



Colorado Department of Education
William J. Moloney, Commissioner



***"In today's increasingly competitive world,
there is no higher national imperative
than education."***

- *Bob Schaffer*
- *State Board of Education*
- *4th Congressional District*

February 17, 2006

I. COLORADO SEEKS CHANGES IN NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND LAW

It is now four years since the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

At its core it is a noble ideal wholly in keeping with the very best traditions of our nation: the idea that our society has an obligation to lift the educational and life prospects of all children not just some children. Nonetheless, as most all American educators know the implementation of the law is fraught with grave problems.

As NCLB enters its fifth year, Colorado like all other states is in the process of putting together proposed changes in its approved plan for implementation. These changes, if approved, would hopefully ease the implementation challenges faced by schools across our state while at the same time preserving our commitment to the purposes of the law.

For over six months, the State Board and the CDE have been overseeing a process of gathering input from all across the state. A myriad of individuals, committees, and organizations have participated in this effort. The key participants include the NCLB Committee of Practitioners - a group provided for in statute and made up of educators from across the state. Also prominent is the HUB Committee in which most of our state's education organizations are represented.

At the end of six months effort, what is most striking is the remarkable degree of correlation between the proposed changes coming from all sources. Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), special education and English language acquisition were at or near the top of seemingly everyone's list.

The advantage of this correlation is that when the first draft of the proposed changes reached the State Board of Education in the first week of January, what we found was a very high level of agreement on what educators were urging upon the USDOE and ultimately the Congress of the United States.

This review process is continuing and we are on schedule to meet the required deadline of submitting proposed changes to Washington not later than the first of April.

Already, the Congress and the Federal Government are gathering themselves to undertake the most rigorous examination of NCLB. Just as the original law commanded overwhelming support, it is the hope of the US Congress that proposed changes will command a similar level of affirmation.

One individual being drawn into this consultative process is someone who as a member of Congress was party to the legislative discussion of NCLB and is now a member of the Colorado State Board of Education: Bob Schaffer.

For some perspective on how he viewed NCLB then and now, please see the enclosed op-ed piece he recently produced. It captures well many key issues and the concerns around this landmark law.

II. CDE FILLS KEY POSTS: SPECIAL EDUCATION AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

The well-known management theorist Peter Drucker famously said "personnel is policy." Someone else said policy drives practice and we educators know that good practices are what helps kids.

As every superintendent and principal knows, if you retain good people, good things are likely to happen for children.

Thus it is for CDE, and within the space of a single week we were very pleased to fill two very important positions that have been occupied on an "interim basis" while we persisted in the search for just the right people.

The new Assistant to the Commissioner for Exceptional Student Services is Dr. Edward Steinberg. For over a decade, Dr. Steinberg has been the most distinguished leader of Special Education Services in the Cherry Creek School District. He has served for several years on the State Special Education Advisory Committee (CSEAC) and has long been a leader among our state directors of special education. His sterling reputation for excellence and accomplishment has gained for him a high reputation within our state and beyond.

Over time, Colorado has established an enviable record for the quality of its special education services. At this critical time when the State and Nation are preparing for vital reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), and NCLB Dr. Steinberg's appointment is most timely.

Appointed to head our English Language Acquisition Unit is Dr. Barbara Medina. Dr. Medina served for over fifteen years at the K-12 level in Colorado School Districts and for the last seven years she has been Chair for the Department of Teacher Education and Graduate Teacher Education at Adams State College. Her experience encompasses a wide range of assignments with an emphasis on literacy and second language acquisition. She has been the recipient of a considerable number of federal grants and her publication and speaking credentials are most extensive.

At a time when the number of students for whom English is a second language is steadily growing our ELA portfolio becomes increasingly visible and important. Dr. Medina's rich experience and broad range of professional contacts across the state and beyond will prove a considerable asset.

I would further note that given the importance of both Special Education and English Language Acquisition, I have elevated these positions to membership in the Commissioner's Cabinet, an affirmation of the critical significance of these areas to Colorado's ongoing education agenda.

III. CDE LOOKS TO THE FUTURE: HARMONIZING MISSION AND RESOURCES

During times of economic downturn, whether they are owing to statewide or local conditions school districts have to "tighten their belts." This is a reality that educators have been familiar with for a very long time.

When caught in those circumstances, school districts must broker a compromise between all of the things that people would like them to do and things that are actually possible for them to do. This involves a difficult but necessary process of prioritizing in which boards, superintendents, and even whole communities must reach some consensus on what are the things that they really believe to be the most important as opposed to the things that might be nice but nonessential.

This is not an easy process but it often helps to clarify our own thinking and belief system.

Within the last couple of years, CDE along with all state agencies has been involved in just such a process. During the economic downturn that started some years ago, CDE lost fully 25% of all state funded positions or FTE. During this time, much like local school districts, our earlier responses were along the line of consolidating, reassigning, or slowing down various projects which we had been committed to. As districts know, you very quickly recognize this to be a short-term strategy. If you persist in it your people become stretched too thin and the efficiency of all your initiatives begins to suffer.

For over a year, we have been in what we could call a serial conversation with the General Assembly about what to do about all of this. What all of us in these circumstances would of course like is to see all cuts restored. The fact is however, even with the passage of Referendum C the likelihood of restoration is somewhere between very remote and nil.

The result of all of this has set us on a course, well summed up in the words of one legislator as, "deciding what you can do and what you can't do." When I became Commissioner nine years ago there was no CSAP, no SAR, and no NCLB. Today, those entities command by statutory requirement - state and federal – a lion's share of our energies.

None of these things are going away so it is evident that we have to adjust our own priorities around them. In doing this we are recognizing the same realities in our circumstance that local school districts do in theirs because for them too these things are not going away.

Over time, the State Board and CDE have sought to reshape its mission around raising student achievement in general and addressing the achievement gap in particular.

At this point, our dialog with the executive and legislative branches is well advanced though to be sure no certain solution has emerged yet. At the same time we have welcomed input from the education community regarding how we address this fundamental task of harmonizing our mission and our resources. Without question this is a work in progress that will rivet our attention for some time but it is our hope that within this year we will be able to see the broad outline of our approach to the future.

We thank all of those who have assisted us to this point and ask for their continued participation in this vital conversation regarding our educational future.

Sincerely yours,

William J. Moloney
Commissioner of Education

cc: Governor Owens, General Assembly, State Board of Education, CDE Cabinet, CDE Staff, BOCES, CASB, CASE, CEA, and CFT