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Subject: NYTimes: Schools Chiefs See a Path to Proposing Their Own Accountability Systems

Chiefs for Change members – leading the way

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Subject: Nyt: Schools Chiefs See a Path to Proposing Their Own Accountability Systems

Schools Chiefs See a Path to Proposing Their Own Accountability Systems

By WINNIE HU

Published: July 12, 2011

Some state education chiefs say that if Congress does not overhaul [No Child Left Behind](#), the main federal law governing public education, by the fall, they may be allowed to propose their own accountability systems as an alternative.

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Times Topic: [No Child Left Behind Act](#)

These education chiefs said this week that Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and his aides have signaled that they may grant a waiver on a crucial provision in the law, a requirement that all children be proficient in English and math by 2014, a goal widely seen as unrealistic.

Other provisions that the administration might be willing to relax include a requirement that districts identify and address schools that do not make “adequate yearly progress” toward specific goals and restrictions on how some federal education money must be spent.

In exchange for being freed from these requirements, states would have to propose their own accountability rules and ways they would intervene in underperforming schools, these state education chiefs said they had been told.

Kevin S. Huffman, the Tennessee education commissioner, said administration officials “have been crystal clear that it would not be a waiver for everyone, but for states who are positioned to engage in meaningful reform with real accountability.”

Mr. Huffman added, “They are not saying we’re going to waive school-by-school interventions and let you just make up something.”

The state education chiefs said they envisioned state accountability systems that placed more weight on student “growth” — that is, individual performance on state tests from year to year — and possibly other factors, like high school graduation rates and participation in Advanced Placement courses, as ways to measure student achievement.

Under No Child Left Behind, schools are largely measured by students’ performance on standardized tests, and by the performance of certain subgroups of disadvantaged students.

“The biggest criticism about No Child Left Behind is the pass-fail,” said Hanna Skandera, secretary of education in New Mexico, who supports the law and hopes for more flexibility to make improvements. In 2010, 77 percent of the 827 public schools in New Mexico failed to make adequate yearly progress. “You either make A.Y.P. or you don’t,” Ms. Skandera said. “We’re not able to capture differences.”

The administration’s suggestion of waivers has already drawn opposition from Congressional leaders, including Representative John Kline, a Minnesota Republican who is chairman of the House education committee. They have challenged Mr. Duncan’s legal authority to demand certain reforms in exchange for waivers, saying that it would undermine Congress’s efforts to enact more lasting changes.

But some education advocates say the waivers are a realistic alternative to a comprehensive overhaul of the law, provided that states are still held accountable for raising achievement for all children and closing the gaps that separate poor and minority students from their peers.

“This does provide an opportunity, but only if done well,” said Daria Hall, a policy director for the [Education Trust](#), an advocacy group in Washington. “This can’t be about letting states off the hook. It has to be about setting a high bar for states and granting flexibility to those who are willing and able to do it.”

John B. King, [New York’s education commissioner](#), said that while New York has not made any specific

proposals to federal education officials, he would be interested in exploring an accountability system that looked at student growth as well as proficiency in science and social studies. (No Child Left Behind focuses primarily on English and math). “My sense is that they’re trying to determine whether to have minimum criteria for accountability proposals, and if they were to have them, what they should be,” Mr. King said.

Some states like Indiana and Tennessee have already moved to develop their own accountability systems factoring in student growth, among other things, but they are still required under federal law to assess schools based on No Child Left Behind. The result in Tennessee has been that education officials “feel like our reforms are being splintered across multiple reporting structures,” Mr. Huffman said.

In Indiana, where schools are now graded from A to F, Tony Bennett, the state superintendent of public instruction, said that he would like to see every school — even high-performing ones — focus on raising achievement among the lowest 25 percent of students. Mr. Bennett said he would also give more weight to teacher effectiveness over how many academic degrees or years of experience teachers have.

“I’m a strong supporter of accountability measures,” he said. “But since No Child Left Behind was enacted, we have new accountability measures, and we should build more around them.”

Lillian Lowery, Delaware’s secretary of education, said more flexibility in spending federal aid and helping failing schools would allow her state to try more creative approaches, like language immersion elementary programs, summer classes in science, math and engineering, and educational games.

“We drill and we re-teach, but it’s more of the same for them,” Ms. Lowery said. “So what can we do to hook them so they’re interested and they learn?”