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No Child Left Behind Beginning to Have Major Impact in School Districts; Officials Hope to Meet Goals But Are Concerned About Annual Progress, Funding

First-Ever Analysis of District Implementation Efforts Reveals Mix of Optimism And Apprehension Among School Officials in 15 Districts; Highlights Progress & Challenges

WASHINGTON – October 8, 2003 – The No Child Left Behind Act has had its strongest impact on school districts that have already been deeply involved in various stages of state and local improvement efforts, according to a new study providing the first look at district implementation of the federal education law. But this fall the law is already having a much more significant impact, particularly in causing the districts studied to focus more intensely on ensuring that students from each subgroup – including special education students and English language learners – achieve state targets for adequate yearly progress.

According to the study's preliminary findings, released this week by the Center on Education Policy (CEP), most school officials in the study districts are supportive of the law and its goals to raise achievement for all students and to boost teacher quality, and many are hopeful of their ability to meet these requirements, having already invested considerable effort in state and local reform initiatives. Some school leaders, however, are concerned that the objective of reaching proficiency for all students by 2014 may be unrealistic and are unsure how they will achieve the goal. In addition, some worry about the impact of state budget cuts on their efforts to carry out the law's demands.

The report includes case studies of implementation efforts of 15 diverse districts conducted as part of CEP's multiyear effort to track the impact of the federal education law. The case studies are drawn from a total of 30 that will be included in a larger report to be released in January 2004. The report will also include a survey of implementation efforts in more than 300 districts nationwide, surveys of all 50 state governments, and interviews on Capitol Hill and with Bush Administration officials. The study will be the most comprehensive review of the Act by an independent organization.

"Districts are just beginning to feel the full weight of the law this year, and contrary to popular belief, many are optimistic about their efforts to meet its requirements," says Jack Jennings, director of CEP. "But there is some uncertainty about how they will meet targets for annual progress. There is also a large variance among the school districts studied, with large urban districts expressing much greater concern about the Act's requirements than other districts."

Many districts are currently receiving their first look at disaggregated achievement data now required by the federal law, and while officials in the districts analyzed agree that schools should be held accountable for the performance of all student subgroups, many are concerned about performance requirements for key groups including special education students and English language learners, according to the report. While more than half of the districts studied had no schools identified for improvement in 2002-03, that may change if schools fail to meet state targets for adequate yearly progress. Several districts with generally high achievement recognized they could fall short due to the inadequate achievement of one or more subgroups.

No Child Left Behind builds on previous federal efforts to identify and provide assistance to low-performing schools – a practice that seems to have made a difference in some of the districts studied. Kodiak Island Borough, Alaska, and Bayonne, N.J., for example, saw previously-identified low-performing schools make sufficient gains to exit improvement status in 2003. In addition to these districts, the study also includes Calhoun County, Ala.; Fayetteville, Ark.; Grant Joint Union, Calif.; Fort Lupton Weld Re-8, Colo.; Collier County, Fla.; Chicago, Illinois; Kansas City, Kan.; Avon, Mass.; Cloquet Independent School District #94, Minn.; Hermitage, Mo.; Cleveland Municipal, Ohio; Cuero Independent School District, Texas; and Sheboygan, Wis.

“If the experience of these districts is any indication, we cannot rush to judgment on No Child Left Behind,” says Jennings. “The optimism expressed by many school officials and the concern expressed by others is a clear sign that this effort may work out very differently in various school districts, and we’ll learn much more this year will as the law begins to reach its full impact.”

Mixed Progress on Teacher Quality, School Choice

Many of the districts studied report that all or nearly all of their teachers are highly qualified according to the law’s definition, though some noted difficulties with some middle, high school, and special education teachers who are required to demonstrate subject-matter expertise in all subjects they teach, either by having at least a bachelor’s degree in the subject, or by passing a state test or evaluation. Because of the additional requirements of educators in these areas, the positions could become harder to fill, especially in rural, low-income, and other districts that tend to have higher rates of teacher turnover.

In general, professional development is a high priority for many districts, not only because the law requires it but also because districts see teacher training as an essential element of education reform, according to the report. Several districts, including Fayetteville, Ark., focus professional development on helping teachers make better use of student assessment data to diagnose and address students’ individual needs.

Many of the case study districts are struggling with requirements to provide school choice and supplemental services, however. In Bayonne, N.J., for example, just 50 out of 2,200 eligible students changed schools in 2002-3, with school officials reporting many parents were reluctant to send their children too far from home or didn’t have time to make decisions on transferring. In some districts, such as Fort Lupton, Colo., there are very few or no potential receiving schools in the area.

Districts have also had trouble implementing supplemental services and tutoring. In Chicago, for example, 1,100 of 18,000 eligible students registered for services in 2002-3, though limited numbers of approved providers and the late starts of some programs have played a part in low participation, according to the report.

Implementing The No Child Left Behind Act, along with all 15 case studies and additional information on CEP and its work, is available on the web at www.cep-dc.org.

Based in Washington, D.C. and founded in January 1995, the Center on Education Policy is a national, independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. The Center does not represent any special interests. Instead the Center helps citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.

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