

Members of Congress Propose Changes to No Child Left Behind Act

By Gitanjali Hazarika

Congress is debating the reauthorization of the landmark No Child Left Behind Act, which is due to expire this year. The controversial law forced strict new standards on public schools aimed at preventing them from covering up or ignoring low achievement rates. It required all districts to meet similar standards regardless of their proportions of poor, minority, or special-needs students.

The Congressional debates have centered on how the act can be improved to better assess student achievements and weaknesses. A few senators, like Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), want to “fix one of the law’s more glaring problems” so that it retains its most critical accountability provisions. However, others argue that the law harms at-risk students by paying little attention to their needs.

According to the act’s supporters, schools often blame poverty and uneducated parents for their own poor performance. No Child Left Behind holds schools accountable for the performance of their students in reading and math, setting 100% proficiency in those subjects by 2014 as its overarching goal. The law also requires schools to be graded on the basis of their pass/fail rates. Schools that fail to meet the standards set by the law incur disciplinary sanctions, which increase with time and end in the schools’ closure or restructuring under new management.

In its present form, the act has been criticized as flawed, and during the six hours of Congressional testimony last week, educators derided it and suggested several changes, some of which included:

- the adoption of uniform, national-level minimum performance standards for both students and schools
- assessment of student learning to ascertain whether schools are meeting standards
- the adoption of methods to ensure that all children from diverse backgrounds are learning equally
- a requirement that schools maintain transparency regarding their performance

With reauthorization work on the act underway, it is time Congress also set the ball rolling on high school reform in the next version to arrest the nation’s high dropout rate of more than 1 million students per year.