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## Lawmakers debate education reform law

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WASHINGTON -- With the No Child Left Behind law turning five this week and up for renewal later this year, politicians and educators are debating whether to mend, end -- or just better fund -- President Bush's education reform.

To commemorate the law's anniversary, Bush and Education Secretary Margaret Spellings met with congressional and business leaders Monday to discuss progress under the law and to press for its reauthorization this year.

And the law wasn't far from the minds of members of the South Carolina delegation.

"No Child Left Behind started with some good ideas -- but what Congress didn't mess up, the bureaucracy has," said Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C.

On Monday, DeMint and Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, unveiled a new education bill at conservative think tank, The Heritage Foundation. The senators want to give school districts a way of gaining more control as long as they meet existing federal standards.

No Child Left Behind pledged to bring all students up to grade level in reading and math by 2014. Schools that repeatedly fail to make adequate yearly progress -- as determined by the federal government -- must provide additional services like tutoring and can face sanctions.

The law's emphasis on testing and its strict timeline have drawn criticism, and it will likely be hotly debated this year as Congress begins the process of updating and rewriting it. Democrats say NCLB has been under-funded by about \$50 billion and are pushing for more money.

"It's very difficult to run local schools from Washington," said Rallie Liston, superintendent of Spartanburg District 4. "If you try to micromanage education from a national level and you put all these punitive measures in there ... it doesn't work."

Supporters praise the law's high standards of accountability and commitment to improving minority student achievement.

No Child Left Behind is based on a noble premise but "needs some serious revision," said Jim Rex, South Carolina superintendent of education.

"It's hard to disagree with the premise that we need to make sure every child succeeds," Rex said. "But ... the devil is in the details."

Under the DeMint-Cornyn bill, states would be given the chance to assume greater control of their schools but would still need to meet federal academic standards.

"What we're trying to do is create two options ... a state can stay under the regimen of No Child Left Behind, or they can agree to standards and have the flexibility to redesign their schools and education," DeMint said.

Rep. Bob Inglis, R-S.C., agreed that the law is flawed and said it should be scrapped altogether.

"I think the best thing that can happen to No Child Left Behind is to repeal it," said Inglis, a member of the Education and Labor committee.

The law, Inglis said, imposes stringent requirements on school districts that receive relatively little federal money. "Typically the local school district gets 8 percent of its money from the federal government and here come all these regulations."

Inglis added that federal testing and accountability requirements had confused matters for states like South Carolina that already had such systems in place when the federal education law took effect.

Superintendent Liston agreed and said the federal government bases its evaluation of a school's yearly progress on state – rather than national -- accountability and assessment programs. Because of that, states that set lower standards for student achievement are more likely to pass muster.

And many states that did not have testing and accountability systems before the law's enactment, simply set lower thresholds to avoid federal penalties, he said.

"To meet the law and get on a fair playing field we would have had to lower our standards," Liston said, "and nobody wanted to do that."

With the law up for revision, Superintendent Rex said he plans on pushing other states to set higher achievement standards.

"We're not comparing apples to apples nationwide," Rex said. "I hope that the other states will raise their standards as opposed to South Carolina lowering hers."

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