

No Child Left Behind: Outlook for Action is Not Positive

Throughout 2007, Congressional leaders on both sides of the aisle, as well as President Bush, maintained that they were committed to reauthorizing the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) before Congress adjourned at the end of the year. However, with a long and contentious appropriations cycle and major policy differences on key pieces of the bill, the year ended with no formal bill introduced by either House of Congress and NCLB reauthorization was put off until at least this year.

With the 2008 Congressional year now underway, lawmakers, education reformers and the president have come out with statements calling for major changes to a draft bill released last summer by the House Education & Labor Committee. Rumor has it that Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) will take a stab at pulling together a full draft of a NCLB reauthorization bill from his perch as Chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. He may even introduce it formally and hold a mark-up this spring. But, with a Congressional year shortened and overshadowed by Presidential elections, prospects for Congress to move a bill by year's end appear dim.

At this time, the House Education & Labor Committee has not announced when, or if, it will formally introduce a bill based on the draft that it circulated last summer. According to Rachel Racusen, a spokeswoman for Committee Chairman George Miller, (D-CA), negotiations are ongoing to "significantly improve the law." Miller has been under particular pressure for NCLB reauthorization because the draft bill that he released drew withering fire from all sides – the Administration, key members of Congress and many in the education stakeholder community, especially the National Education Association. Objections ran the gamut from complaints that the bill did not go far enough in allowing new, alternate measures into a revised adequate yearly progress formula (which measures whether schools and districts are meeting goals for reading and math proficiency based on state proficiency tests) to assertions that it went too far in allowing any alternate measures to objections that the alternate measures proposed were the wrong ones.

The education technology community, however, was pleased with the Miller draft and a later, smaller Kennedy draft of NCLB reauthorization legislation because both incorporated the key components of the Achievement Through Technology and Innovation bill (ATTAIN). That bill, supported by the International Society for Technology in Education, the Consortium for School Networking, the State Educational Technology Directors Association and the Software & Information Industry Association, would revamp the current Enhancing Education Through Technology program by targeting funds towards professional development and district-wide reform programs that make heavy use of technology.

In response to the delay in NCLB reauthorization legislation, Education Secretary Margaret Spellings and President Bush warned Congress that if it continues to stall the reauthorization process, she will "partner with states and districts" to make changes on her own. Spellings recently chastised Congress for failing to move on updating the law, saying, "Congress has had over a year to consider these reforms, but students and

teachers need help now." Spellings also criticized education interest groups who had come out against the draft legislation, placing some blame on them for the lack of movement on the bill. Her remarks echoed President Bush's threat this week to act unilaterally to strengthen NCLB if Congress did not extend the program.

On the presidential trail, all of the Democratic candidates have come out against the law, calling for massive overhauls, particularly to its testing requirements. The candidates generally say NCLB's strong focus on math and reading test scores has led to an overly-narrow and regimented curriculum. Spellings responded to this criticism, saying that the administration would not compromise on this core principle of the law.