

[Ahwatukee Foothills News](#)

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Congressman Harry Mitchell (D-Ariz.), the freshman representative from Arizona's 5th Congressional District that includes all of Ahwatukee Foothills, was in town last week to meet with constituents, news media and supporters.

He was receptive and talkative last week. But how does he fare when constituents from Arizona go to him? Specifically, when education officials from his district travel to the nation's Capitol to speak with him about issues that concern them?

Mitchell's openness was tested at the end of last month and, according to officials from the Kyrene and Tempe Union High school districts, he passed that test with flying colors.

"Harry was extremely receptive and very supportive of education," said Kyrene board vice president Rae Waters. "He even came to our reception and talked to all the delegates, even though a lot of them weren't from his district."

Waters, Kyrene board president Sue Knudson, and Tempe Union board president Zita Johnson all traveled to Washington, D.C., last month as part of a delegation of the Arizona School Boards Association. They went as school board associations do every year to speak with legislators and lobby for education reforms.

"This was my eighth year going to Washington, D.C., and in that time the only congressman that met with us was (Sen.) Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) and he wasn't receptive at all," Waters said.

This year was different, the Arizona delegates said. They went to lobby for changes to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which is up for reauthorization this year, and found a sympathetic ear.

They also went to have legislators sign a Pledge to America's Schoolchildren, a National School Boards Association pamphlet whose signers pledge to work and vote for NCLB improvements, improvements to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and support teachers and students in general.

"We got the list of last year's signers when we got there, and it didn't feel good to have no one from Arizona on the list," Johnson said. "But now we have one."

A warm reception to educational lobbies is nothing shocking, Mitchell said last Wednesday, since he has a soft spot in his heart for public schools.

"I'm obviously very biased as a former teacher," Mitchell said. "I went to a couple of meetings

with teachers. I know these people; I was on two education committees when I was in the State Senate, higher education and K-12."

Mitchell, 66, was a government teacher at Tempe High School from 1964 to 1992 and a state Senator from 1998 to 2006. He's in Washington, D.C. now after defeating incumbent J.D. Hayworth in the 2006 election for District 5's spot in Congress.

The local lobbyists specifically wanted changes made to NCLB's accountability requirements. Schools can fail a component of NCLB, a portion called Average Yearly Progress that measures improvement in subgroups of students like low-income, special education and minority students. The AYP requirements have been criticized for being too stringent, with multiple ways for even excelling schools to fail, the consequences of which can be dire.

Mitchell on Wednesday said he was familiar with the issue and felt strongly about it.

"NCLB is up for reauthorization and we've been in contact with school board associations, teachers' associations; most everyone who believes there's got to be some changes made," he said. "Especially with the accountability part. There needs to be a change to the way NCLB classifies a school as under performing or performing. Most people believe there has to be a better way to address that, and I do too."

Locally, the issue has most recently affected Kyrene de las Lomas Elementary School. Lomas last September was labeled as failing AYP when conflicts between IDEA, which says some special education students must have access to calculators, ran into conflict with NCLB, which says students that use calculators on math tests can't have their scores count. The issue was eventually settled through the state, but not before highlighting some officials' frustrations with AYP.

Kyrene board president Knudson said Mitchell was familiar with such issues in a way that other legislators from Arizona weren't. Knudson met with Sen. Jon Kyl (R-Ariz.), who expressed resistance to changing NCLB standards because he thought some were trying to "skirt accountability issues.

"As a school board person it raised my hackles a bit because we don't have a problem with accountability at all, but it should work," Knudson said. "There shouldn't be 144 ways to fail AYP."

Mitchell said Wednesday that his goals for education on Capitol Hill, in addition to working on NCLB, was to provide more benefits to encourage teachers to undergo professional development, fund IDEA at the level promised when it was enacted (40 percent, as opposed to the 18 percent at which it's currently funded) and other initiatives.

"I am such a believer in public education," Mitchell said. "Most of the people in this country have attended public schools, and we have to do what we can because they're the strength of our nation."