Treat NCLB as an attitude, not an acronym

No Child Left Behind. It’s a shame that words that are so clear and promise so much to all our students too often are perverted into the cold, sharp acronym “NCLB.” With sarcasm and disdain, many in our educational community have draped this simple promise to children in the muted cloak of educationese. They fret about their “NCLB plan” or their “NCLB targets.” They complain about the lack of “NCLB funding” or the enormous strain on their organization of “meeting the demands of NCLB.”

Others, meanwhile, have taken on the words’ true intent. These leaders talk about what they will do to meet the needs of all students. They know that creating schools and districts that serve all students is a path fraught with twists, turns, and challenges of will. Leaders of these schools and systems put aside ego to build a community of leaders focused on improving instruction in every classroom every day. Here are three examples:

• Edmonton, Alberta, schools have for the past two years increased the number of students reading at grade level and successfully completing high school.
• In Southern California, a committed group of literacy-focused Reading by Nine schools increased their Academic Performance Index (API) scores at a pace that exceeded the state gains.
• The Gilroy, Calif., district in one year increased by 21% the number of students proficient in English.

The work is unique in each community, yet themes in these successful schools and districts can help us all strengthen our own work with students.

Leaders in districts living the promise engage in frank, open, and honest discussions with their communities about the challenges they face. They help others understand that each student must learn to access information, be able to organize, analyze, and use that information to make a decision, and have sufficient communication skills to explain and justify decisions. Those are the new basic skills. These leaders communicate that 100% of students must be fully educated and prepared for further training and education. They challenge their community to meet this goal.

They reject the impulse to make testing and accountability their nemesis. These new challenges push their organization toward actions that improve student learning for every student:

1. Schools focus their energies on improving instruction by using recent student learning data to develop an instructional focus. Schools home in on improving instruction in every classroom.
2. Teachers have time to work together as professionals to learn from each other about proven, research-based teaching techniques. Teachers focus on a few evidence-based practices, implemented with conviction.
3. Every educator in a school, including the principal, is expected to be fluent in these techniques. Training is combined with opportunities for regular practice and coaching. Work sessions take place at school and in teachers’ classrooms, not in an “edutainment” session with slick slide presentations and stale sticky buns.
4. Time, people, talent, energy, and money are relocalized around the focus. Leaders make hard decisions to ensure resources support classroom instruction in the focus area above all else. They honor the maxim that “the good is the eternal enemy of the best” and are not afraid to let go of some good things to focus on the best thing — students’ reading and thinking.
5. Families are equal partners in supporting student learning. Leaders ask parents to support students at home and hold them accountable for high expectations, conduct, and learning.
6. Most importantly, they measure and set specific targets for student learning growth, help teachers modify instruction based on student learning, and chart and celebrate their focus on student learning results.

In these districts and schools, educators focus on all students learning. In these schools and districts, every student is taught to be an eagle. Sure enough, when taught as an eagle, students soar like one.