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Interview with Dr. Charles Watson, Arkansas Department of Education

Sarah C. McKenzie
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Gary W. Ritter
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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Q: In general, how is the implementation and working with NCLB? How is that being accepted at the state level? Are the policy makers welcoming it, happy to do it, or are folks having trouble implementing parts of it? What is the general reaction to the relatively new legislation?

CW: It's the law. We're challenged with carrying out the law. And we gladly do it.

Q: Are there any pieces in NCLB that policymakers have looked at and said, "That's great...that will really help us"?

CW: Well, I think the whole idea of accountability—bringing the focus on standards to the forefront—will be a big help in terms of focusing on student achievement and ultimately, the performance of all our kids.

Q: In the past—prior to the NCLB legislation—we did have an accountability system, an assessment system, a set of standards, and those sorts of things. How is it working in terms of integrating the system we had previously with the new legislation?

CW: Well, right now the NCLB legislation is almost mirrored in the Act 35 that was approved in the Special Session in 2003, and those pieces are essentially one in the same. It's almost not even possible to go back and to draw parallels to what we had before because we were beginning to look at accountability system, at...well, we started back in '83 if you want a historical perspective on it...with these standards. We've been working with accountability measures but this is really the first time where there have been penalties and things like that associated with schools...I think the impact of NCLB has shaped the state's accountability system even further than it was before.

Q: Overall, are there any concerns that policy makers at the state have with the way the legislation is set up? Any challenging regulations that we hope the feds might reshape slightly?

CW: Well I think there are always challenges to implementation of any piece of legislation...the impact of subgroups and the fact that now all children are held to the same accountability standard is a new venture for us. I don't know if that's got a merit, or if there will be changes made at the federal level, but I think there certainly will be dialogue ...about the standard for, say...students with disabilities. There have been some concessions made, in terms of students for whom English is not their primary language, but beyond that...I don't know that there will be a whole lot of dialogue in terms of things that might come from...the state, such as requests for changes in the law.

Q: The way we are doing AYP in terms of conforming with the feds., can you talk a little bit to a group of folks who may not be as familiar with AYP about what AYP means and how are we setting that up in Arkansas?

CW: Essentially what it is: AYP is establishing a standard, assessing students based on that standard, and reporting the results for all students as they either meet or fail to meet the conditions of the standard that's been set. The standard is a very high standard; it has to do with proficiency of kids' (performance), and ultimately, by a specific point in time, expecting all kids to meet that proficiency standard. That's a tough standard.

Q: There are consequences at three levels, right?...the school, the district, and the state as a whole...and right now there are consequences at the school level. There is reporting, but there are not published consequences at the district and state levels. The goal of the feds is that by 2014,

all kids in each state will be 100% proficient. What is to be the federal reaction, realistically, if we are not all at 100% proficient? Presumably, if we didn't comply...the feds could withhold Title I money?

CW: Yes, that's correct.

Q: In terms of AYP, there are differing sets of consequences, aren't there, for different numbers of years (on the improvement list) and different levels of not meeting proficiency (standards) is that true?

CW: Correct.

Q: How are we doing, in terms of how many schools, thus far, are or are not meeting AYP?

CW: Well, as of this year roughly one-third of our schools have failed to meet...the AYP standard at this point for this year. Two-thirds do.

Q: For some of that 1/3, they might be in their second or third year...?

CW: That's correct.

Q: And they'll face different consequences?

CW: Yes...but we also had 68 that...were previously in school improvement, and met the standard this year...You have to meet the standards for two consecutive years, so they met standards for this year, and if they meet standards next year then they'll be removed from the list.

Q: So they are still on the list but they're not moving up the list in terms of increased consequences?

CW: That's correct. They're just sort of on hold.

Q: And if they attain AYP again, then we are going to forget about them, unless they miss in the future?

CW: Correct .

Q: There have been lots of arguments back and forth about whether we're going to end up

identifying schools with lots of subgroups more often than others? I've heard two ways of looking at it. One is you're punishing them by identifying and the other view is you are shining a light on them and then offering assistance to help them get better more quickly. Can you talk about both sides of that and how you think it's going to play out in Arkansas?

CW: Well, I don't necessarily see identifying schools (for improvement) as a punishment...The intent of the act is to identify schools that are not meeting the standard, or for which a substantial number of students are not meeting the standard, and then to provide additional resources, to redirect resources, or to change what they're doing in order to get those students to meet the standard. NCLB should not be considered a punitive piece of legislation. It's not that at all. It is strictly legislation that has consequences when schools are not meeting the standards that have been established by the state and the federal government.

Q: What kind of assistance and additional resources will be directed at schools who have trouble making the standard?

CW: Well, there's an additional pot of money that goes into schools that are in school improvement that they can use to plan for additional professional development, for additional resources, for technical assistance...The state has a cadre of mathematics, science, and literacy specialists that work across the state. The state has given those staff members the responsibility of assigning first priority to those schools that are in some level of school improvement in terms of their (allocating their time for) technical assistance. We are required to redirect some of our funds to improving the quality of staff members and the ability of staff to work in the school...there are personnel resources and financial resources that are directed to helping schools meet the standard.

Q: And are these resources available beginning in Year One?

CW: Yes.

Q: Do you have any sense from talking with your peers in other states, or reading up on things on

how other states are doing? We have about 2/3 of our schools meeting the standard. How are other states doing?

CW: That's fairly consistent. Some are much higher than that, a few are lower. Some have as much as 50%. I don't think we are an exception one way or the other.

Q: Is there a good source to get a list of all of these schools (in other states)?

CW: The Council of Chief State School Officers have a website and you could check this website also: www.schoolresults.org .

Q: Do you pay attention to the highly qualified teacher (HQT) piece of NCLB?

CW: I'm not responsible for administering that, but I do pay attention to it.

Q: How are we doing in the state in terms of ensuring that we're going to be okay in 2005-2006 in terms of those requirements?

CW: We (the state school board) just adopted a rule that details our state level definition for highly qualified teacher. Once that is in place, then we will move forward with some studies, and with finding out what the issues really are. I predict that we are going to have some issues in a couple of places...I think that we will have issues in the area of special education in terms of particularly at the high school and middle school level. In meeting the criteria for HQT, I think there will some issues with teachers at middle school level, particularly those who have retooled from elementary into middle school, in terms of meeting the definition of HQT.

Q: Can you talk a bit about those salary incentives to get HQT?

CW: It's Act 102. There's a new rule that's just been developed, something like a \$10,000 salary incentive to attract folks to come into high poverty areas of the state.

Q: HQT is it by the beginning of 05-06 school year or the end of the 05-06 school year?

CW: The end the 05-06 school year.

Q: How do you think the Lakeview case and our legislative reaction to the Lake View case is interacting with NCLB? Do you think that the legislative reforms stemming from the Lake View case are going to make positive changes for us in the next few years?

CW: I think the major change that we'll see is particularly from Act 59: the additional funding resources that are available for public education, the fact that there are significant new dollars that go into funding a category of students, such as those qualifying for free and reduced school lunches or "NSLA funding," as it is called in Act 59. Generally, those kids are children of poverty, and children of poverty tend not to perform as well. Therefore, a significant number of new dollars will be following those kids and education for those kids and that is a direct result of Lake View .

The second thing, I think, is the additional focus on professional development for teachers. The ability of the teacher to teach, and to have knowledge of content, are significant factors in student performance. The requirement of additional 30 hours of professional development for every certified staff member was adopted by the legislature, and it's sort of trickled down from the Lake View case.

Also in Act 59 was the funding to support that (additional professional development). For example, \$50 per student goes into every school for additional professional development. Also, lengthening the school year for professionals by five days to accommodate the additional hours of professional development is a direct result.

Overall, looking at salaries and establishing a salary structure across the state with the idea of trying to help impact student achievement by having higher professional salaries is piece of that. And finally, there are some salary incentives for attracting HQT into low performing schools or schools that have a high percentage of poverty students. All of these things are a trickle-down from the Special Session of the legislature that are a direct result of the Lake View case, all focused on improving the status of public education in our state.

