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Colorado schools: Are we succeeding or failing?

By Jennifer Sharp-Silverstein and Andy Hartman

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President Bush touted his No Child Left Behind Act in his State of the Union address, telling members of Congress they had "made the expectation of literacy the law of our country" and that we were "making progress toward excellence for every child in America." So how are our children and schools faring here in Colorado?

Take Boulder's Fairview High School, for example. This fall, the Colorado Department of Education shared some discouraging news with the school's administrators: Fairview had been deemed "in need of improvement" by the federal government, judging by NCLB standards. But the school already had been recognized by Colorado Gov. Bill Owens as an "excellent" performing school. Understandably, teachers, students and parents were perplexed.

How can a school be both successful and in need of improvement at the same time? Because in Colorado, we have conflicting standards. Starting this academic year, school performance is rated according to standards set forth in state Senate Bill 186, which was passed by the state legislature in 2000, and according to NCLB standards, signed into law by President Bush in 2002.

This obviously creates a quandary for Fairview and other schools across the state. Which set of standards is correct? And in a state with lots of educational choice, what information should parents rely on?

It is clear that Colorado needs a single educational accountability system that best reflects what we want for our kids. Although NCLB isn't perfect, we believe that most Coloradans agree with President Bush that we must strive to improve the academic performance of all our kids. Therefore, it makes sense for the state to make significant changes to SB 186 and move toward the more rigorous standards and principles in NCLB.

The good news is that the federal and state laws have some basic similarities. They both:

- 1) hold schools and districts accountable for student performance;
- 2) use Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) scores as a measure of student performance;
- 3) set consequences — such as conversion to a charter school — when student performance does not adequately improve; and
- 4) require that parents be informed of school performance, either through School Accountability Reports, per our state law, or some other form of report card, as required by NCLB.

The problem is that there are two important differences between these accountability systems that can result in dramatically different appraisals of how well we are educating our kids:

NCLB requires schools and school districts to improve student performance for all students. But the state law judges schools based on their scores averaged across all kids, allowing some groups of low-performing students to remain hidden behind their better performing peers. NCLB sends the clear message that this is no longer acceptable. Schools must demonstrate that all students — those with



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disabilities, from low-income families, minorities, and with limited English proficiency — are making progress. If students in any one of these categories fail to make adequate progress (as defined in NCLB) toward proficiency on the CSAPs, then the feds will classify the entire school as "in need of improvement."

SB 186 sets a static standard for judging school-level performance, one that is based on how well schools perform relative to each other (like "grading on the curve"). For example, the cut-off for unsatisfactory schools—the lowest performing category under state law—was defined as the average CSAP scores for the lowest performing 2 percent of schools in 1999. These standards have not changed since then. This means that only 2 percent of all schools start out in the unsatisfactory category each year, and as long as they raise their test scores one point above the standard, there are no consequences. Under NCLB, the standard is absolute—not relative—and continuous improvement is required. As its title implies, NCLB requires schools to make steady progress in moving all students (in all sub-groups) toward the goal of 100 percent proficiency by 2014. So, every couple of years the bar gets higher and schools must ratchet up their performance.

A statewide system that conforms to the details of the NCLB law would not be perfect — the federal law, for example, needs to be improved so that it works better in the "real world" of our communities. But the basic tenet of holding schools accountable for every child's performance is important. So, while adopting the NCLB framework as the basis for our single educational accountability system, we must work with our federal representatives to make changes that will make it a better tool for improving schools.

For one thing, educators must view it as fair. Rep. Keith King (R-Colorado Springs) has proposed an accountability system that requires continuous progress toward the goal of proficiency much like NCLB, but allows schools time to move low-performing students up to grade-level proficiency. This kind of fine tuning is already under discussion in the U.S. Congress, and Colorado can and should be a strong voice in the debate.

And, if we are truly serious about every student reaching proficiency, then the federal, state and local governments must provide adequate funding. Carefully targeted resources used to implement effective strategies will lead to more students meeting these high standards. President Bush must ask for, and the Congress must provide, full funding for the federal programs in NCLB. Last year, they did not do their part.

And here in Colorado, we can't talk about weakening Amendment 23, which protects state education spending. Simply telling schools to improve what they are doing without giving them the support to do so is like asking the military to wage a war without giving it the budget, people power, and equipment to win.

Colorado has prided itself on being a leader in the areas of educational accountability and improvement under both a Democratic and Republican governor. It is time to take another step forward if we are to stay on the frontlines of this critical effort. Colorado needs a single educational accountability system that serves all of its children, families, and schools. President Bush and other leaders have called on us to get rid of the double standards and the "soft bigotry of low expectations." He has laid out a challenge with the No Child Left Behind Act. We should embrace these principles and make them work for all our kids.

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