



Doc H's Blog

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Let the games begin

For the first time in years, it appears there may be serious talk of trying to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. It's most recent iteration, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 was due for reauthorization in 2007, but like its predecessor, political acrimony has held up progress.

However, recent activity in Congress signals the best chance for reauthorization in the last 8 years. Of course, if we are to see reauthorization, both the Senate and House must agree, which will take some Democrats in the Senate crossing the aisle, and the president would have to agree to sign the bill. So it is not a slam dunk.

Over the next few weeks, I will use this blog to keep readers up to date on the progress toward reauthorization and discuss some of the key issues that must be resolved.

The first question is, why do we need reauthorization?

No Child Left Behind aspired to ensure all children would become proficient in reading and math. To reach this noble yet lofty goal, all states would adopt high standards, assess those standards, and hold schools accountable for helping all children reach proficiency. It was a great goal and a great strategy that was championed by both Democrats and Republicans. Yet, history has shown that excessive federal involvement in education has always been problematic.

The problems began almost immediately upon passage of NCLB in 2001. It became more about the numbers of kids who crossed the proficiency finish line than about teaching kids the skills they needed for success.

Some states actually lowered standards and set the cut point for proficiency very low. Schools started teaching to the test and in many cases there were cuts to student opportunities for the arts, physical education, science, social studies, world language and other activities that ensure a balanced education. Many schools began teaching only to the "bubble kids" – those students closest to meeting the state proficiency score. Students who had already reached the state proficiency level or who were well below it were often ignored.

The result? In some states, 90 percent of students performed at the proficient level on state tests. Yet on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a uniform test given across the country as a means of comparison between the states, only 20 percent of that same state's students performed at the proficient level. A study of state cut scores compared with NAEP cut scores revealed a huge discrepancy in what was considered proficient among the states. U.S. Chamber of Commerce reports showed the truth in labeling of each state based on the NAEP comparisons. In Tennessee, the Governor and other policy makers basically said the state was lying to parents and students. The very law that was supposed to make sure no child was left behind was, in fact, leaving masses of children behind.

By 2004, it became clear that there were big problems with the implementation of No Child Left Behind. While the vision and strategy were excellent, the implementation was very poor and had an unpredictable, pernicious impact on students.

In attempting to respond to the inaction of Congress to right the wrongs of NCLB through reauthorization, Secretary Duncan and President Obama worked through executive action to allow states to seek flexibility and waivers from some of the requirements of No Child Left Behind. Again, on the surface, this sounded like a great idea. Chief state school officers appreciated this relief and the opportunity to improve schools – more than 40 states requested a waiver. I have written previous blogs ([The good news and bad news on NCLB waivers](#); [USED action contrary to state, federal law](#); [Politics as usual or not?](#)) that have provided the developing concerns and problems with the waiver process and my true hope and desire for reauthorization.

Now, Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN), chair of the Senate Health Education Labor and Pensions Committee, has laid out a plan for reauthorization of No Child Left Behind. Rep. John Kline (R-MN), chair of the House Education Committee, has done the same. Every education organization and think tank in Washington, D.C. and many civil rights organizations have brought forth guiding principles for reauthorization. The next 3 – 6 months could be very interesting.

So, let the games begin and let's hope everyone can set aside the political acrimony in favor of our children.

Next week, I will address the top issue that must be considered with ESEA/NCLB reauthorization – standardized testing.

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