



by Mary Pat Pfeil

Communication Challenges of NCLB

Leave No Parent Uninformed

Educators have heard a wide variety of euphemisms for the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, ranging from “No Child Left Untested” to expletives. But one appropriate name may well be “No Parent Left Uninformed.”

NCLB includes numerous and detailed requirements for sharing of information with parents and other community members. Along with accountability, flexibility and research-based education, parent options are among the “four pillars” of NCLB, and parental involvement and notification are key provisions of the legislation.

For educators and school board members familiar with the Title I programs first authorized under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, these requirements are not new. The parent involvement requirements of Title I, including consultation with parents regarding program planning and evaluation and Parent Compacts, are well-established components of Title I programs.

The communication challenges regarding NCLB, which is the reauthorization of ESEA, are really two-fold. First, the law attempts to ensure that key stakeholders, including school board members,

teachers, administrators, other staff members and parents are aware of the provisions of NCLB and its implications. Second, districts must comply with the numerous notification and public reporting requirements of the law.

In May 2002, a study by the national polling firm Hart-Teeter found that only 12 percent of the general public was aware of the NCLB legislation. More surprising was the fact that only 63 percent of education policymakers and only 36 percent of educators reported being aware of the new law. While that knowledge base has hopefully expanded in the past 12 months, the reality is that educational leaders still can't assume widespread understanding of the provisions of NCLB.

In communicating about NCLB generally, a number of state and national resources make it easy to provide a basic overview. The box with this story lists some helpful Web sites that include fact sheets, news updates and even PowerPoint presentations that can be easily adapted for local use.

The message about NCLB, like all good communications, needs to be targeted at the specific audiences. While all stakeholders may need to know the requirements of

the law, school board members and administrators must clearly understand the concepts of “adequate yearly progress,” the requirements for schools “in need of improvement” and the provisions regarding “highly qualified” teachers and paraprofessionals.

Teachers may be more interested in the specific provisions regarding testing and, of course, the definitions for “highly qualified” professionals.

Parents need to be aware of their rights to information and services under the new legislation.

The language used to communicate the provisions of NCLB is important. If educators speak only in terms of “requirements,” as opposed to “opportunities” or “improvement,” the message will be that the very positive aspects of the legislation, in terms of continuous improvement and accountability, are being forced upon public schools, rather than embraced. Contrast that approach with schools and districts that emphasize the role accountability and testing can play in improving instruction and targeting support, make the NCLB parental notification provisions a component of a broader parental communication plan, and use the highly qualified

Finding Out More About NCLB

The following Web sites can offer additional information and insights involving the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act.

www.dpi.state.wi.us

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction Web site includes a helpful PowerPoint presentation that can be adapted for local use, as well as copies of bulletins that provide more detailed information about specific components of the legislation.

www.nochildleftbehind.gov

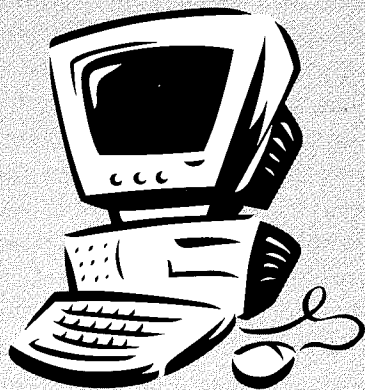
The U.S. Department of Education NCLB Web site provides fact sheets, frequently asked questions, statistics, graphs and policy statements. It also includes a toolbox for parents.

www.ecs.org

The Education Commission of the States site provides information about how each state intends to comply with NCLB.

www.nsba.org

The National School Boards Association site includes a series of resource documents about various provisions of NCLB.



- the placement of their child in a language program and why their child was identified as LEP;
- the child's academic achievement level and level of English proficiency, including how such proficiency was measured;
- the methods used in the language instructional program;
- how the language program will meet the child's instructional needs;
- how the program will help the child learn English and meet

- academic standards for promotion or graduation;
- the exit requirements for the language program; and
- an explanation of parental rights, including the parent's right to decline to enroll a child or remove a child from a language instructional program.

Parent Notifications for Schools in Need of Improvement

A district or school meets "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) under NCLB if each group of students meets or exceeds the state's annual measurable objective and the district or school meets or exceeds the state's other academic indicators. Wisconsin is looking at using attendance and graduation rates as other academic indicators. A school is designated as "in need of improvement" if it fails to meet AYP for two consecutive years. Federal sanctions increase the more years a school is found in need of improvement. While these sanctions are specific to schools receiving federal funding under Title I of NCLB, any school can appear on a state's published list of schools in need of improvement.

The federal sanctions are accompanied by explicit requirements for parent notification. When a school has been identified as in need of improvement and is required to take corrective action, parents must receive prompt information about the identification, including:

- an explanation of what the identification "school in need of improvement" means;
- information on how the school compares to other schools in the district and state;
- the reason(s) for the identification as a "school in need of improvement";

- how the school plans to address the achievement gaps; and
- information about how parents can help.

In subsequent years, if AYP is still not met, notification of the school choice and supplemental educational services options available, including transportation service guidelines and the identity and qualifications of approved supplementary services providers, must also be provided.

Parent Notifications for Schools Identified as Persistently Dangerous

Under the NCLB plan being proposed by the DPI, a school can be found to be persistently dangerous if its expulsion data, for three or more consecutive years, showed either that the school had expelled 1 percent of its pupils or had expelled five or more pupils, whichever is greater, for assault, behavior endangering self or others, or weapons related offenses.

Schools so identified must notify parents within 10 days that the school has been identified as “persistently dangerous.” The notice must explain the parent’s right to transfer a child to another school in the district, with guidelines for transportation services.

The law also includes provisions specifically directed at the victim of a violent crime. The DPI includes 15 different offenses, ranging from third degree sexual assault to homicide, in its explanation of violent crimes. The school or district is required to contact the parent of any student who is the victim of a violent crime while on school grounds or at a school-sponsored event and to inform the parent of the student’s right to transfer to another school.

In addition, parents must

receive information about a school’s violence and drug prevention efforts, as well as information on how they can be involved in such initiatives.

Parent Notification Requirements Under the Protection of Pupil Privacy Rights Amendment

The Protection of Pupil Privacy Rights Amendment (PPRA) provides guidelines related to the administration of pupil surveys and evaluations. Specifically, the amendment says that no child shall be required to participate in a survey, analysis or evaluation that reveals: political affiliation; mental and psychological problems of student or family; sexual behavior and attitudes; illegal, anti-social or demeaning behavior; critical appraisals of close family relatives; legally recognized privileged or analogous relationships, such as those with lawyers, physicians or ministers; or income. NCLB added an eighth category—religious practices, affiliations or beliefs—to the list.

PPRA requires districts to notify parents annually of their rights, including the right to inspect any survey or instructional materials used in connection with the survey. Districts must also inform parents about the approximate dates of any surveys that may be covered by the amendment and of their right to exclude their child.

Other Parent Notifications Requirements Under NCLB

The NCLB Act also includes a number of other provisions related to sharing information with parents and/or students. Among these provisions are:

- provide information to staff, families and students about the parameters of constitutionally

protected prayer and religious speech or action in schools.

- publicize the dates and timelines for implementation of testing, curriculum and instructional changes;
- notify parents of high school students that they have a right to request that their child’s name, address and phone number not be released to a military recruiter;
- provide parent information in an understandable format and, to the extent possible, in a language parents can understand;
- share with the parents of child in a Title I-funded program a written parental involvement policy, including provisions for an annual meeting and involvement of parents in the planning, review and implementation of Title I programs;
- notify parents annually about student physical examinations and screenings and of their right to exclude their children. ▀

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WSPRA provided this column. WSPRA specializes in school community relations and provides visionary leadership and service to Wisconsin schools by equipping its members with effective communication management skills. www.wspra.org