

Charlotte Sun: Are we really leaving no child behind?

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There is no issue more important than our children's education. With the controversy over FCAT and the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind quickly approaching, it is critical that our community have a voice in the debate. I was proud to bring Chairman George Miller of the house education and labor committee in Congress to Port Charlotte recently to discuss the No Child Left Behind Act with our school board members, superintendents and teachers. Our educators then carried their message directly to the halls of Congress last week, when a Charlotte County elementary school principal and school board member came to Washington to testify on No Child Left Behind.

The No Child Left Behind Act was intended to increase accountability of public school systems to hold school districts and schools responsible for improving the academic performance of each student. However, arbitrary and contradictory standards compounded with a lack of federal funding has hurt, not helped many of our schools.

A good example is Neil Armstrong Elementary School in Port Charlotte. Chairman Miller and I visited the school to discuss the impact No Child Left Behind has had in the classroom. Neil Armstrong Elementary has posted double-digit improvements in math and reading, earning it a high grade under Florida's "A+" Plan. However, despite these impressive improvements, the school did not meet "adequate yearly progress" or AYP under No Child Left Behind and was labeled a school "in need of improvement." Adding insult to injury, the school was required to send a letter to every parent notifying them that the school failed the AYP litmus test.

It is clear that the process used to evaluate our schools is flawed. When a school succeeds under one evaluation standard and fails under another, it sends a confusing message to our teachers and parents, and encourages students to leave what is oftentimes an outstanding school. Neil Armstrong Elementary will now have to redirect time and resources to redesigning their program, instead of continuing to strengthen a system that is clearly working for students and teachers.

Accountability is important. However, in order for accountability to work, school boards and their teachers must be empowered to tackle the daunting challenges they face in the classroom. Educators are tired of teaching to a test and being held accountable to arbitrary standards while operating without the financial support our children deserve. As No Child Left Behind is closely examined this fall, I will be working to make sure the voices of our local schools continue to be heard. It's time for our teachers and students to get the funding, support, and respect they deserve.

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Rep. Tim Mahoney represents Florida's 16th congressional district in the House of Representatives.

