

From: "Christie Farese" <cfarese@mde.k12.ms.us> ["cfarese@mde.k12.ms.us".Net.GOV_MAIL] on behalf of "Christie Farese" <cfarese@mde.k12.ms.us>

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To: <CatHayden@aol.com>, <dowd@desotoappeal.com>, <holly.wright@djournal.com>, <william.butts@ed.gov>, <JSewell@governor.state.ms.us>, <kriley@governor.state.ms.us>, <lburks@jam.rr.com>, "Joy Milam" <JMilam@mde.k12.ms.us>, <JanetFriend@mssuperintendent.com>

Subject: Most states lag far behind 'No Child Left Behind' law - USAToday

Most states lag far behind 'No Child Left Behind' law

By Greg Toppo, USA TODAY

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One year after President Bush signed the sweeping "No Child Left Behind" education bill into law, states are rolling out ambitious testing programs, improving teacher quality, developing excruciatingly detailed report cards and struggling to make it all work.

Only 12 states are on track to comply with even half of the major federal requirements, according to a report scheduled for release today by the independent Education Commission of the States. Though states have a few years to meet some of the requirements, many were already due.

In the first detailed look at how all 50 states and the District of Columbia are grappling with the complex law, ECS found that many have a long way to go.

The core of the law is a 12-year plan to improve the basic skills of the nation's 47 million public school students. States face an important deadline on Friday, when they must tell the federal government how they'll integrate No Child Left Behind into their testing systems. Those that fail to comply with the law ultimately risk losing federal money for their schools.

U.S. Education Department spokesman Dan Langan says states "are indeed making progress" and are probably further along than the ECS findings suggest. "What you see today may not be the same tomorrow, because of a change in a state policy or program."

As they face shrinking state budgets, many local lawmakers and education officials are complaining that the federal government is saddling schools with dozens of new requirements without providing enough extra money to get the job done.

"There are a lot of good ideas in there," says New Hampshire state Rep. John Alger, a Republican. "If they're not going to pay the whole shot, that's not fair."

Alger plans to introduce a bill next month that would prohibit New Hampshire from spending a single dime on No Child Left Behind because the state's constitution prohibits lawmakers from passing unfunded mandates on to local governments.

And several other states aren't exactly exuberant, either.

"Some are more enthusiastic about No Child Left Behind than others," says Kathy Christie of the ECS Information Clearinghouse, which produced the report with a \$2 million grant from the education department. Christie says the Web-based report is designed to help states see where they stand and find ways to work together to implement the law.

Among the results so far:

Of the 40 federal requirements examined by ECS, 12 states are close to fulfilling half or more. Among the furthest along: Mississippi, Tennessee and Texas, which have met or nearly met 24 requirements, and North

Carolina with 26. Among those lagging furthest behind: Nebraska, New Hampshire and Oregon, which are on track with only three each.

Thirty-nine states are developing accountability systems, but fewer than half are even close to figuring out how to assess or improve the test scores of children in every subgroup, such as low-income, minority and disabled kids.

Every state is at least partly on track to have required math, reading and science standards in place over the next two years, as well as actual tests in reading and math.

Forty states are working to identify schools with consistently poor test scores, where students must be offered tutoring or transportation to another public school; 28 states have a list of approved tutors, and 20 actually are offering tutoring. Only 25 are ready to offer transfers, which were to have begun last fall in the 48 states with underperforming schools.

Only five states—California, Hawaii, Kansas, Montana and Ohio—have developed policies by which students in "persistently dangerous schools" can transfer to another school. States were required to begin allowing the transfers last fall.

Ten states have defined what "highly qualified teachers" are, but only eight are close to having them in their classrooms, and only Wisconsin says it has a highly qualified teacher in every classroom. Under No Child Left Behind, all new teachers in schools serving mostly poor students were to have been "highly qualified" last fall. All teachers in all schools must meet the same criteria by spring 2006.

The law requires that all teachers be trained in the subjects they teach. Research has shown that about one in four high school and middle school classes in core subjects are taught by a teacher not trained in the subject. The problem is worse in schools that serve poor and minority students.

The result of a rare bipartisan effort by Congress and President Bush to improve basic skills among public school students, No Child Left Behind already is being felt in the nation's classrooms.

Last fall, thousands of schools with low test scores had to begin offering students extra help or free rides to another public school, and principals had to send home notes to families whose children were being taught by a teacher not certified to teach a particular course.

Many educators say the law, combined with a decade of testing in most states, has encouraged basic academics while helping new teachers to figure out what's essential and old teachers to remember why they're in the classroom. The plan also has made education reform a top domestic priority.

"Everybody is talking about achievement gaps, everybody is talking about how we get kids to high standards, and that's a real sea change," says Ross Wiener, policy director for the Education Trust, a Washington group that advocates for poor and urban students.

Worried about so many tests

But some teachers say the law, with its emphasis on testing, is hijacking their lesson plans.

"We're giving so many more assessments than we've ever given before," says Stacey Cole, a fourth-grade teacher at West Elementary School in Storm Lake, Iowa. "It feels like we're always preparing for another test."

Recalling the old saw about education being like raising a cow, she says, "It just seems like we keep weighing the cow, and we don't have any time to feed the cow."

Her boss, principal Juli Kwikkel, notes that even if test scores improve throughout Iowa, the requirements of the

Bush plan could categorize more than half of all Iowa public schools as "failing," generally because the test scores of students in every subgroup aren't likely to improve every year.

"We're talking Iowa, with the highest literacy rate in the country," she says. "It's just nuts."

Cole, 28, who has taught for seven years, is considering another career in the face of all those tests. She was disappointed last fall to learn from her new pupils that, for the first time, they didn't have a chance as third graders to try their hands at a science project that has been a perennial favorite.

"We don't have 20 minutes anymore to build a volcano, and that's really, in essence, what sticks curriculum into their brains, the hands-on activities," she says. "Now the volcano's gone."

With its requirements that schools hire only "highly qualified" teachers, as well as develop and give reading, math and science tests to every child in third through eighth grade, No Child Left Behind also is setting state lawmakers' teeth on edge. A few are beginning to question openly whether the ambitious plan is workable.

"Certainly any legislator in the country would say 'Amen' to the idea that we want every child to do well in school," says Nebraska Sen. Pam Redfield. "But at the same time, it's going to be difficult for us to come up with the wherewithal to finance this within the time frame that's required."

Education accounts for about 35% of the general fund in most states; schools can transfer to tests, and state legislatures provide, on average, about half of most school districts' money; the federal government provides about 7%.

But just as the sluggish economy has hit consumers hard, it also has hit states: 17 cut their budgets for kindergarten through 12th grade last year; 12 have done the same or are planning to do so this year, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

"Before it's over, I think we'll see a lot more states cutting their K12 education budgets," says David Shreve, the group's senior committee director for education and labor.

Bush has touted a huge increase in aid for schools to implement the plan, including more than \$1 billion annually for a new elementary school reading program. But many critics, noting that the federal government has never lived up to its longstanding promise to pay 40% of the bill for educating disabled students, remain skeptical.

Congress authorized \$16 billion this year for aid to schools attended by mostly poor students, the major recipients of No Child Left Behind programs. But Bush has proposed \$11.3 billion.

A recent study by the New Hampshire School Administrators Association estimated that even with the increases, Bush's plan will give New Hampshire schools only \$77 for every student, while costing the state \$575 a student to implement.

Not surprisingly, Nebraska and New Hampshire are among the states that have moved slowest on No Child Left Behind.

Worried about local control

Funding concerns aside, many observers worry about the loss of local control of schools, because teachers in each grade must soon begin giving and presumably preparing for the same tests statewide.

Also, each state must consent to giving select fourth and eighth graders the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, also known as "The Nation's Report Card," each year. While poor NAEP scores can't be

used to punish schools, federal officials have openly said the embarrassment of low scores will likely nudge states into demanding changes in schools.

"I am amazed that this Republican administration would be promoting such legislation that is really invasive into the local control process much more than any other federal program I've seen come down the pike," says Dean Michener of the New Hampshire School Boards Association.

In Nebraska, Redfield and others have asked that the U.S. Education Department let the state hold off on math tests until later grades, but the federal government has refused. The state and federal government are discussing a proposal to allow school districts to choose from one of several skills tests each year, depending on when they teach specific skills to their students.

Worried about funding

State lawmakers and educators also fear that the push to get all children learning at the same level will bring more legal challenges to school funding formulas. Families in low-income districts can easily make the case that their poorly financed schools are set up to fail under the new requirements.

"As the society has become more unequal over the last 20 years, the various education reform measures (have) set up more and more hoops for young people to jump through," says Dave Stratman, former Washington director of the National PTA, who is now an organizer for MassRefusal, a group of teachers' union leaders fighting against high-stakes testing in Massachusetts.

"It raises the bar while not providing the support for them to succeed," he says.

In Massachusetts, Stratman notes, hundreds of teachers are being laid off "at the same time the schools and the kids are being expected to perform miracles."

Tony Harduar, principal of Central Elementary School in Ferndale, Wash., 80 miles north of Seattle, says he is willing to be patient with the Bush plan.

"I don't think No Child Left Behind is playing out fully yet," he says. "Dangerous schools" can transfer to safer schools, he says. But Harduar says it's making it hard for him to find qualified teacher aides. The plan requires that both teachers and aides be "highly qualified" in their subject areas, but Harduar says he already has hired three people who since found better-paying jobs.

Kwikkel has had the same problem. She says many people applying for the aide jobs don't have the required college degree or 90 hours of training, and they can't be bothered with the required skills test.

"Why go through this when you can go over and work at McDonald's and make more money per hour?"

The interactive report, which features detailed breakdowns of how far along each state is on 40 measures, will be accessible online at www.ecs.org.