



## Exam time near for education law

### Many say federal No Child Left Behind Act needs improvement

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Nearly six years after the federal No Child Left Behind law took effect, the question may be obvious, but the answer is not.

Has No Child Left Behind been good or bad for education in Illinois?

It's been both, say people who have worked for years in the state's public education system. They agree that NCLB demands a higher level of accountability from schools, which is a good thing, but that it also needs to undergo some revisions.

"I think it's here to stay – in some form," State School Superintendent Christopher Koch said.

NCLB is due for reauthorization, but Congress has yet to take action.

No Child Left Behind was created with two intertwined goals in mind, according to the U.S. Department of Education. The idea is "to improve the performance of America's elementary and secondary schools while at the same time ensuring that no child is trapped in a failing school," says an online fact sheet issued by the agency.

One of the overarching goals is for all students to be able to read and do math at their grade level by 2014.

Schools failing to make "adequate yearly progress" toward that goal face sanctions, which increase in severity over time. The most serious sanction involves school "restructuring."

"Obviously the concept and the rhetoric is hard to argue with, that every child is capable and is going to achieve a certain level of mastery," said state Rep. Roger Eddy, R-Hutsonville.

But the federal government has not adequately funded the education initiative, said Eddy, who also is superintendent of the Hutsonville School District in southeastern Illinois.

"One of the big problems with No Child Left Behind is they left the money behind," he said.

One of the positive results of NCLB is that educators now know more about the performance of student "subgroups," including English-language learners, students with disabilities and students who are members of racial minorities, Koch said.

“That, to me, is one of the biggest changes as a result of No Child Left Behind,” Koch said. “It wasn’t that schools were completely ignoring these kids before, but we weren’t holding them necessarily to the same standards.”

Another lingering question centers on how realistic it is for the government to expect every student, regardless of background, to achieve 100 percent proficiency by 2014. Students with certain disabilities, for instance, might never be able to reach that goal, according to educators.

“I think there’s a bunch of things that we need to have fixed (in No Child Left Behind) to make things fairer and more equitable,” said Jane Russell, a retired high school chemistry teacher who heads a suburban Chicago teachers union.

For example, she said, students who are learning English as a second language are being required to take the same assessment tests as students who grew up with English as their native language.

“It’s like me taking the ACT (test) in Portuguese,” Russell said.

Eddy said he expects “a reality check” for No Child Left Behind – and that will result in changes to the existing law.

“The reality check might be the (2008) presidential election,” he said.

In a survey about NCLB, Russell said members of her union local expressed concern about the heightened emphasis on tests.

Koch noted that even though teaching and learning are not “one size fits all,” NCLB discourages an individualized approach to educating children.

“Also there’s a myopic focus, I think, on academics at the expense of other things that are also important,” he said.

Subjects such as art and music “kind of get pushed to the wayside because it’s all about reading and math,” he said. “And certainly, those are important, but so are other things.”

But Koch said he thinks Illinois education is “going on the right track” as far as achieving what the NCLB law demands.

“That’s not to say we can become complacent,” he said. “One thing’s for sure, this law requires us to keep pushing, because students can do better all the time, and we have to keep on top of the students that are coming into our schools and what services they need.

“Schools have to be very adaptable to be able to do that.”

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