

# Plans seek high standards, accountability for students

## 'Federal elementary and secondary education intervention is a failure'

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While the satirical R-rated comedy "Bad [Teacher](#)" by no means addresses the root problems plaguing the public school system today, it has put the topic of public [education](#) in the spotlight.

Now a major question that needs to be addressed is: What can be done to fix No Child Left Behind?

The federal No Child Left Behind Act is a "slow-motion train wreck for children, parents and teachers," said Education Secretary Arne Duncan.

The Obama administration says it is prepared to offer regulatory flexibility to states regarding NCLB if Congress does not provide a solution about reauthorization of the bill before the August recess.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, passed under President George W. Bush, was meant to provide standards-based reform, hold primary and [secondary schools](#) to higher standards, and give parents more opportunity for school choice.

Under the law, schools that receive funding from the federal government must administer a statewide standardized test in addition to meeting other mandates. But this requires states to hand over billions of dollars to satisfy federal requirements and provide the extensive manpower to complete the necessary federal paperwork. In fact, 41 percent of the monetary and employee support in state education agencies is a result of federal regulations and mandates, according to the Government Accountability Office.

*(Story continues below)*

Furthermore, each state sets its own achievement standard. This leads some to argue that NCLB encourages political maneuvering instead of excellence in education. For example, numerous states have lowered academic achievement standards to avoid sanctions by the federal government.

"Federal elementary and [secondary education](#) intervention is a failure and it is unconstitutional," said Neil McCluskey, associate director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute.

McCluskey spoke at congressional briefing on NCLB hosted by the Cato Institute recently. He said that the power over education should belong to local government and be in the hands of parents, not the federal government.

Last year, McCluskey published a policy analysis titled "Behind the Curtain: Assessing the Case for National [Curriculum](#) Standards." The analysis demonstrates why national education standards don't work for the benefit of students, but universal school choice for parents does.

"Only a free market can produce the mix of high standards, accountability, and flexibility that is essential to achieving optimal educational outcomes," wrote McCluskey.

Duncan has said he believes Congress will promptly take the necessary steps to improve NCLB, but he expresses concern over the timeliness of reform for children in the public school system who "only get one shot" at their education.

"While Congress works, state and local school districts are buckling under the law's goals and mandates," Duncan said.

Two pieces of legislation in Congress that offer educational reform are titled the A-PLUS Act and the Learn Act.

The Academic Partnerships Lead Us to Success Act, known as the A-Plus Act, was re-introduced this year by Republican Sens. Jim DeMint and John Cornyn. The A-Plus Act aims to give states flexibility in determining how to improve academic performance, decrease administrative costs and comply with regulations handed down by the federal government. It also upholds accountability to the public for advancing the academic achievement of students.

"The A-PLUS Act recalibrates the balance of power between federal and state governments, and strengthens schools' accountability to parents. Instead of rewarding schools for making risk-averse policy decisions about how to meet NCLB targets, A-PLUS empowers schools to base policy decisions on the interests of their students," said Cornyn.

One aspect of the A-Plus Act is it gives states the opportunity to voluntarily enter into a five-year performance agreement with the U.S. Secretary of Education. This allows states

to consolidate federal education funds to use on their state's education as deemed best and not be subject to federal NCLB regulations for the five-year period. In exchange, the state must demonstrate students have improved academically and the achievement gap between students has been narrowed. If the state fails to show improvement academically, the agreement is removed and the state must return to the NCLB regulations.

Also, the A-PLUS Act provides for increased accountability such as making it necessary for states to offer their annual findings on student improvement to parents and taxpayers.

"It's time to give parents and teachers more choices and flexibility to offer children the best education possible," said DeMint.

Another piece of educational legislation, the Local Education Authority Returns Now (LEARN) Act, was introduced by New Jersey Congressman Scott Garrett last year. The LEARN Act redirects power and resources by allowing states to opt out of federal money and retain taxpayer money that would have gone to the federal Department of Education and spend it instead on local education. Garrett says one component of the LEARN Act is it avoids large amounts of money being lost to bureaucratic waste.

"It allows versatility in the classroom and allows education to be multi-faceted and dynamic, some of the characteristics that have been lacking in our education system since No Child Left Behind regulations have consumed many [school curriculums](#)," said Garrett.

Ben Veghte, spokesman for Garrett, said that the New Jersey congressman has always been an opponent of No Child Left Behind.

"He believes power belongs on the state and local level in education. That is one of the reasons he introduced the Learn Act," said Veghte.

The problems within the public school system have led some parents to make the choice to [homeschool](#) their children. A survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) revealed that in 2007 there were 1.5 million children homeschooled. The three main reasons parents polled cited for [homeschooling](#) their children included wanting to provide religious or moral instruction, concern about the school environment, and dissatisfaction with the academic instruction at other schools.

Author Brian Ray published a study of more than 5,000 homeschooled children titled, "Strengths of Their Own: Homeschoolers Across America." The study revealed on the average, "homeschoolers out-performed their counterparts in the public schools by 30 to 37 percentile points in all subjects."

"The academic success of homeschooling shows that individualized education and high parental involvement almost always leads to academic success," said William Estrada, director of federal relations for the [Home School](#) Legal Defense Association. While Estrada is an advocate for homeschool families, he is also concerned about the

educational welfare of the children attending public schools in the United States. He believes if he saw more local control in education and greater parent involvement, there would be a turnaround in public schools.

"We wish the federal government would get out of the business of education and leave it to the states, local control, and to the parents where it belongs," said Estrada.