



Richmond Schools Make Progress

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WASHINGTON This fall, Congress will begin in earnest to reauthorize No Child Left Behind -- a signal piece of federal legislation aimed at improving the quality of our nation's public schools, particularly those in our urban areas.

The act represents a formal acknowledgment that too many children in our nation are failing to acquire the kind of education that will enable them to reach their full potential, a tragedy not just for these children, but also for the nation as a whole. And we know who these children are who have been "left behind." Predominantly, they are African-American, they are poor, they grow up in households in which little or no English is spoken, they have special needs -- and they live mainly in our inner cities.

No Child Left Behind went beyond just acknowledging the existence of children who have been locked out of the opportunity to get a first-rate education. It also embodied a commitment to redress the educational disparities in this nation. In particular, it mandated that states put in place assessment and accountability measures designed to close the achievement gaps between different groups of students.

Under the law, all students must be tested in reading and math in grades three and eight and one grade in high school, and all schools must show that their students have made adequate yearly progress (AYP) on these tests -- or face various levels of sanctions. What's more, the public has the data to tell us how students and schools are doing.

WITH THE beginning of the new school year and Congress debating the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind, it is appropriate to reflect on some of the changes in public education that have occurred since the law was enacted. For me, the most hopeful change has been the academic strides made in many of our urban school systems, and the recognition of places where the improvements have been particularly strong. Richmond is one.

The numbers chart the progress. In 2003, only 23 percent of Richmond's public schools made AYP under No Child Left Behind; by 2006, that proportion had jumped to 80 percent. In 2002, only 20 percent of Richmond's public schools met the state accreditation standard, a previously established measure of school performance; by 2006, that proportion had jumped to 88 percent.

Such progress in Richmond did not just "happen." It took a lot of hard work and commitment on the part of many people, as the school system implemented a series of clearly defined strategies to improve student academic achievement. The school district's first strategy was to change the culture from one of having low expectations for students to one of having high expectations. Other strategies dealt less with changing attitudes than with changing processes and procedures. For example, the district moved to develop a districtwide curriculum and to align that curriculum with state academic standards and assessments; to link professional development for teachers with districtwide reforms; and to institute a system to closely monitor the efforts of the lowest-performing students and schools.

THE DOCUMENTED results of these strategies have brought national attention to Richmond Public Schools, once considered one of the weakest school districts in the state. A report by the Council of the Great City Schools, which represents the nation's 66 largest urban school systems, indicates that the Richmond school district is moving faster in improving student achievement than most urban school districts nationwide.

It would be simplistic to say that No Child Left Behind was solely responsible for this improvement. It would not be simplistic to say that the Richmond public school system, despite the progress it still needs to make, is providing a model of how to strive to make the promise of the law a reality. And it has done this by focusing on good instruction, strong accountability, and clear direction.

A high proportion of Richmond students have experienced disadvantages in their lives, as is the case for so many students in urban school districts nationwide. Nevertheless, many Richmond students have defied the odds: They have made measurable academic gains and they have done so in a relatively short time. That is good for them, of course, but it is also good for all of us.

Michael Casserly is the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, a coalition of the nation's largest urban public school systems, including Richmond's.