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To Educators, 'No Child' Goals Out of Reach

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As the bad news about America's public schools has poured in, with large numbers falling short of state targets demanded by the new federal education law, local officials are blaming the White House and Congress for asking the impossible. How could rational leaders demand, in just 12 years, that 100 percent of students do well enough on standardized tests to be rated proficient in reading and math?

The No Child Left Behind law is "out of touch with reality," said Ron Wimmer, school superintendent in Olathe, Kan., and many of his counterparts across the country agree.

But in Washington, lawmakers who committed this alleged assault on common sense say they are sure they did the right thing. More than a year since the law took effect, they acknowledge that many people think it is much too ambitious to insist that all students meet state standards by 2014, and that all teachers be deemed "highly qualified" by 2006. Still, they ask, what are the alternatives?

Assume for a moment that Congress had decided instead to set a goal of 95 percent of all students being proficient in reading and math, said Rep. John A. Boehner (R-Ohio), chairman of the House Education and Workforce Committee. "Okay, so let's throw 5 percent of the kids overboard," he said. "It wouldn't be my kid or your kid, but it will be somebody's child. Don't they count?"

The same goes for making certain that every teacher is highly qualified with proper credentials and a college degree, said Rep. George Miller (Calif.), the ranking Democratic member of the same committee who joined with Boehner in writing the law, which is a linchpin of the Bush administration's domestic policy.

"We are talking about goals for the nation," Miller said. It can't be, "Well, you have to have a highly qualified teacher . . . unless you are poor or unless you are a minority. That wouldn't work."

Rarely has such a gulf existed between the authors of a major piece of federal legislation and its executors -- in this case, the 90,000 public schools across the country. Many teachers and principals say they see no way that they can make the required "adequate yearly progress" toward such daunting goals, given the deadlines. For one thing, the law requires steady progress within categories of students who are often the hardest to prepare for tests: special education students, recent immigrants with limited English skills and children living in poverty.

At the same time, the legislators and federal education authorities who wrote the law say they see no other way to make progress, because previous attempts to fix struggling schools with a more modest approach did not work well.

It has been 38 years since Congress first declared that it wanted no child overlooked by passing Title I of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the first major grant of federal dollars to low-income schools. "By the time I got here in 1975, everyone was dipping their hands into the Title I money," Miller said. "Suburban districts wanted that federal money, so it got diluted. Then we said, 'Well, we want these standards,' and then this president [George W. Bush] said, 'I want to reconcentrate

the money, as Lyndon Johnson had suggested, and focus on the poorest children and poorest-performing schools.' "

This was a radical departure, Miller said, but one that Democrats and Republicans accepted. In the 2000 presidential campaign, Bush and then-Vice President Al Gore supported the concepts of regular testing and higher standards, already in place in many states, that became central to the No Child Left Behind Act.

Critics of the law, such as George Mason University educational psychologist Gerald W. Bracey, are less hard on its goals than on what they say is a severe lack of money. For the 2004 fiscal year, congressional Democrats want the \$32 billion initially authorized for No Child Left Behind, rather than the \$22.6 billion Bush has requested.

"If you want to try to get poor kids to high proficiency, you take the JFK man-on-the-moon-in-a-decade approach and fund the program adequately," Bracey said. "To succeed, this task needs an \$87 billion supplemental appropriation more than the rebuilding of Iraq needs an \$87 billion supplemental appropriation."

The issue is made more confusing because each state will have its own definition of proficiency. Before No Child Left Behind, when educators used the word "proficient," they often meant that level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the federal exam given to a sampling of students to get a sense of national achievement levels. Only 31 percent of fourth-graders tested proficient or above on the latest NAEP reading test, in 2002, and only 26 percent were proficient or above on the math test given in 2000.

But under No Child Left Behind, each state sets its own standards, which are turning out to be much lower than that of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In Virginia last year, for instance, 72 percent of third-graders passed the Standards of Learning test -- the state's measure of proficiency -- in English, and 80 percent passed the state math test. Still, many Virginia schools have not made adequately yearly progress under the federal law, because their low-income and special education students have not been that successful.

"If expectations are high, then [students] will thrive. If expectations are low, then they will come to believe they are hopeless causes and they will surrender," said U.S. Education Secretary Roderick R. Paige.

"We are taking 12 years to get there -- that is important to stress -- and the goals we are asking them to reach are community-set," said Sen. Judd Gregg (R-N.H.), who with Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) was among the law's main authors.

Last week, Gregg and Kennedy together fought off an attempt by Sen. Richard J. Durbin (D-Ill.) to delay the law's effects -- Durbin's proposal failed by a vote of 67 to 28 -- though Kennedy, Miller and most congressional Democrats deride Bush and the Republicans for not giving the nation's schools more money.

The law needs more funds to succeed, Miller agreed, but he is not very sympathetic with the complaints from local education officials about too-ambitious goals.

"I look at the angst in the school districts trying to deal with it, the principals trying to deal with it, and I say, 'This is great.' These people are thinking about how to improve the achievement of these children,"

he said.

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