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OTHER VIEWS

It's time for a better way to Leave No Child Behind

As I travel around Wisconsin, I hear time and again from teachers, administrators and parents about a law that has created mounting frustration in Wisconsin's classrooms: the No Child Left Behind Act.

NCLB is too focused on testing, too rigid in the way it evaluates progress in schools, and too harsh in the punishments it does out to schools that don't meet its narrow requirements.



SEN. RUSS FEINGOLD

Many educators are concerned that NCLB is producing a generation of students who know how to take tests but don't have the necessary skills to become successful adults and haven't experienced a curriculum rich in the arts, social studies and other subjects. One Wisconsin elementary school teacher who wrote to me put it this way: "This mandate [NCLB] has restricted our teaching so much ... a large portion of our teaching has become strictly teaching students how to take tests. Obviously, this will not help students in most areas of life. In the meantime, much less real learning is going on, and this will give students to discouragement and apathy, not to mention a lower quality education."

Test-taking has an important place in public education, but it shouldn't be up to the federal government to dictate the terms of testing in our public schools. These are decisions best left to states, districts, schools and teachers. The tests associated with NCLB pose problems in the classroom, and the results of those tests can create broader problems for struggling school districts.

It's troubling that NCLB test results are the primary measure of whether a school, district or state is considered to be "in need of improvement" or "failing to make adequate yearly progress." And just as troubling are the federal sanctions for schools labeled as falling short. The sanctions are costly, and many districts have been forced to spend precious Title I funding to cover costs of these sanctions, reducing the amount of Title I money available for other educational needs.

These sanctions are being imposed despite the fact that the federal government has not provided the resources to help these schools succeed that were promised as part of NCLB. In this fiscal year alone, Congress is providing the states with \$10 billion less than the fully authorized funding level

for educating disadvantaged students. As a result, state and local governments have had to shoulder an increasing burden of paying for NCLB. Local schools aren't getting the support they deserve, and this law isn't getting the congressional scrutiny it needs.

For three years, I have led a group of my colleagues in urging the chairman and ranking member of the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee to hold hearings on NCLB's implementation and how it affects schools and districts. This law is fast approaching its reauthorization date, so it is critical to our schools that we hold these hearings now. But, unfortunately, our request is yet to be granted.

The hearings must move forward, and we should also consider other NCLB reforms, such as allowing states to take into account student progress and finding other ways—in addition to testing—to measure student achievement. We should also examine reforming the current sanctions structure, which punishes struggling schools, and explore the option of letting states develop their own plans with the consequences and incentives they believe will work best for their schools.



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NCLB was based on a flawed premise—that the way to hold schools accountable and close the achievement gap was to pile on more tests and use those tests to evaluate schools. We need to reform NCLB to reduce the burden on our schools and increase real support for students and teachers in our classrooms.

Congress is responsible not just for passing laws but fixing them when they fall short. It's time to fix No Child Left Behind and to get

back to learning—not just testing—in our public schools.

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