

Senate, House look to update Bush-era education law

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In this Jan. 21, 2015 file photo, Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Chairman Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn. listens to testimony on Capitol Hill in Washington. It's something most everyone on both sides of the aisle can agree on—an update to the Bush-era No Child Left Behind education law is much needed and long overdue. This week, the Senate and House take up rewrites of the 2002 law, with lawmakers seeking to finally resolve a key question Congress has struggled with for many years (AP Photo/Susan Walsh, File)

Congress is making another run at rewriting the Bush-era No Child Left Behind education law, even as the Obama administration urges changes it says would ensure that schools are held accountable when their students are seriously lagging behind their peers in better-performing schools.

The Senate opened debate Tuesday on an update to the 2002 law, with the bill's main sponsor, Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., calling it "the most effective path toward higher standards, better teaching and real accountability."

The annual reading and math tests outlined in No Child would continue to be a part of the law. But the so-called "Every Child Achieves Act" whittles away at the federal role in education policy and instead shifts to the states decisions about how to use the required reading and math assessments to measure school and teacher performance.

The bill also would expressly prohibit the federal government from requiring or encouraging any specific set of academic standards—a reference to the Common Core standards, which were drafted by the states with the support of the administration but have become a rallying point for those who want a smaller federal role in education.

Sen. Patty Murray of Washington, the senior Democrat on the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, partnered with Alexander in crafting a bipartisan bill. It cleared the panel in April with a unanimous vote, with support from conservatives like Rand Paul, R-Ky., and liberals like Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass.

Murray said she would like stronger measures in the bill that would require states to identify their lowest-performing schools and require those schools to have plans for improvement.

"When we don't hold our schools and states accountable for educating every child, it is the kids from our low-income backgrounds, kids with disabilities, kids who are learning English and kids of color who too often do fall through the cracks," Murray said.

As the Senate began its debate, the White House issued a statement Tuesday strongly urging additional revisions on school accountability. "Parents, families and communities deserve to know that when children fall behind, their schools will take action to improve," it said.

The Obama administration also asked for a cap on the amount of time spent annually on standardized testing and a requirement of parental notification when testing is consuming too much classroom learning time.

Republicans, meanwhile, are expected to use the floor debate to pressure members to further reduce federal oversight and to strengthen the state role.

Alexander previewed the unfolding debate, which could continue into next week, saying it will be contentious at times because "this isn't an issue-free piece of legislation."

The House this week is also taking up its own version of an education bill, sponsored by Rep. John Kline, a Minnesota Republican who chairs the House Education and the Workforce Committee. The legislation gives the states more control over accountability and includes a school choice provision that would allow public money to follow low-income children to different public schools—something Democrats don't support.

The House abruptly canceled a vote on the Kline bill in February when it became clear that it didn't have enough support from conservatives to

pass. The White House has said President Barack Obama would veto it.

Seeking to close significant gaps in the achievement of poor and minority students and their more affluent peers, No Child Left Behind mandated annual testing in reading and math for students in grades three to eight and again in high school. Schools had to show student growth or face consequences. But critics complained the law was rigid, overly ambitious and punitive, and said there was too much testing.

Anticipating that No Child's goal that all students should be able to read and do math at grade level by 2014 could not be met, the Obama administration has been granting states waivers around some of the law's more stringent requirements. The administration has granted waivers to 42 states, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia.

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