
Federal Foray into School Accountability Brings Outcry from the States

The federal government's venture into public school accountability in the form of the No Child Left Behind Act has created a storm in the states as state and local education agencies learn of the magnitude of the act and the expense in implementing it. The bipartisan outcry has come from states from Arizona to Ohio, with some state officials even suggesting foregoing federal Title I monies to get out from under its requirements.

In North Carolina, the response has been more muted, in part because the state already had much of the testing infrastructure in place due to its own accountability program, the 1996–1997 ABCs of Public Education law. The state's congressional delegation voted overwhelmingly in favor of the federal law, with Sen. John Edwards and 10 of the state's then 12 House members voting for it. Former Sen. Jesse Helms and Reps. Walter Jones and Charles Taylor voted no.

Since then, enthusiasm for the new law in North Carolina has waned. Sen. John Edwards, in an unsuccessful bid for the presidency, pronounced his support for the law a mistake.¹ And, in March 2004, the State Board of Education, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Mike Ward, a delegation of 10 North Carolina education groups, and selected N.C. DPI personnel traveled to meet with the state's congressional delegation as well as U.S. Department of Education officials to press for revisions in the law in seven different areas. Among the State Board of Education's concerns were what it referred to as "the all or nothing" nature of the law in holding schools separately accountable for performance of multiple subgroups of students, funding issues, the way the law handles students with disabilities, participation requirements for high-stakes testing, and the requirement that every classroom be staffed by a highly qualified teacher.

But despite the unprecedented trip to Washington to argue for tweaks in the law, the board

reiterated its support for the increased federal role in holding the public schools accountable for student performance. "The goals are the right goals," the board stated in prepared materials.² "We do not want any child 'left behind' or allowed to accomplish less than he or she could with appropriate guidance and support from highly qualified teachers and administrators. We believe adjustments in the areas we have identified will . . . strengthen the law and ensure its ultimate success and, more importantly, the success of every child in North Carolina's schools."

Meanwhile, Republican President George Bush has criticized Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry for voting for No Child Left Behind and then attacking the law on the campaign trail, though the Kerry campaign staff maintains that most of Kerry's complaints are about funding levels.³ Bush vows to stand behind the law no matter the complaints of critics. These now include governors of both parties who raised questions and concerns at a February 2004 meeting of the National Governors Association in Washington, D.C.⁴ "We're not backing down," Bush declared at a May 2004 appearance at an Arkansas middle school. "I don't care how much pressure they try to put on the process. I'm not changing my mind about high standards and the need for accountability."⁵

—Mike McLaughlin

FOOTNOTES

¹ Erik W. Robelen, "No Child Law Faulted in Democratic Race," *Education Week*, Bethesda, Md., January 14, 2004, p. 1.

² "No Child Left Behind: The North Carolina Perspective," State Board of Education, Raleigh, N.C., March 31, 2004, p. 3.

³ Sean Cavanagh, "Bush Takes on Critics of No Child Left Behind Act," *Education Week*, Bethesda, Md., May 19, 2004, p. 28.

⁴ Alan Richard and Erik W. Robelen, "Federal Law Is Questioned by Governors," *Education Week*, Bethesda, Md., March 3, 2004, p. 1.

⁵ Cavanagh, note 3 above.