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Obama proposes new way of uniformly raising academic standards

Under Obama's plan, states would be eligible for federal Title I funding only if they adopt new academic standards that are certified as 'college- and career-ready.'



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President Obama made clear Monday his commitment to raising academic standards in all states.

Under a new proposal, states would be eligible for federal Title I funding – the money set aside for poor students – only if they adopt new standards that are certified as “college- and career-ready.”

That's been the new buzzword in education circles lately, and that idea is providing a big push to the common standards that the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers are developing. The standards are set to be finalized this spring.

Currently, states adopt their own standards, and many have lowered theirs to make it easier for students to reach a proficient level: Thirty-one have set fourth-grade reading proficiency standards that are lower than the “basic” level determined by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), according to a White House briefing. Between 2005 and 2007, 11 states lowered their standards in math.

“That may make those states look better relative to other states, but it's not going to help our students keep up with global competition,” Mr. Obama told a gathering of the NGA on Monday, as he went on to outline his proposal. “If a university, state, or school district begins preparing educators to teach to higher standards, we'll give them the support that they need.”

He added, “To make sure we're delivering for our kids, we're launching a competition to reward states that join together to develop the highest-quality, cutting-edge assessments required to measure progress, and we'll help support their

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implementation.”

It's unusual, some observers have noted, to have a proposal tying such large amounts of federal money to standards that don't yet exist.

“We're sort of running ahead of ourselves, but this is a fast-moving game,” says Jack Jennings, president of the Center on Education Policy in Washington, which has advocated encouraging states to adopt more-rigorous common standards. So far, he notes, only one state – Kentucky – has officially announced it will adopt the new standards.

The proposal clearly pushes states to adopt the new common standards. So far, only two states – Texas and Alaska – have declined to be part of the consortium developing the standards.

States can also work with universities, the Obama administration has said, to certify that their existing standards are high enough.

The proposal also calls for \$405 million to help states better prepare teachers, \$400 million to help states implement assessments aligned with the new standards, and \$2.5 billion to support professional development for educators.

Previous, top-down efforts to create national standards have failed. The current effort has gained more traction in part because it has been developed by the consortium of states, rather than by the federal government. But it still has many critics. Rick Perry, the Republican Texas governor, is not participating, citing Texas' already high standards and saying it smacks of a “federal takeover” of public schools.

Neal McCluskey, an education analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington, is another critic of the common-standards initiative. There is no evidence, he says, that national standards will lead to higher achievement or will even necessarily be better standards. And once a system of national standards has been adopted, he says, it becomes difficult to ensure that they're enforced, and it insulates state- or district-level officials from responsibility.

“Talk is nice, but it never translates into kids really meeting high standards consistently over time,” Mr. McCluskey says. “It's the structure of the system that causes it to have low standards.... What we need, rather than further centralizing authority over education, is decentralization.”

Mr. Jennings acknowledges all those difficulties. But still, he says, the process is essential and is a step in the right direction.

It's still doubtful whether Congress will be able to move quickly enough to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (better known as No Child Left Behind) this year. Congress would consider the proposal that Obama outlined Monday as part of a reauthorization.

The House Education and Labor Committee has announced plans for a bipartisan effort in the reauthorization process, which kicks off with hearings this Wednesday on a proposal to expand access to charter schools.

“This is moving,” says Jennings. “We shall see how far it gets, but it's moving.”

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