



THEMES in the NEWS

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Education Policy Choices: Unsuccessful, Unproven or Unaffordable

By UCLA IDEA

Last week, President Barack Obama affirmed that states were struggling under unrealistic requirements of the No Child Left Behind law. States can now obtain waivers from meeting proficiency rates in reading and mathematics, in return for adopting key pieces of the administration's reform agenda. The move may be attractive to some states, but to others, it presents a difficult choice between two undesirable alternatives.

First, states could choose not to seek the waiver. That would retain a nearly impossible commitment for students to achieve proficiency in reading and math—up to 100 percent in 2014. Missing proficiency targets brings steep consequences. With each year schools fail to meet the benchmarks, they could face state takeovers, closures or charter conversions. Earlier this year, Education Secretary Arne Duncan told Congress that 82 percent of schools were on track to fail, given the current NCLB requirements. In California, more than 3,800 schools were labeled in need of improvement after missing benchmarks for at least two years.

On the other hand, states that accept the waivers would have to adopt higher college and career standards, tie teacher evaluations to test scores, intervene in more low-performing schools, be receptive to charter involvement and accomplish all this without new resources. Schools are concerned because some of the replacement requirements are either untested (with no assurance they would accomplish their goals) or they are very expensive (schools are already financially stressed just keeping the doors open and teachers employed).

California's Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson has reservations: "We are carefully examining the proposal, which would appear to cost billions of dollars to fully implement, at a time when California and many other states remain in financial crisis." California has been hit hard by the economic crisis and has seen a steady decline of more than \$500 per student over the last three years.

The waivers impose untested strategies on schools and states to gauge learning and progress. UC Berkeley education professor Bruce Fuller said that relief from the onerous portions of NCLB comes with requirements that are "not always backed by evidence, but now there's a new president, and he has a new set of remedies which he thinks are going to be effective.

On a positive note the willingness to grant waivers signals that key education leaders recognize that No Child Left Behind is crumbling as the cornerstone of the nation's education policy. Unfortunately, schools now have to choose between unsuccessful old policies and unproven new reforms, while lacking resources to accomplish either. With or without waivers, California and other states are in an awful position of meeting requirements without proper support.

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