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Testimony of:

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National Title I and School Reform

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Regarding:

Funding for Independent Parent Centers

For Families of Students Served by

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act

Before:

The Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Committee on Appropriations

Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services,

Education and Related Agencies

WEDNESDAY APRIL 5, 2000, 10:00 A.M.

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RULE XI, CLAUSE 2(g)(4) Disclosure of Federal Grant/Subgrant or Contracts/Subcontract Receipt by The Center for Law and Education During Federal Fiscal Years 2000, 1999, & 1998.

Federal Grantee	Amount of Subgrant to CLE	Source: Agency	Source: Program
PACER Center Minneapolis, MN	FY 2000: \$100,000 FY 1999: \$100,000 FY 1998: \$0	ED Office of Special Education Programs	FAPE Project (Families and Advocates Partnership in Education)
The Big Picture Company, Cambridge, Massachusetts	FY 2000: \$0 FY 1999: \$0 FY 1998: \$163,771	ED Office of Vocational and Adult Education	New Urban High Schools

INTRODUCTION

Accountability is a key word in education today. Accountability comes from many sources. Top down accountability occurs, for instance, when states or school districts hold schools accountable for meeting academic progress goals. Bottom up accountability, or consumer accountability, occurs when schools and districts are held accountable directly to families and communities for educating well the students with whom they have been entrusted. Current Elementary and Secondary Education Act (“ESEA”) programs, Title I being the most significant, provide a great deal of opportunity for *top down* accountability for outcomes when federal funds are used. Importantly, H.R.2, the Student Results Act passed by the House last year, builds on and strengthens these opportunities.

Yet, as important as it is, top down accountability cannot do all, or even most, of the work of ensuring that all students get a high quality education. Such accountability takes “snapshots” of schools and districts, identifies major areas of need, and requires that all children meet standards several years down the road. But when it comes to day-to-day decisions about how and what children will learn, and getting answers about individual children whose learning cannot wait another day, much less years, families must have the capacity and the support to ensure the best for those children. Despite progress in the area of bottom up accountability, ESEA still fails to provide significant resources for key supports for families, the ultimate consumers of federal education programs, to ensure that their students receive a high quality education. In particular, only limited provisions and funding currently support state-level independent centers to assist parents in understanding and pursuing quality in ESEA programs.

Only a handful of those interviewed . . . knew their kid’s STAR [test] scores. The parents of only four or five students had actually had the scores explained to them in any detail.

* * * * *

Less than one in five parents had been consulted by their children’s teachers about any plan to assist their academic success . . .

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More telling than these summary figures are parents’ repeated descriptions of interactions with the public schools which left them feeling inadequate and hopeless and which leave a more neutral observer shocked. Parents are frequently unable to learn even the basic facts of their children’s situation, let alone access enough information to make informed decisions about their child’s education.

--From Harsh Realities, Brighter Futures: A Report and Action Plan for Alum Rock Schools, San Jose ACORN, June 17, 1999.

At present, there are fifty-eight Parental Information Resource Centers (“PIRCs”) – independent state and regional parent centers funded by federal grants. These PIRCs are to provide crucial assistance at the state or regional level to all parents on issues ranging from early childhood development to how to work with schools. Currently funded under Goals 2000 at \$30 million, the PIRCs are at grave risk in the House of not being reauthorized. It is critical for Congress not only to reauthorize these programs, but also to: (1) adequately fund them; and (2) add appropriations for grants for Local Family Information Center (LFIC) projects. LFIC

projects would focus locally on families served by ESEA programs in areas of greatest need.¹ They would greatly increase the capacity of families to ensure that federal funds result in high quality public school programs. We request a \$100,000,000 appropriation for independent parent centers: \$50,000,000 for state/regional PIRCs and \$50,000,000 for local LFICs.

THE STUDENT RESULTS ACT AND THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT APPROPRIATIONS STATUTE

In 1999, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 2, the Student Results Act, which reauthorized Title I and several other titles of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.² Title I of H.R. 2, along with last year's \$134 million school improvement appropriations statute,³ offer essential tools for effecting school reforms which reject the long tradition in American education of holding high expectations for a small percentage of students, and only minimum ones for all others. Such tools include: comprehensive school report cards with disaggregated data on key student achievement factors; strong school accountability measures which are meant to ensure that schools are held accountable for making substantial annual progress in getting all students to meet standards⁴; a right of transfer to another public school in the district for students who are in schools which have been identified as in need of improvement; provisions for reforming schools that are failing; provisions requiring that students in Title I programs be taught to high standards by highly

¹This model of state and local level support is used successfully in many instances. For example, parents of students with disabilities have access to training, information, and support at a regional/state level through Parent Training Information Centers and at a local level through Community Parent Resource Centers, which focus locally and target harder-to-reach families for assistance. Parents of students without disabilities need access to independent support too.

²The House Committee on Education and the Workforce has broken ESEA up into several different bills.

³Congress appropriated \$134 million for school improvement for FY 2000, in response to calls for accountability for Title I funds. The money must be used by local educational agencies (LEAs) to supplement funds available to carry out section 1116(c) of Title I – a large part of the top-down accountability feature in the Act – which requires that LEAs identify and provide technical assistance to schools if they fail, for two consecutive years, to make substantial annual progress in getting all students proficient in high state standards. Districts must take corrective action when schools continue to fail. Students enrolled in schools identified for improvement under 1116(c) of Title I must be given the option to transfer to another public school within the LEA, including a public charter school, so long as there is capacity to do so. According to ED, nearly 8,000 schools were identified for improvement under Title I in 1997-98. These schools must create improvement plans. Parents are supposed to be invited and included meaningfully in that process. Parents are also to be told of the option to transfer to another public school within the LEA when a school is identified for improvement. See, U.S. Department of Education, *Guidance on the \$134 Million Fiscal Year 2000 Appropriation for School Improvement*.

⁴See, e.g. Margot Rogers and Christine Stoneman, *Triggering Educational Accountability*, Center for Law and Education, 1999.

qualified professional staff and receive individualized assistance when they are struggling; and provisions for parent involvement in decisions in schools.

Thus, between Title I of H.R. 2 and the appropriations statute, there is great opportunity for enforcement of *top down* accountability for federal dollars. Yet there is a missing link. Although there are the *beginnings* of toeholds for *bottom up* accountability for these federal dollars and federal programs, more must be done to assure the kind of accountability to families that will result in real public school reform. Under these provisions, for example, parents should be able to get data on school and district performance and make important decisions about the schools their children attend, how they will become involved in improvement activities and other parent involvement activities under Title I, and, if the school is in improvement, whether and how to exercise the right of transfer. Yet without support, training, and assistance, many parents, particularly those whose children are in schools in most need, will not be able to access and use those tools effectively.

When independent local nonprofit Milwaukee Catalyst discovered that the four-year graduation rate in the Milwaukee Public schools was less than 50%, the public was shocked. MPS had been reporting annual dropout rates of around 12%, based on students enrolled in September and officially dropped from the rolls before June. Hundreds of dropouts weren't counted in this way. This kind of independent and objective view by an organization committed to improving the public schools is essential to providing the community with information they need to take action so that half of the students aren't lost.
—*Act on the Facts*, Milwaukee Catalyst, 1998.

For instance, many parents will need assistance in understanding school report cards in a way that helps them know what questions to ask, what the data really show, and what they might be able to do to assure that their children receive a high quality education. They may need training on how to work with the schools to improve the Title I plans and ensure that all students are well-served by highly qualified staff. Parents often need outside help to get the information, support, and training to build capacity to collaborate with schools and to press for significant improvement in the learning environment for their children. Particularly where schools have been or should be identified for improvement, it is often hard for parents to get all of the information and capacity-building they need from the schools or districts themselves.

INDEPENDENT PARENT CENTERS – BOTTOM-UP ACCOUNTABILITY FOR FEDERAL FUNDS

Compelling evidence shows that when parents are meaningfully involved, results include higher student achievement, better attendance, and greater student interest in post-secondary education.⁵ Children do better in school and stay in school longer. This holds true not only in elementary school, but also in middle and high schools, when sorting and selection processes intensify and parents need to keep careful watch over student placement.⁶ Parent involvement

⁵*Urgent Message: Families Crucial to School Reform ("Urgent Message")*, Anne C. Lewis and Anne T. Henderson, Center for Law and Education, 1997.

⁶*The Family is Critical to Student Achievement*, Anne T. Henderson and Nancy Berla, National Committee for Citizens in Education & Center for Law and Education, 1994 (first printing), pp. 14-15.

also leads to better schools.

Parents play four basic roles in education: (1) **as teachers**: parents promote learning at home, reinforce what is taught at school, and develop values and life skills; (2) **as supporters**: parents contribute their knowledge and skills to the school, enriching the curriculum, and providing extra services and support to students; (3) **as advocates**: parents help children negotiate the system and receive fair treatment, and work to make the system more responsive to all families; and (4) **as decision-makers**: parents serve on advisory councils, curriculum committees, Title I planning teams, etc., and participate in joint problem-solving at every level.⁷

Barriers preventing parental involvement in *all four* ways range from lack of staff time, to a singular focus on “passive” types of parent involvement, and from class, language and cultural differences, to a lack of urgency to give parents full information in order to make critical decisions about their children’s education.⁸ Alone, schools often prove incapable of overcoming these barriers. As the Goals 2000 Report card points out, parent involvement of the type envisioned by Title I, in terms of parents helping to ensure accountability for quality programs, remains a distant goal for many Title I schools in most states.

For instance, at least 1% of Title I funds must be used to involve parents meaningfully in understanding standards, developing Title I school plans, learning how to assist students to achieve high levels of performance, etc. Yet frequent visitors to schools

will tell you, as education writer Anne Lewis told us, that while many have school-based parent centers and parent liaisons, “it’s the same parents, and rarely do you see parent centers teach parents what standards are, how to write parent involvement policies, or how to review and provide input on Title I school improvement plans. Schools perceive that type of parent involvement as crossing some line . . . Low performing schools especially don’t have the incentives to provide the most important information on school reform to parents. It’s really

In 1998, Chicago Local School Council Members were asked whether it was important to receive training from outside of the school district, such as from local independent non-profits. They answered “yes” overwhelmingly. Reasons included:

- ✓ *Outside training is more detailed and sensitive.*
- ✓ *The Chicago Public Schools will only give you information they want you to know.*
- ✓ *The trainers sent from the public schools two years ago did not do anywhere near the in-depth job that independent groups do.*
- ✓ *You cannot be part of something and a good judge at the same time! You are not objective when you have to say certain things!*
- ✓ *Need objective/non-biased dialogue.*

Fall 1998 Survey, Parents United for Responsible

⁷*Id.* at 15.

⁸E.g., whether or not students are taught to high standards by highly qualified teachers, how to read a school performance report card and understand things like the impact on assessment scores and equity issues when large numbers of students are left out of the assessments, the relevancy of disaggregated data, accountability systems, and what it all means for their child and their child’s school.

important for parents to have an independent parent center where they can get the information and support they need.”⁹

It is thus essential for families to have independent sources of information and support that they understand and trust so that they can participate in an informed and effective manner and help ensure the efficacy of federal funds in creating high quality public schools. It is critical to have independent, nonprofit parent centers – places where parents can go for support, information, and training on what Title I schools ought to be providing their children, how to work with schools, and how to understand standards and improve the educational program. Based on experiences of the limited number of nonprofit parent centers that exist now, including the state- and regional-level PIRCs, outside parent centers can reach these families because:

- They are not formally connected to the schools and are seen as unbiased. Families believe they will listen to their concerns objectively. Such centers mediate effectively.
- They go outside of the schools to reach families. Many families feel alienated from the schools due to their own experiences as students or their children’s experiences. Independent centers which go to neighborhood community centers, homeless shelters, low-income housing sites, Head Start, etc. reach many more families.
- Independent parent centers often are more successful in presenting information in a culturally sensitive way and in parent-friendly terms.
- Staff from independent parent centers can objectively evaluate schools as to their family friendliness. They can help parents present their perspectives.
- They can explain school options, education policies, and reforms without fear or reprisal.
- Many effectively reach out to immigrant parents, teaching them how to be involved.

RECOMMENDATION

Parental Information Resource Centers, which are currently funded at \$30 million under Goals 2000, are underfunded and have not, as of yet, been reauthorized in the House. They are to provide state and region-wide assistance to all parents to help them understand a wide array of standards-based reform issues, and also to provide early childhood developmental parenting assistance and training. Some provide, for instance, training in the parents as teachers model, on how to work with schools effectively and on state education policies and standards. It is extremely important that they be reauthorized and funded appropriately.

Local Family Information Centers would work with the PIRCs, but these projects would focus on areas of concentrated need and on families served by ESEA programs, particularly Title I. Local Family Information Center projects would serve a more focused group of parents in areas where there are large concentrations of Title I schools, schools in need of improvement, and/or limited English proficient families. Because of local focus, these programs would be expected to work intensely with hard-to-reach families to help them effectively participate in their children’s education, to help them understand how standards-based-reform can help their children, how school accountability works, and how they can ensure that federal funds are used

⁹Anne C. Lewis, *Why Congress Should Support Independent Parent Centers*, 1999.

to provide quality programs.

For independent parent centers, we therefore respectfully request that the House Appropriations Committee appropriate \$100,000,000, half of which (\$50,000,000) would be used for state and region-wide Parental Information Resource Centers projects, and the other half for localized projects, or Local Family Information Centers.