

**“NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND”
APPLYING TESTS OF COMMON SENSE**

"I love those who can smile in trouble, who can gather strength from distress, and grow brave by reflection. 'Tis the business of little minds to shrink, but they whose heart is firm, and whose conscience approves their conduct, will pursue their principles unto death."

Thomas Paine 1737-1809, Political Theorist and Writer; Author of Common Sense

**CRITICAL STRATEGIC ISSUES AND A
RECOMMENDATION**

OFFERED BY

**THE WESTERN STATES BENCHMARKING
CONSORTIUM**

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MARCH 15, 2004

Introduction

Thomas Paine's treatise, Common Sense, provided a major stimulus to the American Revolution. Readers of Paine's work know that his view of "common sense" called for informed judgment—not simplistic easy solutions. Another American author, H.L. Mencken, observed, "For every complex problem, there is a simple, neat solution.....and it's *wrong!*" Leaders in the complex human enterprise of public education admire both Paine's and Mencken's guidance about common sense! The Western States Benchmarking Consortium now calls for applying a strong dose of common sense to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) legislation and regulations, also known as "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB).

For more than a decade, the member districts of the Western States Benchmarking Consortium have made significant progress in transforming our school systems to create truly personalized, proficiency-driven opportunities for each student and to close the achievement gap. We have confronted the tremendously complex challenges to shift our policies, capacities and practices from "one size fits all" to "each child a successful, proficient learner." We've struggled daily to build and change our human and organizational capacities to deliver on this new promise. We've built explicit, research-based Consortium Benchmarks to help push our systems toward high standards of performance in critical areas. We've gathered rich, relevant and real time data to guide and measure our progress in transforming our organizations.

Although these endeavors have occurred during an era of significant decline in inflation-adjusted resources applied to public education, we have not and will not give up on the promise of customized learning for each child and youth. Our country's future depends on our ability to help all students reach their full potential by nurturing the aptitudes, talents and interests of every learner. It is our calling; it is our deep moral purpose! And, by all measures, our districts have made progress in our journey. But we maintain a nagging dissatisfaction with where we are, and therefore seek pervasive and continuous growth—to move from "good" to "great."

To achieve this progress, we strive to:

- *Close the achievement gaps that still plague schools and communities across the country.*
- *Launch a healthy and vigorous dialogue* about the need to improve uses of data to guide continuous improvement in classroom instruction and systems' strategies

- *Create a laser-like focus to improve literacy* of every student, while recognizing and responding to public expectations that we equip each

- student with the necessary broader knowledge and skills to succeed as an adult
- *Create much greater alignment* among our learning standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment
- *Strengthen community and staff focus on customized learning*—not just “schooling”

In this constant effort, we have learned much about the three essential systemic strategies to truly focus on proficiency:

- *Growth oriented, data-rich accountability systems that celebrate and reward progress*
- *Major investments to build new organizational and human capacity to personalize learning.*
- *Purposeful, deep and continuing engagement of our local communities in the journey*

Unfortunately, the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act and regulations dangerously ignore research findings about all three strategies. They demand simplistic and unrealistic “solutions” to solve the very complex problems of “leaving no child behind.” On one hand, they go too far in surpassing the historic role of the federal government in public education. On the other hand, they do not go far enough, offering precious little in support for building the capacity of students, families, schools and learning communities. Unless changed, they will *divert* rather than accelerate our efforts to promote individual student success.

We do not call for ESEA’s elimination. However, the only way to sustain its positive national goal and focus is to learn from its implementation, and to make mid-course corrections along the way. Any effective organization would do the same. What follows is a proposal to make the necessary changes to sustain the national goal of universal proficiency.

Purposes of this Paper

The purposes of this paper are therefore to:

- Offer a strategic focus for a vigorous and honest national dialogue about ESEA and the necessary changes in the law that will support efforts to maximize learning growth for each child
- Stimulate a spirit of collaboration among federal and state officials and local communities and educators working “in the trenches” to learn from ESEA’s implementation, and to make strategic changes that improve our ability to sustain the positive features of ESEA

The Western States Benchmarking Consortium's progress Benchmarks have received national attention. They were built from a thorough examination of research and best practice in: Student Learning; Capacity Development; Community Connections and Data-Driven Decisions. This work has changed educators' and communities' historic view of "common sense" from *perceptions* about effective practice—to what *research* suggests about effective practice. So our "*test of common sense*" used throughout this document is buttressed by more than 20 years of high quality research and field experience in learning development and organizational improvement.

Applying our test of "common sense," ESEA's current accountability strategy a) ignores relevant research on learning and organizational change, and b) punishes rather than rewards continuous growth. ESEA's assumption that all children can achieve proficiency in the same fixed time frame violates everything we know about learning—or human performance in any endeavor!

A preponderance of evidence shows that all children can reach challenging academic goals, but not on the "same day in the same way." Successful school systems that narrow the achievement gap adopt a "continuous improvement" model. Such a model charts and guides individual student growth over time, requiring and using data systems which provide "rich, ready and real-time" information to students, teachers, parents and administrators. Successful school systems also recognize that promoting and rewarding steady growth requires them to challenge the assumption that all students can achieve the same standards within the same time frame.

We also know that most standardized tests today offer minimal help in providing teachers with immediate and meaningful data. Such test results are used primarily for *reporting* progress on groups of students. Meeting the public's "right to know" is certainly a valid purpose. But ESEA's singular focus on "snapshot" test reporting is like trying to fatten cattle by weighing them more often.

Equally problematic are ESEA's simplistic accountability provisions that focus on using test data to report progress only among *groups* of students—not individual students. The Act's requirements also ignore the need to measure and monitor the *same students (cohorts)* over time. This serious flaw in ESEA's accountability system is equivalent to a business measuring the performance of current employees by examining the performance of past ones! "Adequate Yearly Progress" cannot be correctly determined without such cohort analyses.

Our recommendations to improve ESEA are detailed below..

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The Recommendation: Change the Accountability Model

At its core, ESEA's accountability strategy must be changed to create a much more appropriate and workable strategic approach to accountability, one that:

- Preserves “Adequate Yearly Progress” as a core concept in the ESEA accountability structure, but significantly changes the current provisions to be consistent with and supportive of a continuous improvement strategy versus the current unproductive and simplistic “test snapshots” provisions.
- Requires cohort analyses and reporting as the core component of the ESEA accountability system
- Focuses the highest priority of accountability on measuring continuous growth to facilitate personalized instruction—assessing learner needs, diagnosing, prescribing, intervening, verifying progress, certifying progress and re-assessing in a continuous cycle
- Provides support to improve teacher skills in ongoing uses of data for personalized instruction—while still meeting the public’s right to know through public reporting of progress
- Uses multiple measures of student achievement to determine growth in more valid ways
- Supports, rather than punishes, struggling schools. We cannot afford to “give up” on our public schools that need the most help through unproven methods such as vouchers. This violates our commitment to public schools as America’s best hope for our democratic and economic future
- Rewards, rather than punishes, schools demonstrating continuous growth in cohort data
- Expands opportunities and resources to identify evidence-based best practices in improving learning for each student, and uses this information to provide helpful peer support to struggling schools

Acting Soon to Keep ESEA’s Worthy Goal

Now is the time for us to engage in an ambitious broad national dialogue about ESEA’s provisions, apply tests of common sense, and make legislative changes that truly will ensure that we meet each student’s learning needs. Without such dialogue and action for change, we will get, at best, an attitude of minimal compliance because of serious strategic flaws in the existing Act, regulations and implementation. For example, common sense would suggest that it is unfair, unreasonable, and unethical to place a test before a handicapped student who receives limited content coverage appropriate to his or her individual Education Plan (IEP) which may not address some or all of the content of standardized achievement tests. Yet, ESEA requirements fly in the face of such common sense and standards of ethics and fairness.

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The tone and tenor of the current national dialogue about ESEA also needs serious and immediate change. We observe an authoritarian, negative counterproductive tone in some federal officials’ responses to suggestions for changes in ESEA. It is time to de-politicize and end this adversarial tone, and cooperate in the best interests of our students, families and communities! As a nation, we should be facing the challenges of

the 21st century *together*. Now is *not* the time for shouting and name-calling. Labeling educators who suggest changes in ESEA as obstructionists prevents civil discourse and collaborative problem solving efforts.

The Western States Benchmarking Consortium offers its commitment to reverse this politically-charged and hostile trend. If we do not improve ESEA's primary strategies, we all surely will experience unintended negative consequences. More children *will* be left behind, and more students will drop out of school ill-prepared to be successful in our highly competitive, global economy. Unless we act quickly to make changes in ESEA, the Act likely will collapse for lack of public support as communities come to understand its lack of common sense, and the impossibility of achieving universal learning growth and proficiency without setting reasonable expectations and ensuring adequate resources. In this event, we will lose ESEA's positive national focus on success for each student

In closing, we strongly recommend a vigorous and open national dialogue among federal and state policy makers and local communities, school boards, administrators, teachers, parents and students about the specific shape of the necessary strategic change in ESEA's accountability model. Such a dialogue is long overdue because communities and professionals at the local level were seriously ignored when the Act was crafted! Further, they were not involved in the developing the new, non-regulatory guidelines for special education and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students! Without a productive and inclusive dialogue, we fear for the future sustainability of ESEA's positive features. If the Act is not changed soon to be aligned with tests of research-guided common sense, the national perspective will shift to *mere minimal compliance* instead of fostering strong national, state and local commitment to eliminate the achievement gap and to help each child realize optimal learning growth.

The national dialogue also should engage participants in serious efforts to clarify what is really needed to achieve our mutual common goal of universal proficiency—*not just in literacy but in the broader set of knowledge and skills necessary for success in the 21st century*. Inherent in this conversation will be the need to address the significant, but as yet little-discussed, changes in the federal/state/local relationship wrought by ESEA.

A significant portion of this dialogue should be devoted to developing the commitment to the *true costs of transforming a public education system* to move from "equal access" to the new goal of "universal proficiency." The need for extended learning opportunities to help struggling students, for example, demands substantial resources. The alarming mis-alignment between ESEA's authorization and current and projected appropriations must be addressed, as should other relevant financial support for investments that pay off in learning growth such as early childhood education and nutrition. Adequate funds

for valid and reliable measurement systems that support personalized learning and continuous progress also will be imperative.

Federal officials and policy makers can and should work with the rest of us in meaningful ways to generate a positive, publicly-supported vision and commitment for the future that:

- Places the highest priority on personalizing the learning process for each student
- Provides schools and school districts with the data systems and technology tools that will enable personalized learning
- Creates a meaningful accountability system for public education that values, supports and rewards continuous growth for students, schools and districts
- Supports a concept of “lateral” accountability by building the capacity of school systems’ to perform as true *learning communities*—holding one another accountable for developing universal proficiency among our students. No form of “top down” accountability will accomplish what local communities and educators, working together, can do to transform their school systems and thereby ensure optimal learning growth for each student!
- Recognizes and rewards progress over time, and provides meaningful support to those who are struggling with progress.
- Demonstrates that all students can learn and succeed---but not on the same day in the same way.
- Commits the necessary resources to achieve universal proficiency.

Let us work together to achieve these ends. The students of today and tomorrow deserve no less. The future of our country rests in their hands.

The next page shows how everyone can help.

LEADERSHIP GROUP	ROLE IN SHAPING THE CHANGE
PARENTS	Solicit help from your school systems in understanding ESEA and its limitations. Support transformation efforts at the local level. Communicate with key policy makers about the need for changes in ESEA. Participate in the national dialogue through your local school district.
LOCAL AND STATE BOARDS AND OTHER POLICY MAKERS, ADMINISTRATORS AND TEACHERS	Initiate and participate in vigorous, well-informed state and local dialogue that builds understanding and commitment to universal proficiency, and a continuous growth model of accountability. Provide specific impact data and experience about ESEA implementation to policy makers
US CONGRESS AND OTHER FEDERAL OFFICIALS	Engage in an open dialogue. Seriously examine research and data on the impact of ESEA and change the accountability requirements to a continuous growth model. Seek and act on data about the true costs of re-engineering public education to move from “equal access” to “universal proficiency”