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No Child Left Behind needs reform

By RUSS FEINGOLD

Last week, Wisconsin public schools received their annual report cards, only to learn that 92 didn't meet adequate yearly progress required by the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Four high schools in the Madison School District — East, West, Memorial and La Follette — were on that preliminary list.

That's frustrating for many people involved in Madison's public schools, who feel that NCLB is too focused on testing, too rigid in the way it evaluates progress, and too harsh in the punishments it doles



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out to schools that don't meet its narrow requirements. Those problems are some of the main reasons I voted against NCLB, and they are some of the key areas I am pushing to reform.

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.

Many educators, administrators and parents don't agree with NCLB's approach. One Wisconsin elementary teacher wrote to me: "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."

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." 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 the costs of these sanctions, reducing Title I funds for other needs.

These sanctions are being imposed despite the fact that the federal government has not provided the help promised these schools. In this fiscal year, Congress is providing the states with \$10 billion less than the fully authorized funding for educating disadvantaged students. As a result, state and local governments have to shoulder an increasing burden of paying for NCLB.

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. This law is fast approaching its reauthorization date, so it is critical that we hold these hearings now. Unfortunately, our request is yet to be granted.

The hearings must move forward, and we should 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 sanctions structure, which punishes struggling schools, and explore the option of letting states develop their own plans.

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.

Feingold is a Democratic U.S. Senator from Wisconsin.