

The Few Benefits Don't Outweigh the Problems in Alexander's ESEA Bills

If you're a parent or teacher fed up with the way high-stakes testing drives more and more of what happens in school, a new bill from Sen. Lamar Alexander offers little hope of relief. While it would help things by getting rid of the disastrous AYP provisions, it keeps too much testing in place and does nothing to address the way the current law increases educational inequity by turning schools for poor children into test prep centers and little else.

The bills introduced by Senator Alexander and others have the notable benefit of removing NCLB's disastrous "adequately yearly progress" provisions. Most schools would not be subject to the punishment side of NCLB's "test-and-punish" structure. Unfortunately, the bills retain a federal mandate for too much testing. They insist on the idea, practiced in no other economically advanced nation, that testing each child annually with a standardized exam in reading and math will lead to good education. Nations that perform better on multiple indicators of educational quality test far less with fewer stakes. Under NCLB, however, NAEP scores have flattened, even declined in some cases. SAT college entry test scores have dropped over the past five years. Instead of endorsing continued over-testing, Congress needs to reduce ESEA mandated exams to once each in elementary, secondary and high school, as was required in the 1994 ESEA and is common in other countries

Overall, while the Alexander bills offer some modest benefits, they mostly perpetuate serious problems. Other conceptual flaws in the ESEA Amendments bill include:

- It retains test scores as the near-sole accountability data.
- It does not take meaningful steps toward ensuring adequate, equitable opportunity to learn.
- It does not expect districts, schools, or states to regularly evaluate their progress and take reasonable steps toward improvement.
- It fails to provide needed resources to the many schools, beyond the lowest-scoring five percent, that do need significant assistance.
- And, it does not establish sufficiently flexible, comprehensive "turnaround" plans for the too-few schools for which it requires interventions, instead merely adapting the Department's unresearched "four models."

Fortunately, the Senators would not require states to adopt "educator evaluation" systems as a condition of receiving federal funds, though the Administration has been pushing for this. Such systems are expensive and complex and frequently incorporate deeply flawed ["value added" measures](#), so it is better that Washington not impose mandates in this area.

The guiding purpose of ESEA is to help schools serving low-income youth improve. After the failure of NCLB, Alexander wants to hand that task back to the states. However, in doing so the bill fails to replace punishment with a positive federal role, such as is found in the fundamentally different approach recommended by the [Forum on Educational Accountability](#) (FEA, which I chair).

Alexander, et al., would require states to intervene in the lowest-scoring five percent of their schools. Unfortunately, with large and growing child poverty and underfunded schools serving

low-income youth, far more than five percent of schools need help – provided that the “help” is supportive, not punitive.

Unwilling to spend what it takes to assist more schools, these bills also adopt the Administration’s four un-researched “turnaround” models. The models include firing staff, privatizing control over schools, or closing them. Some options include a few potentially useful components, if done well, such as professional development. Also making them slightly less counter-productive, the Alexander bill adds in a “something else” that states could do with federal approval and a vaguely worded waiver for rural districts.

The four models are unlikely to improve learning outcomes, in part because they will perpetuate testing’s control over teaching. The FEA, by contrast, has proposed an [evidence-based set of practices](#) around which schools and districts would be required to develop improvement plans. Sen Alexander’s proposals are also light on expecting schools to monitor their improvement practices, then evaluate, report and adjust them as needed. Again this is contrary to FEA recommendations.

In addition to perpetuating too much testing, the bills maintain standardized tests in reading and math as the near-sole determinant of school success. Though sanctions will be removed, incessant test score reporting alone is likely to continue the downward spiral of many US schools, particularly those serving low-income youth, into mere test-prep programs. That won’t help reach any real-world version of “college and career ready,” the new goal of ESEA. Indeed, in the absence of wise policies and adequate resources, the new goals will be as illusory as “all children will score proficient.” For those who seek genuine assessment reform, there is a very slight possibility of funding. The bill allots \$400 million in annual support for state tests; there may be a small amount left over to try to construct better forms of assessments.

Finally, on the “Teacher and Principal Improvement Act,” also introduced by Alexander and his colleagues: The Obama-Duncan administration has bribed states into implementing educator evaluation systems. These must include student test scores “in significant part.” Duncan is expected to make that a condition of waivers from AYP. Alexander, et al., correctly avoid making that lose-lose tradeoff. Indeed, Alexander is among the members of Congress who are contesting Duncan’s claim of the right to, in effect, write legislation. However, in this bill, if a state seeks to use federal funds toward an evaluation system, it would have to include student test scores “in significant part.” Since the best evaluation systems, such as the one in Montgomery County, Maryland, do no such thing, Congress should use evidence, not ideology, in its legislation. It should not include any requirement to use student standardized test scores in reviewing educators.

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