



## Parent involvement in NCLB school standards is found lacking

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Inadequate parental involvement is hindering fulfillment of the federal No Child Left Behind program's goal to improve the nation's schools and produce better students, a two-year research project by an independent nonprofit has found.

In a report released today called "It Takes a Parent," [the Appleseed Foundation](#) concludes that too many parents don't learn NCLB-required data about their children and schools soon enough to make timely and informed decisions; that poverty as well as language and cultural differences impose barriers to parental involvement; and that such participation "is not uniformly valued by school leaders as a key accountability strategy."

To counter such trends, Appleseed is calling for better quality of information, active engagement of parents, community support, and professional development.

It is also recommending that policymakers, when setting accountability standards, place as much emphasis on parental involvement as they have, for instance, on test scores. The report says that there is a "preoccupation with the accountability elements of NCLB, such as testing and teacher quality," while at the same time too many schools demonstrate "a lack of awareness and training on how to effectively engage parents."

Appleseed, a consortium of 16 state and local organizations that rely heavily on pro bono help from lawyers, studied 18 school districts in six states. The report comes as Congress prepares to take up reauthorization of the six-year-old NCLB legislation early next year. The report won plaudits from at least one federal lawmaker:

"Appleseed has placed its finger on the pulse of a core education issue that is often overlooked," said Sen. Johnny Isakson, a Georgia Republican, in a prepared statement. "Informed parents are able to make a crucial difference in the academic success of children and the overall performance of schools."

But Appleseed representatives say the solutions it is recommending will not be easy.

"There's still a lot of confusion among parents about how they are supposed to take the data and improve their own child's and school's academic performance," says Sharon Hill, executive director of the Georgia Appleseed Center for Law and Justice. "There's no

silver bullet," she adds, but in the short term, schools and teachers must be encouraged "to move their parent involvement from the side and to the center of their strategy."

"What's always complicated is you can write into the law that parents have certain rights," says Jeanne Bliss, who was not part of the Appleseed project but who, during her recent seven years at Education Trust, worked on NCLB issues of parental involvement and accountability. "The extent to which it's implemented, that's a separate issue."

Art Coleman, a partner at Holland & Knight, which committed more than 3,500 hours of time to the project, says the question becomes: "How do I effectively integrate [parental involvement] as part of an overall school accountability plan?" Steve Winnick, a Holland & Knight senior counsel, stresses that while the current federal legislation speaks specifically to the need for parental involvement, it is at the state and local level where the best of intentions often must give way to bracing realities.

Such realities, says Hill, include cultural differences that the NCLB act may not have anticipated. For example, she says, "On the receiving end, there [may be] an unfamiliarity with our culture that would invite parents to come in and talk with persons of authority." She also mentions that many parents face limitations (alcohol or drug dependency, for instance) or obligations (like work) that preclude the kind of involvement that would give them a better picture of how their child is doing.

Hill, who was the truancy judge in Atlanta's Fulton County for 8½ years, points to the problem of a single working mother who, already in transit to get to her job, "can't be there to get [her son] out the door." And just as the mother can't be there to nudge a sleepy student, says Hill, "chances are she can't just pick up and go to a special meeting during the school day" to find out how well her child or his class is or isn't meeting NCLB standards.

The Appleseed researchers looked at districts that combined rural, suburban, and rural elements in six states: Connecticut, Georgia, Illinois, New Mexico, Texas, and Washington state. In Georgia, for example, the program looked at three school districts—Cobb County (north of Atlanta) as well as Muskogee and Dougherty counties, which are in the southwestern, more rural part of the state but also contain small cities.

In addition to Holland & Knight, the law firm of DLA Piper also provided assistance to the project. Other aid was provided by PricewaterhouseCoopers and Columbia Teachers College at Columbia University.