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Obama Admin. Outlines Vision for ESEA Reauthorization

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U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan says too many states lowered educational standards to comply with the No Child Left Behind Act. Duncan has announced the Obama administration's proposed overhaul of the law this year will emphasize "high, standards, rewarding excellence, and a smarter, less prescriptive federal role."

In the past six weeks, Duncan testified to Congress, spoke to school administrators in Phoenix, and addressed state governors in Washington DC about the administration's plans, saying he is "optimistic" its guiding principles would attract bipartisan support.

President Obama echoed the secretary's comments in his address to the National Governors Association in February. Obama said ESEA reauthorization would include funding contingencies, such as requiring states to present a plan for adopting college and career-ready standards. The president outlined his goals for reauthorization of ESEA, which was last reauthorized in 2002.

Republicans Respond

As administration officials lay out the specific elements they want included in a reauthorization bill, Republicans in Congress are outlining the policies they believe would most improve education. Rep. John Kline (R-MN), ranking Republican member of the House Education and Labor Committee, is uncertain about an ESEA reauthorization timeline but has specific goals in mind for the direction of education policy in 2010.

"When Congress reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Republicans will be focused on one simple goal: Doing what's best for students, parents, teachers, and communities. We can accomplish that by restoring local control, empowering parents, letting teachers teach, and protecting taxpayers," Kline said.

"While it's too soon to say exactly what shape a new federal education law will take, it is clear that there is no one-size-fits-all federal solution for the challenges in our schools," Kline added. "That's why I welcome an emphasis on local innovation and flexibility – and it's why I'm wary of new initiatives pushed by the Obama administration that could result in a de facto national curriculum with the national tests to match."

Kline said he is concerned about any further federal intrusion into education, traditionally a state and local matter.

"While Secretary Duncan has said some very promising things about expanding access to charter schools and improving teacher quality through performance pay, the administration has also identified proposals that would be far more federally intrusive," Kline said. He pointed to Obama's proposal to tie funding to federal curriculum requirements, which would, "in effect, [put] bureaucrats in Washington in charge of what's taught in individual classrooms."

State Authority Preferred

Rep. Rob Bishop (R-UT), a former classroom teacher and another member of the House education committee, also expressed concerns about an enlarged federal role in education.

"When it comes to education and the future of children in this country, it should be easy to see that states, not the federal government, are better suited to address the unique needs of their student populations," Bishop said.

"I hope this administration provides states with more flexibility and local accountability and parents with increased

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Ben Boychuk III is the new managing editor of *School Reform News*. He's available for research, writing, and speaking engagements on school reform issues from distance learning to vouchers and everything in between.

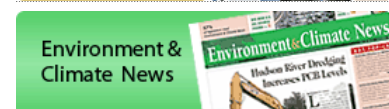
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options and choice. But, if we've learned anything in Washington, it is that rhetoric does not always match reality," Bishop added.

Bishop says he hopes Democrats and Republicans can find common ground to give parents, teachers, and local school officials more freedom to serve students' needs.

"It's critical that all of us, regardless of party lines or political pressures, do what is necessary to ensure teachers, parents, and schools have the necessary flexibility to meet the diverse needs of students," he said. "It is my hope that more control will be transferred from the federal government back to the states, where it belongs.

Federal Expansion Expected

But although the Obama administration has been supportive of states adopting college and career-ready standards, it intends to expand the federal government's reach into K-12 education, says Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom.

"It's clear that the Obama administration will be pushing for national—though the President prefers the term 'common'—standards to be part of the No Child Left Behind reauthorization," he said.

"It appears that he wants academic progress to be judged, at least in part, on how well students do on assessments of national standards rather than separate state standards," McCluskey said. "What is unclear is how much of a school or district's evaluation he'd like to see based on such assessments, and how much on other measures such as graduation rates, portfolio evaluations, and myriad other possibilities.

"Regardless of the mix, it is unrealistic to believe that just because standards are common or national they will be high, and if somehow high, actually met. The research on national standards is slim at best, and none of it demonstrates that national standards improve outcomes," McCluskey added.

NCLB Prospects Uncertain

McCluskey notes the prospects of Congress actually reauthorizing No Child Left Behind are still uncertain. "If enough members of Congress believe Americans are outraged because they think Congress has become paralyzingly partisan, education is a place where they can overcome that," he said. "Many Republicans and Democrats would likely support imposing 'high standards' from Washington."

Even if reauthorization has bipartisan support, McCluskey predicts a bill would have trouble getting passed this year.

"The preliminary work on legislation is just beginning, and it is hard to imagine too many folks in Congress working really hard to reauthorize NCLB while they pour their energy into getting reelected in November," McCluskey said.

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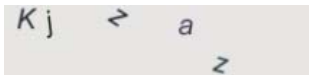
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