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Moving Beyond No Child Left Behind

The reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) was due to take place in 2008, but an election, financial crisis, and health care reform have delayed the process. However, this week, President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan sought to jump start the process by offering a blueprint for overhauling No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the current version of ESEA.

As expected, this blueprint builds on themes present in the requirements for Race to the Top (RTTT). What is key to this blueprint is a revamping of the accountability system that has become synonymous with NCLB. The President proposes leaving behind the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets and their timeline for 100% proficiency by 2013-14 for a system that focuses federal resources on the lowest-achieving schools and places an emphasis on students' academic growth.

A notable departure that the proposal takes from NCLB is to shift from predominately distributing federal funds as a system of entitlements to one that includes entitlements, but also features a number of competitive opportunities modeled after RTTT.

The proposal carries forward the focus on reform of "persistently low performing schools" as defined for School Improvement Grants from American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Funding. Each state would be required to identify the schools for which grants would be available. The goal is to spur significant changes in the operations, governance, staffing, and instructional program of such schools by requiring one of the following actions:

- Transformation: Replace the principal, strengthen staffing, implement a research-based instructional program, provide extended learning time, and implement new governance and flexibility
- Turnaround: Replace the principal and rehire no more than 50% of the school staff, implement a research-based instructional program, provide extended learning time, and implement new governance and flexibility
- Restart: Convert or close and reopen the school under the management of an effective charter operator, charter management organization, or education management organization
- School Closure: Close the school and enroll students who attended it in other, higher-performing schools in the district.

Another major area of change included in the plan is teacher and principal quality. Under the proposed plan, states and local educational agencies will be required to put in place specific policies and systems, including:

- Statewide definitions of "effective teacher," "effective principal," and "highly effective teacher," and "highly effective principal" that are based on student academic growth and other data, such as classroom observations. The current law related to "Highly Qualified Teachers" would continue, but with additional flexibility.
- State-level data systems that link information on teacher and principal preparation programs to the job placement, student growth, and retention outcomes of their graduates.
- District-level evaluation systems that meaningfully differentiate teacher and principal performance levels based on measurements of "effectiveness" provide meaningful feedback to improve their practices and inform professional development, and are developed in collaboration with teachers, principals, and other educational stakeholders.

While the proposal calls for abandoning AYP, it would retain the NCLB requirement that assessments be administered by states and disaggregated by racial and ethnic groups and other populations, such as students in special education. However, in terms of applying accountability standards, emphasis would be placed on students' academic growth rather than comparing different cohorts of students with each other. The proposal does not provide details regarding how districts and schools currently under Program Improvement sanctions would be transitioned from the current accountability system to the proposed

accountability system.

Go to <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/blueprint.pdf> for a copy of the proposal.

—*Jannelle Kubinec*

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