



LAWMAKERS TARGET MANDATORY TESTING IN EDUCATION LAW

March 21, 2007

Opposition to mandatory testing could derail President Bush's controversial 5-year-old No Child Left Behind education reform program.

The amount of testing in public schools and whether it is replacing creative classes is being debated in the nation's capital as a growing number of school administrators and parents pressure lawmakers to come up with alternatives to President Bush's education policy.

"Republicans and Democrats agree that burdensome regulations are preventing our schools and students from achieving their best," Republican Senator Jim DeMint of South Carolina said last week.

DeMint and Republican Senator John Cornyn of Texas introduced the Academic Partnerships Lead Us to Success Act (A-PLUS), which would allow states to opt out of No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

A similar bill was introduced in the House of Representatives.

A controversial policy

President Bush signed NCLB into law in 2002, but it is set to expire this year.

The law, an extension of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, requires schools receiving public money to set and achieve Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets in reading and math. AYP must be raised each year to reach an overall goal of 100 percent student proficiency by the end of the 2014 school year.

It also seeks to close the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students and ensure a highly qualified teacher for every core academic subject.

For years, President Bush has championed NCLB's results.

"The No Child Left Behind Act has worked for America's children -- and I ask Congress to reauthorize this good law," he said in his 2007 State of the Union.

Prominent teachers' and administrators' groups, however, oppose NCLB and have criticized its reliance on standardized tests to determine AYP.

Testing critics

"If I were a student, I would be spending most of my year doing test preparation and thinking that the whole purpose of school was to pass a test rather than receiving a well-rounded education," said Michael Shaw, a professor at St. Thomas Aquinas College and a member of the National Council of Teachers of English's commission on reading.

"I would be angry that other subjects were being diminished because of this focus on tests."

Lisa Guisbond, policy analyst for the National Center for Fair and Open Testing (FairTest), a group advocating alternatives to standardized testing, said testing pushes some good teachers out of the classroom.

"There's tremendous dissatisfaction amongst experienced teachers with this sort of straight jacketing," Guisbond said. "Teaching to a test, that's not why they went into education."

Holding schools and teachers accountable

But Connie Garafalo, principal of Reading Central Community Elementary, a NCLB Blue Ribbon school in 2005 for lowering low-income students' achievement gap, said that while the days of doing "cute little units" have passed, teachers maintain the ability to inject their own styles into their courses.

"The good teachers will take the standards and apply creative teaching strategies," she said.

"If we don't have these kinds of measures, then how do we know that our kids are achieving and meeting the standards?"

States vs. the federal government

Betty Sternberg, superintendent of schools in Greenwich, Conn., believes the real problem with NCLB is that states don't like the federal government telling them what to do.

Under the law, states with schools who fail to meet the targets must offer students after school tutoring and the opportunity to transfer to a different school. If a school fails for four consecutive years, it must replace staff, restructure the curriculum and extend the school day/year.

"If kids are failing, don't be specific about sanctions," Sternberg said. "When you do it from on high, so far away from the classroom and the school, you really aren't getting it."

Sternberg was the Connecticut commissioner of education in 2005 when the state unsuccessfully sued NCLB for failing to provide the dollars needed to enact its testing requirements.

Adequate funding?

President Bush's budget request for Fiscal Year 2008 includes a \$993 million boost for NCLB.

"It's our perspective that we have put forth the funds to make this work for kids," said Kerri Briggs, acting assistant secretary for policy at the U.S. Department of Education.

But according to Democratic Representative Dennis Moore of Kansas, a member of the House Committees on the Budget and Financial Services, total NCLB funding is \$55 billion short of the levels outlined in the 2002 authorization.

Moore supports a House bill that calls for "a moratorium on compliance with Adequate Yearly Progress regulations that are not fully funded."

Both the House and the Senate are expected to vote on the proposed laws before the end of April.

-- *By Josh Miller, NewsHour Extra*

© 2007 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions