the failing school. You label it failing, and everyone runs away.”



In states like Tennessee, where public funding for schools is hard to come by, labeling schools as failures could make it more difficult to gain public support, said Michael “Davis” Lawyer of White Station High School in Memphis. “For people that already are somewhat disdainful of public education...all the negative results may make them (look down upon) the public schools more,” he said, “but others may say: ‘We need to fix this thing.’ I’d say it was a mixed effect.” Another Memphis student, however, said the see-saw effect of being on-off-on the list of failing schools made a mockery of the NCLB standards for her Northside High School community. It is so demoralizing, said Danisha Oliver, that “I feel this will make some students give up the hope of graduating from high school!”

Rather than create under-appreciation for local schools, school improvement efforts ought to make links with communities stronger, testified Roy Rodriguez of Senn High School in Chicago. “Some of my friends don’t like school because they don’t see it as a way of learning...or that’s it helping them,” he said. “I’ve been with different organizations...and they tell you if you stay in school, you can be smart. You can go out there and help your community. And I think that really helps a lot—to have a community link to your school!”

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**“In theory, NCLB is trying to provide schools with the support they need, but in practice it is not happening. Our schools need tailored solutions and committed supporters.”**

**—Cindy Rivera, former Los Angeles student, now at Georgetown University**

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Just as the national report documents NCLB’s failure to improve parent-school communications, students believed they were not being given meaningful roles or voices in their schools. They had not received information about NCLB. Their traditional student representation, such as student councils, were pro forma at best, in the opinions of those who testified.

The hopeful part of the testimony was that the students wanted to be part of the solutions, and had keen insights about how to engage their peers. Those who testified would have welcomed the opportunity to be part of discussions about fair, proper testing and the values that accountability systems should incorporate. They wanted to help define highly qualified teachers. They could help schools have stronger relationships with parents. They were passionate about their ideas and experiences because, as one student said, “education is our right.”



## Conclusion

The student voices PEN heard represented a strong chorus of concern for their schools, and the quality of their education. One of the most vital outcomes of the hearings was the testimony from students who, often quite eloquently, articulated their valid concerns about their educational experience, classroom practice, and ultimately, their right to a quality education. They were keenly aware of what was happening in their schools, and in some cases, offered pragmatic, creative solutions to the problems they identified. They know that what gets measured is what gets taught, but they also know that achievement isn't only about grades and test scores; it's about creating school communities where kids are engaged in their studies and learning thrives, where creativity is valued and encouraged, where resources are readily available, and where quality teaching contributes to the success of all.

PEN and its partners also heard vivid stories from students illustrating the disconnect that exists between efforts to close the achievement gap between high- and low-performing students, and real progress. It is now our responsibility to carry these voices to policymakers and others who can effect change. These voices should be a key component to any discussion of the law, and how it can ultimately be made to truly work for all children.



We gratefully acknowledge the testimony at the nine state hearings from the following students:

### Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

May 20, 2004

Emily Colvin, Juniata College, Huntingdon, PA

Jennifer Shafer, Juniata College, Huntingdon, PA

Mary Wells, West Philadelphia High School, Philadelphia, PA

Robert Cunningham, West Philadelphia High School, Philadelphia, PA

### Boston, Massachusetts

June 2, 2004

Jessica Almeida, Brighton High School, Brighton, MA

Meredith Carter, Mohawk Trail Regional High School, Buckland, MA

### Sacramento, CA

June 8, 2004

Anthony Wandick, Sacramento High School, Sacramento, CA; SCUSD Student Advisory Council (SAC), Remember Me member

Lamonte Jones, graduated in 2004, Hiram Johnson West Campus High School, Sacramento, CA; Student Advisory Council (SAC); board member, Black Student Union

Chris Bliss, Hiram Johnson West Campus High School, Sacramento, CA; Boys Senate; Student Advisory Council (SAC) treasurer; Youth Congress

### Los Angeles, CA

July 21, 2004

Berhane Hiwot Azage, Manual Arts High School, Los Angeles, CA

Jasmin Iraherta, graduated in 2004, Belmont High School, Los Angeles, CA

Dean Lee, graduated in 2004, Downtown Magnets High School, Los Angeles, CA

Cindy Rivera, Georgetown University, Washington, DC

### Bedford Heights, Ohio

September 14, 2004

Sam Kay, Beachwood High School, Beachwood, OH

Carly Schlotterer, sophomore, Edison High School, Milan, OH

Jamie Melka, senior, Bedford High School, Bedford, OH

Afrisha Lavine, 7th grade, Roswell Kent Middle School, Akron, OH

### San Antonio, Texas

September 28, 2004

Ashley Avey, Garza High School, Austin, TX

Brenda Macias, Palo Alto College, San Antonio, TX

José Nava, Hidalgo High School, Pharr, TX

Cristal Ponce, Eastwood Academy High School, Houston, TX

Alejandra Maggie Teran, South Texas Business Education and Technology Academy, Pharr, TX

Rocio Valdez, University of Texas, San Antonio, TX



## Memphis, Tennessee

September 30, 2004

Danisha Oliver, senior, Northside High School, Memphis, TN

Michael "Davis" Lawyer, senior, White Station High School, Memphis, TN

Coretta King, freshman, White Station High School, Memphis, TN

Bethany Copperidge, senior, Ridgeway High School, Memphis, TN (submitted written testimony)

## New York, New York

October 7, 2004

Paula Kinev, senior, LaGuardia High School of Music and Art and Performing Arts, New York, NY

Orla Thompson, junior, Boys and Girls High School, Brooklyn, NY

Lauren Adams, sophomore, Hempstead High School, Long Island, NY

## Chicago, Illinois

October 13, 2004

Richard Guss, sophomore, Harlan Community Academy, Chicago, IL

Roy Rodriguez, senior, Senn High School, Chicago, IL

Jamie Smith, junior, Austin Community Academy High School, Chicago, IL

### 'Student Voices' Editor:

Anne Lewis, education policy writer

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