

I wanted to give you a brief report on my meeting with Congressman Howard "Buck" McKeon on March 28th, 2008. It was scheduled to last about 45 minutes and actually stretched to an hour and a half. In general I found it very enlightening, and I think that feeling went both ways. I learned a lot!

The meeting started with general pleasantries and introductions; this moved to an overview of the general state of education in America. I believe we were each just trying to get a grasp on where we were coming from. Dr. David Vierra was in the meeting as well.

Mr. McKeon started our discussion with an overview of the general intent of No Child Left Behind, and how it has strayed from where it was supposed to go. He explained that it was originally set up as a three-step test process (three times during a child's career as a student) to ensure that each child met certain minimum reading and math standards prior to being awarded a high school diploma. Modifications in committee have bloated the act to try to address a slew of social problems and issues. He believes that we can't solve all social problems with this act.

His philosophy appears to be that in the next iteration of the ESEA they should make it simpler and not as convoluted (but it probably won't be). He did reaffirm that ESEA will not go away, as some are asking. NCLB is here to stay, he believes, and will be modified, but not shut down.

From this general overview I handed out a document entitled "No Child Left Behind: Issues and Solutions"; in this paper I summarize issues created by NCLB that are confronting schools today. In addition, the paper presents my "Fourteen Points" suggestion for changes in the program. We discussed each point and issue in detail. Dr. David Vierra discussed financial and curriculum impacts on our district.

One of the themes running through this meeting was "state versus Federal". Mr. McKeon explained what the Federal law requires from each state, and how the State of California has decided to implement the Federal law. He stated clearly that each state has the authority to design their program around the framework of the law.

It seems that California, according to Mr. McKeon, has decided to go overboard (my phrase). We've set the state "proficiency" test score at 800 - very unrealistic. We test every child every year - not required by the Federal law. He claimed that many of the issues I've raised in my columns are state issues, not Federal problems. California, he believes, has set up a situation where the State will take over most school districts in the next decade - and that is not his intention. He was emphatic about that. He explained that extremists on both sides are trying to use this NCLB model to push their own "solution" - vouchers and charters on the right and state take-over on the left. He opposes either "solution". He suggests that the vast majority of school districts should stay independent, with some charter schools and some state-controlled schools arising, but not all in one camp or another.

Mr. McKeon addressed each of my points and here's a summary of his thoughts. He suggests five changes to NCLB and the direction it's taking.

1. Connecting merit pay to test scores won't happen. He concurs that merit pay is highly unworkable. They discussed this with recognized teachers across the country and came to this conclusion. From what he said, I

believe this issue is dead - there's little support in the House or Senate for this provision.

2. The definition of a "highly qualified teacher" has to change. It's unworkable in its current design. Special education teachers are almost completely out of compliance, for example. They're looking at a few proposals for how this would work.

3. Schools should be judged on more of a "growth model" instead of an absolute score improvement concept. Some are pushing for monitoring children through their years instead of checking one class against another (class of 2009 versus class of 2008, for example).

4. Schools should be judged on a diversity of defined measures, not just on one "high-stakes" test.

5. I was surprised when he acknowledged that this mandate is very much under-funded. He said that has to be addressed as well. He acknowledged that this has become a heavy drain on school financing.

He did like my suggestion of diploma levels (A, B, C), to send a message to employers and colleges as to how well a child did in high school. IN effect, put the grade point average on the diploma. He also supports vocational training, and would like to see that allowed as a measure of NCLB. He agreed with me that parental and community involvement was crucial for student success, but didn't know how to address that in a law.

He was surprised to hear our perspective that there's no consequence for a child who "blows off" the state STAR test, and that we have a duplicate test as well (CA High School Exit Exam). We described how students will just "bubble" "B" all the way down a sheet. Dr. David Vierra confirmed this issue. Mr. McKeon said that was troubling.

Mr. McKeon said that we probably won't see any changes in NCLB this year; he believes the Democrats are hoping to recapture te White House and re-work it according to their image of how things should be. He believes they think they'll get the House, the Senate and the White House and will be able to dictate changes.

The meeting ended with smiles and a friendly atmosphere. We took some pictures and parted.

There you have it. I didn't change the world; I didn't believe I would. I did, however, see that there is a desire for change in NCLB in the House of Representatives, but it may not happen soon. I did speak my mind to the one of men who wrote NCLB. I did tell him I thought the Federal government should not even be involved with this, but he pointed out that the current law authorizes each state to design their own program. I'm not as convinced that this is as benign as he suggested, but I now believe that California has done the proverbial "shot itself in the foot".

Mr. McKeon did say that hearing the perspectives of educators has strongly changed his perspective on this law, and he has been pushing for the changes I list above. He's frustrated that nothing will happen on re-authorization until 2009 at the earliest.

I hope this general summary made sense and is helpful!