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NATIONAL NEWS

Senate panel votes to reduce federal role in schools

Washington Post

By: Lyndsey Layton

October 21, 2011

http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/senate-panel-votes-to-reduce-federal-role-in-schools/2011/10/20/gIQA7X91L_story.html

A Senate panel voted 15 to 7 Thursday to reduce the role of the federal government in overseeing the nation's 100,000 public schools as part of a revamping of No Child Left Behind, the key education law.

The government would stop supervising the performance of 95 percent of the nation's schools under a bipartisan [bill](#) crafted by Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), chairman of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, and the ranking Republican, Sen. Mike Enzi of Wyoming.

Only 5 percent of a state's worst-performing schools — often known as "dropout factories" — would be subject to federal oversight under the measure.

Another 5 percent of schools — those with the greatest achievement gap between students of different racial groups — would also be required to make improvements under the proposed legislation, but states would determine how to intervene in those schools.

The legislation would drop requirements that all public schools meet yearly achievement goals or face federal sanctions.

Republicans on the committee pushed to further shrink the federal role and return more authority to states and local districts. Democrats argued that the federal government must maintain oversight to ensure that struggling children get the attention and resources they need.

In an unusual political pairing, teachers unions and conservative Republicans pressured Harkin to scrap a provision that would have required schools to evaluate teachers using student test scores, classroom observations and other methods. Unions have been adamant that student test scores do not adequately reflect teacher performance.

"For 95 percent of schools, Washington is going to get out of the business of deciding who is succeeding and who is failing," said Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.), a committee member and former education secretary. He was among three Republicans — including Enzi and Sen. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) — who joined with Democrats to approve the bill.

It now heads to the full Senate for a vote.

Harkin said that he wanted to keep the teacher evaluation requirement and to require states to set annual goals for student achievement but that he made the concessions to win the backing of Republicans.

"I refuse to let the perfect be the enemy of the good and for my own views to take precedent over the needs for bipartisan legislation," Harkin said.

The bill would retain a key provision of No Child Left Behind, which requires schools to test students annually in reading and math in grades three through eight and once in high school. Schools would also be also required to break down those results by gender, racial group and English language ability.

Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.), elected last year with support from the tea party movement, wanted to get rid of that, too. He unsuccessfully tried to persuade the panel to roll back national education policy to 1994, when the federal role was much more limited.

Some Democrats argued that the Harkin-Enzi bill is too soft on the states and would not do enough to compel failing schools to improve.

"This is the biggest federal retreat that I think we've had in domestic policy that I can remember," said Sen. Michael F. Bennet (D-Colo.), a former Denver school superintendent. "Children are being shackled to a place where they're getting no education at all. . . . We're holding onto one small sliver, children who are marooned, and were saying, 'You need to do something about it if you take federal funds.' To insist that the very bottom of the heap be dealt with is not excessive federal intervention."

When No Child Left Behind was enacted in 2002, it marked an unprecedented reach into education by the federal government, propelled by a bipartisan alliance between President George W. Bush and the late Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), who argued that states receiving federal money for education must be held accountable for results.

The law was embraced by [civil rights groups](#) that believed that struggling children were hidden from view, their test scores obscured by school averages, and that failing schools had no incentive to improve on their own.

But in the nine years since No Child Left Behind was enacted, schools, states and teachers unions have widely complained that its goals are unrealistic and the sanctions draconian.

The law was due for reauthorization four years ago.

Last month, President Obama said he was so frustrated by congressional inaction that he would direct Education Secretary Arne Duncan to [waive](#) the requirements of the law for states that embrace education policies favored by the White House. At least 39 states, in addition to the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, intend to apply for a waiver.

Harkin, Enzi, Alexander and others in the Senate want to pass a bill by the end of the year, before the waivers are issued.

Harkin agreed to hold a hearing on the legislation next month before the bill goes to the Senate floor.

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Early-Learning Race to Top Contests: 35 State Applicants

Education Week

By: Alyson Klein

October 20, 2011

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2011/10/early_learning_race_to_top_con.html

By guest blogger Sean Cavanagh

Thirty-five states, plus the District of Columbia, are vying for a piece of the \$500 million [Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge](#), a competition meant to spawn innovative approaches for improving the skills and development of young children.

The contest has drawn applications from states with very different early-childhood education systems. Eleven of the 12 winners in the two rounds of the earlier Race to the Top competition, which split \$4 billion in awards, are making a bid this time. Only Tennessee elected to sit this one out.

One state that applied in the earlier round of Race to the Top, chose [not to pursue](#) the early-learning money after officials there raised concerns about creating a new program with one-time money.

Applicants will be eligible for early-learning awards worth between \$50 million and \$100 million, based on the details of the state's proposal and its population of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

State applications were due this month, and the awards are expected to be announced in December. Unlike the earlier Race to the Top competition, which was overseen by the U.S. Department of Education, the early learning challenge is being administered jointly by the Education Department and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which is heavily involved in early-childhood programs, most notably Head Start.

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Senate Education Panel Approves ESEA Overhaul

Education Week

By: Alyson Klein

October 20, 2011

[http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/10/20/09eseahearing.h31.html?](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/10/20/09eseahearing.h31.html?tkn=PPPFxXGucJFciKnINYN47gjoouPPWJBv56H&cmp=clp-edweek)

[tkn=PPPFxXGucJFciKnINYN47gjoouPPWJBv56H&cmp=clp-edweek](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/10/20/09eseahearing.h31.html?tkn=PPPFxXGucJFciKnINYN47gjoouPPWJBv56H&cmp=clp-edweek)

After a long delay, the Senate education committee approved a bill Thursday night that would rewrite the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, but the measure is certain to encounter further debate on the Senate floor.

The bill, sponsored by the committee's chairman, Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, and its ranking Republican, Sen. Mike Enzi of Wyoming, garnered support from all of the committee's Democrats and three Republicans—Sen. Enzi, Sen. Mark Kirk of Illinois, and Sen. Lamar Alexander of Tennessee.

Sen. Harkin hopes to move the bill to the floor of the Senate before Thanksgiving, and he believes it's "possible" that Congress could approve a rewritten version of the nation's main education law before Christmas—in time to negate the need for the Obama administration's [waiver plan](#).

The bill would change several aspects of the current ESEA, known, at least for now, as the No Child Left Behind Act.

It would scrap the accountability system at the heart of the nearly 10-year-old NCLB Act—adequate yearly progress, or AYP. Instead, it would place the federal focus on the lowest-performing schools, including high schools with high-drop rates. The measure would call on states to craft college-and-career standards, and it would streamline the Department of Education by consolidating 82 programs into around 40.

The measure would retain the NCLB law's regime of testing in math and reading in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school, and it would continue to require states to disaggregate data by particular subgroups of students, including racial minorities. But it would scrap the requirement that states set annual, measurable goals—a move that drew stringent opposition from the civil rights community, including disability advocacy groups who have long seen a champion in Sen. Harkin. In an interview after the markup, Sen. Harkin said that, ultimately, "we will not lose the support of disability groups."

Changes Made

Several amendments to the Harkin-Enzi bill were floated during the two-day markup leading up to Thursday's vote in the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee. Among them, an approved amendment would let states submit their own ideas for turning around the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools.

That provision, sponsored by Sen. Alexander would retain the six turnaround models spelled out in the ESEA reauthorization bill introduced last week by Sens. Harkin and Enzi. The amendment would add a seventh option, allowing districts to come up with their own turnaround ideas, then submit them to the U.S. Secretary of Education for approval.

Speaking on the second day of the committee's markup of the bill, Sen. Alexander said his amendment would allow states to come up with their own best interventions for the lowest-performing schools. He said his own home state, Tennessee, has an excellent new state schools chief and governor who may come up with their own ideas for low-performing schools.

When he was governor of Tennessee, Sen. Alexander said, "I never thought Washington was ahead of me."

But seven Democrats on the committee—including Sen. Harkin and Sen. Michael Bennet, D-Colo.—voted against the amendment, which passed with unanimous support from Republican members.

"We are talking about the bottom 5 percent of schools," said Sen. Bennet. "None of us send our children to those schools. None of us has grandchildren in those schools. ... My hope is that whatever these models are, they are at least as robust as the ones that are contained in the legislation. Otherwise we're going to have those children who are marooned in those 5 percent of schools, marooned in those schools for the rest of their K-12 education, for the rest of their lives."

After the vote, a Senate GOP aide gave Mary Kusler, the manager of federal advocacy for the National Education Association, a congratulatory hug. The NEA put its political heft behind the provision.

Ms. Kusler was happy with the outcome. The NEA has not been a huge fan of the Obama administration's turnaround models, in part because the union considers them a federal intrusion into what it sees as a state and local interest. And many of the existing models require the removal of teachers, or call for merit pay.

"We applaud the passage of Sen. Alexander's amendment to add additional flexibility to the turnaround models in the bill," she said in a statement. "If you want to make lasting, sustainable changes, you must engage all of the people who are involved—educators, parents, administrators, and community members."

Amendments Accepted

Amendments from a number of senators were accepted during the markup:

- Sen. Alexander introduced an amendment, accepted on voice vote, that would allow students in the lowest 5 percent of schools to transfer to better-performing schools.
- An amendment sponsored by Sen. Kay Hagan, D-N.C., would require that new principals coming into turnaround schools have a background in school improvement. Some Republicans voted against it, including Sen. Alexander, who said he thought that districts would already be planning to choose the best person.
- An amendment by Sen. Al Franken, D-Minn., would give states the option of using computer-adaptive tests for accountability purposes under the law. Sen. Franken said the tests are a big hit in his state and give teachers a right-now picture of how their students are doing.
- Another Franken amendment would provide competitive grants to recruit and train principals to lead turnaround schools.
- Sen. Bernie Sander, I-Vt., won approval for an amendment that would call for schools to do a better job tracking students' movement from 8th grade to 9th grade.
- An amendment from Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., asks states to "cross-tabulate" existing student data to make it more clear how students in particular subgroups are doing.
- Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., introduced an amendment to reauthorize the Educational Technology State Grants, which helps states design technology programs. The program lost its authorization in the 2011 continuing resolution, and was eliminated under the bill. The language would restore the program.
- Sen. Robert Casey, D-Pa., introduced an amendment that would create a "well-rounded education" fund. School districts could use the money to fund arts; civics and government; economics; environmental education; financial literacy; foreign languages; geography; health education; history; physical education; and social studies programs.
- Sen. Bennet put forth an amendment that would give states the option of holding their teacher training programs accountable for producing educators who demonstrate the ability to boost student achievement before they graduate. In exchange for their participation in the program, academies would be exempt from regulations that are "burdensome," "input based," and "unrelated to student achievement."

Amendments Turned Down

Other key amendments were rejected, including:

- An amendment by Sen. Sanders that would have only allowed teachers to be considered highly qualified if they had completed a state-approved traditional or alternative teacher preparation program, or passed a rigorous state-approved teacher performance assessment, and attained certification in their subject matter. Sen. Bennet argued the measure would deal a blow to Teach For America and other alternative certification programs.
- An amendment by Sen. Mark Kirk, R-Ill., that would have scrapped the authorization for the Promise Neighborhoods program, which helps communities create cradle-to-career services modeled on the Harlem Children's Zone. Sen. Kirk said the program had only financed a handful of planning grants and the money would be better spent on special education.

The markup got off to a rocky start after Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., threw up hurdles, filing 74 amendments and using a rare procedural move to limit the time the committee could debate the bill. He and committee leaders reached an agreement that allowed things to move forward while assuring him of a hearing on the bill Nov. 8, before it goes to the Senate floor.

Sen. Paul eventually agreed to scale his amendments back to just a handful, including one to repeal the No Child Left Behind Act. That amendment failed.

Amendments Withdrawn

The watch-word for this markup seems to be "withdrawn." Democrats, in particular, seem to be introducing amendments that take a stand on a particular issue, and then pulling them back without a vote. It's a way of planting a marker on policy without holding up the proceedings.

Some of these amendments are likely to be offered when the full Senate debates the bill, which could happen before Christmas if leaders on the education committee have their way. Among the examples:

- An Alexander amendment that would have stripped the "highly qualified teacher" provisions out of the bill. The bill retains the idea that teachers must have a degree in the subject they teach, plus be state-certified. Sen. Alexander's amendment would have let states decide who is highly qualified. He said he'd be bringing this one to the floor.
- An Alexander amendment that would have taken out language in the bill requiring that states make continuous improvement,

and another that would have eliminated a proposed requirement that states develop a plan to address schools with persistent achievement gaps. He made it clear that both of those amendments will make a reappearance on the floor, and that he'd fight for them in a conference committee.

- A pair of amendments from Sen. Casey to improve early childhood education.
- An amendment by Sen. Hagan that would have called for extending learning time programs.
- A proposal from Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., to allow states wiggle room from the law's testing mandates if appropriations aren't kept at a certain level.
- Sen. Pat Roberts, R-Kan., also introduced and then withdrew an amendment that would have scrapped the authorization for the Race to the Top program, President Barack Obama's signature education initiative. He said he would offer the amendment on the Senate floor.

One last tidbit: The new name for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act? The Elementary and Secondary Education Act. No Child Left Behind has become a toxic brand, so the committee is looking to get rid of the name and go back to the classic version.

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FLORIDA NEWS

Florida Chamber of Commerce wants more public funds for private schools

Florida Independent
By: Marcos Restrepo
October 20, 2011

<http://floridaindependent.com/53302/florida-chamber-of-commerce-education>

The Florida Chamber of Commerce today released its 2012 legislative agenda, which includes support for education changes that strengthen charter schools, expand the use of public funds for virtual/private schools and broaden the use of technology in the classroom.

The Chamber's [2012 agenda](#) (.pdf) states that "working with partners such as the Foundation for Florida's Future, The Florida Council of 100, Workforce Florida and other education reform advocates, Florida is leading the way for innovative education reforms needed to cultivate a talented workforce with the skills to succeed in the new economy."

The Florida Council of 100's ["Closing the Talent Gap"](#) (.pdf), published in January and heralded by the Chamber, states that the "crisis in human capital represents a vast and growing unmet need for a highly skilled and educated workforce — our state's most important resource for driving sustainable economic development and a diversified economy."

The Council of 100 study developed a business perspective that describes its "vision of Florida's Talent Supply Chain" that would be "access oriented, market driven, focused on high standards, accountability and incentives and cost effective."

The [Foundation for Florida's Future](#) and the [Foundation for Excellence in Education](#), led by former Gov. Jeb Bush, have promoted the type of education changes the Chamber supports in the 2012 legislative agendas.

Last month, state Rep. Erik Fresen and state Sen. Don Gaetz (both Republicans and both Chamber advocates) were invited to speak at the [National Summit on Education Reform](#), organized by the Foundation for Excellence in Education in San Francisco.

State Sen. Ellyn Bogdanoff, R-Fort Lauderdale (the Chamber's 2011 most valuable legislator) [recently filed a bill](#) "deleting a provision relating to the calculation of class size categorical allocations and the reduction and reallocation of funds; deleting a provision that requires the Commissioner of Education to prepare a reallocation of funds for school districts that have met the class size requirements."

The [Florida Constitution](#) currently caps the [number of students per classroom](#) at 18 for pre-kindergarten through grade 3, 22 for grades 4 through 8, and 25 for grades 9 through 12.

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Florida lawmakers to consider added flexibility for school districts

St. Petersburg Times
By: Jeff Solocheck
October 20, 2011

<http://www.tampabay.com/blogs/gradebook/content/florida-lawmakers-consider-added-flexibility-school-districts>

Not so long ago, Florida allowed school districts to earn "charter district" status that in theory freed them from many of the red tape regulations that occupy so much time and money. Hillsborough and Palm Beach were among those to win the label.

In reality, they didn't have as many freedoms as they had hoped, and over time the designation withered away.

Now, with school district officials loudly complaining about mountains of unfunded mandates at a time of decreasing revenue -- yes, forecasters told lawmakers on Thursday that a midyear "cut scenario" is appearing "much more likely" -- some lawmakers are entertaining the idea of giving districts more flexibility from bureaucracy.

Members of the Senate Pre-K-12 Appropriations subcommittee began taking testimony on what is being called the School District Innovation and Efficiency Act of 2012. The bill, a draft of which appeared in the [committee packet](#), would exempt school districts from most of the state's school statutes "with the intent of continuing significant improvements in student achievement through a variety of means."

Those would include adding more parent choices, expanding virtual education options and redirecting more funding into classrooms.

Consultant Juhan Mixon told the committee that school districts have become bogged down with regulations on top of regulations in an effort to create accountability. "We need between now and session ... to look at all the regulations we've got and say which are needed and which are not needed in an era when we're holding teachers right down to the student accountable," he said.

Remove some of the rules, he suggested, and if achievement dips, then put them back. But the time has come to give districts more room to breathe.

St. Lucie superintendent Michael Lannon agreed, calling for more flexibility to let the districts do their jobs well. He said districts can be more efficient when not bound by so many restrictions. He also asked lawmakers to give districts the ability to impose an added .25-mill critical needs operating tax without voter approval, as they could do until this year.

Subcommittee members plan to continue to look into the concept.

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Florida superintendents approve of proposed FCAT scoring changes

Orlando Sentinel

By: Leslie Postal

October, 20 2011

[http://blogs.orlandosentinel.com/news_education_edblog/2011/10/fl-superintendents-approve-of-proposed-fcat-scoring-changes.html?](http://blogs.orlandosentinel.com/news_education_edblog/2011/10/fl-superintendents-approve-of-proposed-fcat-scoring-changes.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+SentinelSchoolZone+%28Sentinel+School+Zone%29)

[utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+SentinelSchoolZone+%28Sentinel+School+Zone%29](http://blogs.orlandosentinel.com/news_education_edblog/2011/10/fl-superintendents-approve-of-proposed-fcat-scoring-changes.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+SentinelSchoolZone+%28Sentinel+School+Zone%29)

The Florida Association of District School Superintendents supports [the proposed changes to the FCAT scoring system](#).

The association, in a press release sent out earlier this week, said the changes increase "academic expectations and rigor."

They will "serve our students well as we all work together to ensure that they are academically prepared for a 21st century economy," said the association president, Orange Superintendent Ron Blocker.

Blocker, Seminole Superintendent Bill Vogel and Volusia Superintendent Margaret Smith were among a number of superintendents on a panel that recommended new "cut scores" for the state's revised FCAT reading and math exams. The cut scores determine what score fall into what achievement level on the five-level test.

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STATE NEWS

New Mexico Education secretary-designate Skandera seeks help with school reforms

The New Mexican

By: Robert Nott

October 20, 2011

<http://www.santafenewmexican.com/Local%20News/Skandera-seeking-help-with-school-reforms>

Education secretary-designate says legislators need to 'put kids first'

Hanna Skandera, who has run into controversies since her designation this year as state education secretary, is reaching out to superintendents and educational leaders around New Mexico in the hope they'll help reshape her social-promotion bill before next year's legislative session.

In a letter sent out last week to the New Mexico Coalition of School Administrators, Skandera also touched on other elements of the educational reform plan she is pushing in tandem with Gov. Susana Martinez. These include the new A-F grading system for schools, a move to reduce the number of reports school districts must annually file with the state Public Education Department and a revamp of the evaluation system for teachers.

On Thursday, Skandera spoke with *The New Mexican* about several of these issues, reflected upon her first 10 months in office and emphasized the need for state legislators to work together to "put kids first."

"People always look for the silver bullet in education," she said, "But I don't believe in one. Our challenge is not to ask, 'What is a good thing to do for education?' but 'What is a great thing to do for education?' ... and be persistent."

Since joining Martinez's administration in January, Skandera — who served as deputy commissioner of education under Florida Gov. Jeb Bush from 2005-07 — has lobbied both for a simple school grading system and to put an end to the practice of social promotion, in which third-graders who cannot read at a proficient level are passed into the fourth grade.

The New Mexico Legislature didn't confirm Skandera as secretary. She has come under fire from some state superintendents and other critics for a questionable state audit of both public and charter schools and for overruling the Public Education Commission's denial of three state charters earlier this year.

The Independent Source PAC, a liberal political-action group, also publicly criticized her for hiring Patricia Matthews — a lawyer for a legal firm that represents charter schools — as the new director of the Options for Parents department, which oversees charter schools and other alternative-learning venues.

State lawmakers passed the A-F grading bill in February, but the social-promotion bill stalled both in the regular session and a special session in September.

Skandera said she hopes educators within the New Mexico Coalition of School Administrators will contribute to rewriting the social-promotion bill so it can win favor next January. She reiterated that the plan — which she would like to rename the reading intervention bill — has built-in intervention practices in place to ensure students are reading up to their grade level so they don't have to be held back.

The department is still working out the specifics of the A-F system, Skandera said, but she did reveal some points. Her team is putting together three years of data that go beyond proficiency and growth, and include Standard Based Assessment results (which only includes grades 3 through 8 and the 11th grade).

The department also is creating a value-added model building what she calls a level playing field when it comes to accounting for student mobility, the impact of poverty, English-language learners and special-education students within each school.

In addition, schools may receive merit points if they demonstrate strong parental involvement, extracurricular activities, offer Advanced Placement classes and encourage students to take the SAT college-admission test.

According to the most recent Adequate Yearly Progress reports, 87 percent of New Mexico's schools are not making the grade.

"Eighty-seven percent of our schools will not be failing under the [new] school grading system," she said.

While acknowledging that many elements of the grading plan have yet to be worked out, preliminary baseline data suggest that some schools that appear to be doing well may not receive good grades, she said, while others people consider failing may do better than expected.

Speaking of two schools in one district that have been researched, for instance, she said the one that made Adequate Yearly Progress would receive a D. The one that did not will likely receive an A.

"The grading system will engage parents and communities," she said. "You hear that your school got a C and you'll work to get it a B. It also allows us to differentiate. How can we focus our resources on a school that is failing? This gives us an opportunity to intervene."

One element of the A-F plan allows parents to transfer their children from a D or F school to a higher-rated facility. Skandera could not say how this could play out if half a district's schools are rated D or F.

But she repeatedly emphasized the idea of moving those students into a "virtual learning" environment — which could include home — where they could set their own educational path by taking courses at a pace that allows them to keep up. These virtual learning options would offer more choice in course work, too, she said.

Though the state's Higher Education Department does include an Innovative Digital Education and Learning (IDEAL) program, Skandera said there may be other options to pursue for this initiative. The state just submitted a grant to the Jaquelin Hume Foundation to raise funds for a study on digital-learning resources to determine what the state has to offer and what it needs to expand this plan.

She said her dream would be to see an individualized, virtual-learning program set up.

Skandera said the department expects to release baseline school grades first to district superintendents and then to the public by the end of the calendar year. These grades will officially go into effect next summer.

While some superintendents have said they find Skandera willing to listen and cooperate, others have suggested that she has not welcomed their input, so the letter to the association represents an effort on her part to work with state educators.

Asked what she has learned on the job so far, Skandera said, "New Mexico is an unbelievably relational state, and there is a beauty in that. Relationships are key here; more than in other states. I also believe that parents and educators believe there is a sense of opportunity here to live in the richness of this state's culture and succeed."

As for the Legislature not confirming her appointment, she said, "I don't care. That doesn't mean it's not important to me ... but I came here to do a job. I can do it now and I will continue to do it."

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Only 1.5 percent of Illinois public high schools met federal progress mark

Chicago Sun Times

By: Rosalind Rossi

October 21, 2011

<http://www.suntimes.com/news/education/8328197-418/only-15-percent-of-state-public-high-schools-met-federal-progress-mark.html>

Nearly 99 percent of Illinois public high schools failed to meet federal progress standards this year, state officials revealed Thursday in announcing plans to seek a waiver from the increasingly demanding federal No Child Left Behind law.

Only eight of the state's public high schools made "adequate yearly progress," or AYP, meaning at least 85 percent of their overall students and subgroups of students — including special education and low-income kids — passed their 2011 state achievement tests.

"We know there's a lot better story going on than that," said Gery Chico, chairman of the Illinois State Board of Education. "More than eight high schools are doing well with their students..."

"I'm very, very disturbed by the No Child Left Behind Law and what it's doing right now to schools by labeling them as failing because they do not make AYP."

Schools that miss AYP for six consecutive years face the most severe sanctions, which can include closure. Nearly 400 Illinois schools now fall into that category.

Chico said Illinois would be taking up the feds on a recent decision to let states apply for waivers to the law. Illinois' plan to do so in February, Chico said, is not an attempt to cover up lousy results — including this year's record-low high school pass rate. Instead, he said, the state will push for a more "realistic" accountability system with "rigorous" but "attainable" goals.

The law's requirement that all students, and subgroups of students, must make AYP by 2014 was unrealistic when it was signed in 2002, Chico said. "I saw this day coming" at that time, he said.

Last year 77.5 percent of students had to pass their state tests for a school to make AYP, but this year 85 percent had to do so.

This year, more kids passed the Illinois Standards Achievement Tests in grades three through eight — but more high school juniors flunked the Prairie State Achievement Exam, which includes the ACT college admission test.

Overall, 82 percent of students passed their ISATs, up 1.1 percentage points, with reading scores improving in every grade, three to eight, and math down only in sixth and seventh.

But only 50.5 percent of high school juniors passed their PSAEs, down 2.5 percentage points from last year. Both 11th grade reading and math pass rates dropped.

State officials blamed the high school declines on new rules this year that barred high schools from prohibiting academically weak juniors from taking the test. As a result, they said, 12,500 more students took this year's high school exam.

State Supt. Chris Koch once again noted the "disconnect" between the state's elementary-grade test, with its 82 percent pass rate, and its high school one, passed by only half of all juniors. As a result, Koch said, the state's waiver "will be raising the

expectations for elementary” tests while providing better and more complete high school measurements.

Koch said he wants to give schools credit for growth and to “redefine what it means to make AYP.” In high schools, Chico said, officials may add other measuring sticks to the mix, such as Advanced Placement tests and honors-level courses.

“There’s something wrong with the system if only eight schools in Illinois made AYP,” said Linda Yonke, superintendent over the district housing high-scoring New Trier Township High School, which failed to make AYP for the second year in a row, based on its special education population.

Yonke said New Trier has an ACT average of 27.5, and even the bottom 10 percent of its students scored above the national and state average on the ACT.

“But we didn’t make AYP,” Yonke said. “It’s just a reflection of how meaningless this whole process has become.”

The federal requirements mean that, “three years from now, literally if you have one student who didn’t meet or exceed standards, your school would be failing,” Yonke said. “It’s just not feasible unless your standards are so low they have no meaning.”

The waiver would provide a breather until 2014, when Illinois will join a consortium of states in adopting a new, more rigorous test tied to “common core” standards.

Koch said Thursday the common core test is expected to be more expensive because it will probably include more questions requiring short written answers, and will be given at the beginning and end of a school year to assess the growth of individual students. As a result, Koch said, Illinois may not want to test its elementary students in every grade in the future.

“I would argue probably in the United States, we’re testing too much. Countries that are exceeding us [in international tests] are not testing every child every year in every grade,” Koch said. Instead, he said, they are choosing to put their education resources elsewhere.

Contributing: Art Golab

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Brown proposes waiving annual evaluations to draw top teachers to struggling schools

Washington Post

By: Bill Turque

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http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/dc-schools-insider/post/brown-proposes-waiving-annual-evaluations-to-draw-top-teachers-to-struggling-schools/2011/10/20/gIQA7wHL2L_blog.html

D.C. Council Chairman Kwame R. Brown (D) is developing legislation to encourage the city’s most effective teachers to work in its lowest-performing schools by exempting them from annual evaluations for at least a couple of years.

The measure, which Brown said Thursday he will introduce soon, is an attempt to address one of the most vexing issues facing DCPS: how to put its best teachers in front of the children who need them the most. The maldistribution of teaching talent is illustrated by the location of the 663 teachers deemed “highly effective” on the most recent round of IMPACT evaluations. Just 71 work in the 41 schools in Wards 7 and 8, while the ten schools in Ward 3 are home to 135 top educators.

There are also data indicating that the proportion of novice teachers in high-poverty areas has increased significantly in recent years.

“We have to get high-performing teachers into low-performing schools,” said Brown, who added that he has discussed the idea with Chancellor Kaya Henderson, describing her reaction as “excited.”

Under IMPACT, teachers in high-poverty schools who reach the highly effective level can earn an additional \$10,000. There are additional payments for teachers whose students exceed predicted growth on the DC CAS (\$10,000) or for those who work in a sought after subject area such as special education (\$5,000).

While teachers weigh a variety of factors when deciding whether to switch schools (working environment, the principal) the high-stakes nature of IMPACT is clearly a disincentive for working with more challenging students. A poor IMPACT score can mean dismissal. Even Henderson has acknowledged that a teacher who is highly effective in one school may not be highly effective somewhere else. Waiving IMPACT would alleviate the career risks involved in such a move.

Brown said he is still working out the details, but that he might propose that the idea be tried on a pilot basis in the city's middle schools, most of which have dismal academic records.

Brown's proposal was first reported earlier Thursday evening by The Washington Examiner.

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