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**Date:** Thu, 9/15/2011 9:46:36 AM

**Subject:** Republicans for Education Reform (Re: Lamar Alexander's ESEA bills)

FYI

## [Republicans for Education Reform](#)

Posted by [Mike Petrilli](#) on September 15th, 2011 at 9:46 am

For months—no, years—the ESEA discussion has been nothing short of maddening. While many pundits decry the lack of a “clear route to reauthorization,” an obvious bipartisan solution has been sitting there, ready for the picking. It goes something like this: Step away from federal heavy-handedness around states’ accountability and teacher credentialing systems; keep plenty of transparency of results in place, especially test scores disaggregated by racial and other subgroups; offer incentives for embracing promising reforms instead of mandates; and give school districts a lot more flexibility to move their federal dollars around as they see fit.

We at Fordham call this “[Reform Realism](#)”—a pro-school reform orientation leavened with realism about what the federal government can and cannot do well in K–12 education. But it also describes the spirit of the Obama Administration’s [ESEA blueprint](#), released last year.

And now, thanks to a handful of moderately conservative GOP Senators, including former Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander, we have actual legislative language bringing this commonsense approach to life. In a package of five separate bills—a “step-by-step” approach rather than one mega-measure—the senators offer a proposal that would fix all of the onerous provisions of No Child Left Behind without abandoning its focus on reform.

Yes, the legislation can be fairly described as a rollback of NCLB—which is precisely what vast swaths of Americans have been demanding as the shortcomings of that mega-measure become more evident, its excesses become more painful, and its remedies prove themselves ineffectual. The reform package offered by Alexander et al would eliminate “adequate yearly progress,” hand “accountability” back to the states, and undo the law’s “highly qualified teachers” mandate. But it doesn’t abdicate Uncle Sam’s interest in reform, or in the country’s neediest students. States would still be required to take dramatic action to turn around their very worst schools. Title I funding would continue to flow to the highest-need schools and districts. Students would continue to be tested in grades 3-8 and once in high school, and the results would continue to be reported widely and by subgroup. The approach is tight-loose, incentives over mandates, transparency over accountability. It’s “reform realism” through and through.

What’s particularly impressive about this legislative package is its rare combination of thoughtfulness and humility. Take the issue of teacher evaluation. Senator Alexander, for one, believes fervently in the power of rigorous evaluations to drive educational improvement. His home state of Tennessee—one of the original Race to the Top victors—is putting one of the country’s most aggressive teacher evaluation systems in place. Yet Alexander stopped short of demanding that Uncle Sam mandate such a system for every state. He understands that he’s no longer a governor but a senator—and that to mandate a promising reform like teacher evaluation is to kill it—or render it toothless, just like “HQT” turned out. This kind of restraint is remarkable—and comes from the hard-earned experience of watching Washington smother promising reforms through its embrace.

The bills also find a clear route through the Common Core thicket. They strike the right balance—requiring states to adopt college-and-career standards but maintaining a position of neutrality on whether those states should develop standards

together or alone. This is the best possible place for Common Core and those states that earnestly want to employ it—with no federal government entanglement at all.

In a sane world, leaders from both parties would welcome the Alexander approach and bring these bills to the floor of the House and Senate as soon as possible, and the Obama Administration would laud the package for its fidelity to its “blueprint.” (John Kline should certainly appreciate its respect for the 10th Amendment.) To be sure, the legislative language could be massaged this way or that. Debates should be held around the particulars. But the broad contours are right.

And, perhaps best of all, these bills could pass both chambers of Congress tomorrow. Rank and file members of both parties want to undo NCLB’s prescriptiveness around accountability—but don’t want to “cut and run” either. This points the way.

Perhaps that’s why Democrats for Education Reform reacted to the package with such swift viciousness yesterday. This generally admirable group—so effective at giving Democrats at the state level the political cover to break with the teachers unions—has an unfortunate tendency on federal policy to believe that Washington knows best. (Its policy director was a longtime staffer for Representative George Miller, one of the key architects of NCLB.) In a widely circulated [press statement](#), the group described the plan as “a stunning retreat on two decades of reform” and wondered whose “bidding” the senators were doing.

If DFER staffers are implying that the Republican Party—the party of Scott Walker, John Kasich, Mitch Daniels, and Chris Christie—has decided to jump in bed with the teachers unions, then they’ve really lost their marbles. Sure, GOP principles on federalism and the unions’ disdain for accountability lead to a similar place on specific features of ESEA. But for reformers to believe that states will automatically back away from tough love for schools if given the chance is to admit weakness at the state policy level. Republican governors and legislators, the “Chiefs for Change,” and a growing number of DFER-type Democrats have proven themselves more than capable to carry the mantle of reform without help from Uncle Sam.

There’s a new slogan going around Washington this week: “Pass this bill.” When it comes to the GOP ESEA proposal, I say, “Yes we can.”

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