

MOVEON.ORG'S FOCUS ON PAIGE FIRING, NCLB FUNDING LEVEL MISSES THE REAL PROBLEMS CAUSING SCHOOL REFORM WOES

NEWTON, MA.///March 11, 2004///The following statement was issued today by Pam Solo, president of the Civil Society Institute:

"MoveOn.org misses the heart of the real debate about 'No Child Left Behind' (NCLB) when it calls for the resignation of Education Secretary Rod Paige and laments the lack of sufficient funding for NCLB. Mr. Paige's comments equating teachers with terrorists were unwise and insensitive, but they are distracting too many people from focusing on the real problem with NCLB: It measures failure, and does not promote success. If fully implemented, NCLB will dismantle our public education system. NCLB is not solving the problems it was designed to address.

It is providential that NCLB has not been fully funded. We are better off as a nation for not fully institutionalizing and further entrenching the ill effects of a failed approach to school reform.

NCLB is predicated on an over-reliance on high-stakes testing designed to do nothing more than meet federal mandates in the name of standards and accountability. These same federal mandates are leading schools to narrow their curriculum so that teachers are relegated to providing 'test prep' services in order to demonstrate progress on standardized tests.

All agree that higher standards and increased accountability for schools are important and worthy goals. But NCLB accomplishes neither as it fuels the minority high school drop out/'push out' crisis. In part, NCLB was intended to narrow the racial achievement gap in our classrooms. However, a new Civil Rights Project at Harvard/Urban Institute study shows that the reverse is happening: High-stakes testing under NCLB is causing more minority students to leave or be shoved out of school earlier, condemning these undereducated individuals to lives of poverty and despair.

And it is a mistake to view the growing rebellion across the U.S. of lawmakers and parents as just a 'money thing.' Funded or unfunded, parents don't like what their kids are experiencing under NCLB. State lawmakers don't like having their authority and discretion abridged by a completely rigid, cookie-cutter approach to federalized education. Believing that NCLB is a cumbersome federal intrusion on local schools, no fewer than 12 state legislatures have called on Congress to amend or repeal NCLB, or exempt their schools from the policy.

Parents like the idea of no child being left behind, but that does not translate into blind support for NCLB in practice. A February 2004 survey by Results for America of parents with school age children found that a third of all parents (34 percent) who have heard of NCLB see the school reforms as 'punishing schools for failure instead of rewarding them for success,' a quarter view it as 'limiting learning by students' (25 percent), while fewer than half (46 percent) associate NCLB with 'improving learning.'

If MoveOn.org and other like-minded organizations and individuals were serious about education reform, they would not be distracted by the sideshow of election-year posturing. They would address the tough questions about how to return learning to education, promote high standards and ensure that every child receives the education he or she deserves.

Rather than calling for more scarce federal resources for a deeply flawed educational policy, we should be figuring out how to pay for school reform that will work. 'No Child the Same' would be a good guiding principle for positive reform.

Improving our educational system will require a commitment of the national treasury. We can invest our resources in proven approaches to genuine reform that promotes learning and excellence in education: smaller schools, reduced class sizes, early learning, after-school programs, service learning, multiple tools for measuring progress, encouraging teacher quality and creativity and engaging America's parents as full partners in the learning process."

On February 11, 2004, the Civil Society Institute's Results for America (<http://www.ResultsForAmerica.org>) released the findings of the first national opinion survey probing the attitudes of parents about the controversial "No Child Left Behind" school reforms.

ABOUT RESULTS FOR AMERICA

Results for America is a project of the nonprofit Civil Society Institute, which is based in Newton, Massachusetts. The mission of the Institute is to serve as a catalyst for change by creating problem-solving interactions among people, and between communities, government and business, that can help to improve society. Visit Civil Society Institute on the Web at <http://www.civilsocietyinstitute.org>.

RFA seeks to shape and tap the tremendous amount of community-level knowledge, experience and innovative action that could solve America's problems in four key areas:

* Great Kids, Great Schools, Great Communities. Results for America supports investing in public schools, making sure parents have more of a say in their schools and creating conditions that will lead to learning and success for every child.

* Healthy Families, Healthy Economy, Healthy America. Results for America supports affordable health care and prescription drugs. It also supports a commitment to biomedical technologies and breakthrough treatments and cures for life-threatening illnesses that affect millions of us.

* Clean Air, Clean Energy, Bright Future. Results for America supports reducing our debilitating dependence on oil and fossil fuels and making sensible investments in alternative energy sources.

* Rational Foreign Policy, A Safer World. Results for America supports a rational foreign policy that works in concert with global organizations not in opposition to them. It also supports restoring America to its place in the world community as a nation respected and admired rather than mistrusted and feared.

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