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## Reauthorizing No Child Left Behind: The Obama Blueprint

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Almost 45 years ago to this day, the federal government enacted the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* on April 11, 1965. The Act, which provided funds for professional development, instructional materials, resources to support educational programs, and promoted parental involvement in primary and secondary education, has been reauthorized about every five years since its enactment. The current version, known more commonly as the *No Child Left Behind Act*, is now up for reauthorization. The following policy brief will describe the development of the Act into its current form, discuss the major components of *No Child Left Behind*, and highlight the changes being considered for the latest Obama Administration revision.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ESEA

The ESEA has been through many revisions and, as such, a number of different names. In the 1980's the landmark report *A Nation at Risk* prompted a movement toward standards-based reforms and influenced future reauthorizations of the law. Throughout the 1980's, efforts to hold schools and educators more accountable were slowly starting to mature, and would find their way into the Law under the Clinton Administration.

### *The Improving America's Schools Act of 1994*

By the 1990's, the Clinton Administration reauthorized the ESEA calling it the *Improving America's Schools Act (IASA)* of 1994. The IASA forged a federal-state partnership to implement standards-based reform nationwide. For example, the law encouraged each state to:

- Establish performance and content standards in reading and math by 1997.
- Create "aligned" assessments for all students at least once in each elementary, middle, and secondary school by 2002.
- Create accountability guidelines for the Title I schools.

In the wake of the IASA, some states began to develop their own accountability plans. However, most states did not develop state-level standards until the next reauthorization of the ESEA, under the George W. Bush Administration, where all states were required to set performance standards and be held accountable for meeting them.

### *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*

When Texas Governor George W. Bush was elected to the Presidency, his administration's reauthorization of the ESEA included components from the Texas education accountability plan. Although the Bush Administration's 1,000+ page *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 (NCLB) may go down in history as the most critiqued version of the ESEA, it was bipartisan measure supported in the Senate by Ted Kennedy (D-MA), who was also a sponsor of the bill.

Indeed, NCLB expanded on the standards-based education initiatives and accountability measures included in preceding authorizations of the ESEA. However, the following four principal accountability measures included in NCLB have caused greater controversy than previous iterations of the law:

- **Standards and Assessments** requiring each state to set rigorous standards for students and develop assessments to measure their achievement.
- Ensuring **High Quality Teachers** for core subjects (English, math, and science) in every classroom.
- Measuring **Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)** toward the goal that 100% of students are performing at a level of Proficient or Advanced on statewide achievement tests created under the Standards and Assessments provision of the law.
- **Consequences** for school performance in the form of sanctions and rewards.

### *ESEA under the Obama Administration*

Although there appeared to be a bipartisan effort to reauthorize NCLB under President Bush's second term, lawmakers never did make it to the table to revisit the law. Disagreements over how to change components seen as problematic (i.e., measuring achievement by attainment, not student growth) appeared to hold up this effort.

However, the Obama Administration is currently revisiting the law and proposing changes. In mid-March, President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan sent to Congress a "blueprint" to improve NCLB and address some of the previously debated issues seen as problematic in the current version of the law. A comparison between the Bush NCLB and the proposed Obama ESEA is presented in Table 1 below:

**Table 1: Comparing and Contrasting the Bush Administration NCLB with the Proposed Changes under the Obama Administration**

	<b>ESEA - George W. Bush Version</b>	<b>ESEA - Barack Obama Version</b>
<b>Name</b>	<i>No Child Left Behind</i>	As yet unnamed, but will <b>NOT</b> be called <i>No Child Left Behind</i>
<b>Standards and Assessments</b>	States must set and pursue new educational standards and test students annually to measure progress. Testing occurs annually from grades 3 to 8, then once between grades 10 and 12. By 2014, all students should be performing at the “proficient” or “advanced” level.	The current administration recognizes a lack of academic improvement in the past decade and hopes to effect change through raising state standards to push for academic progress transparency and continuing the testing and progress evaluations across the students' entire education experience (including technology use, conducting research, problem-solving, and presenting and defending their answers). By 2020, all students should be college or career ready.
<b>High Quality Teachers</b>	All teachers of core subjects must be "highly qualified," which means fully certified within the state, in possession of a bachelor's degree, and with demonstrated teaching ability and competence.	Under Obama's reformed ESEA, states would be required to create new, fine-grained data systems that rate teachers and principals based in significant part on the performance of their students. These ratings could be used to reward strong educators, create training programs for newcomers, and assess the effectiveness of teacher-preparation programs.
<b>Adequate Yearly Progress</b>	Schools are evaluated on their increases in the number of students whose scores rank "proficient" on annual tests, rather than student growth. However, there is a fear that this has led states to ‘race to the bottom’ by setting state standards low to produce more "proficient" scores.	The reformed ESEA will continue to push for increases in academic performance, rewarding students and schools that show continuous measurable progress toward college and career readiness.
<b>Consequences</b>	Consequences involve sanctions increasing in severity for schools failing to meet AYP (i.e. offering school choice to their students to school reconstitution).	The current administration's plan for reformation includes a shift in consequences that will seek to reward exemplary educators and schools. Good performance will be rewarded, rather than issuing punishment for poor performance. The new accountability system would divide schools into more categories, offering recognition to those that are succeeding and providing large new amounts of money to help improve or close failing schools. However, there does not appear to be specific rewards or sanctions for average performing schools.

**CONCLUSION**

There were many positives resulting from the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act. For example, it is hard to not be in favor of any law that focuses on improving the performance of the lowest achievers. In fact, this may be the key component in creating the bi-partisan effort that usually supports any reauthorization of the ESEA.

However, there have also been many components in NCLB that have caused uproar from educators. For example, although AYP measures attainment and not growth, the term “progress” seems like false

advertisement. This uproar; however, may also be a component in the seemingly positive support for the President Obama/Secretary Duncan Blueprint for the next reauthorization of the ESEA.

Indeed, NCLB has been the topic of much heated debate over the past 9 years; however, changing some of the major components (i.e., measuring growth over attainment and using rewards instead of punishments for performance) could prove to allay some of the dismay from educators.

*For more information on this policy brief, please contact the Office for Education Policy at ([oeop@uark.edu](mailto:oeop@uark.edu)).*