

Bill to end No Child Left Behind faces long odds

by Paul Krawzak

WASHINGTON - A plan introduced in Congress Thursday that would allow states to opt out of the No Child Left Behind law without losing federal funds does not appear to have a bright future.

Rep. Pete Hoekstra, R-Mich., author of the legislation in the House, contends the plan is needed to free school districts from what he says are increasingly onerous testing requirements and the threat of losing federal funding when goals are not met.

"Core academics have suffered because under No Child Left Behind the emphasis is on the subject matters that are being tested," he said.

Hoekstra said the bill would provide local schools with more freedom and flexibility and reduce administrative costs while ensuring states and communities are held responsible for academic progress.

But the bill received a chilly reception from Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., who chairs the House Education and Labor Committee.

Miller, whose position enables him to control the flow of education legislation in the House, called the Republican sponsored bill "irresponsible and unacceptable."

Area lawmakers - including Reps. Ralph Regula, R-Bethlehem Township, and Zack Space, D-Dover - had not had a chance to review the legislation as of Thursday.

But Regula said it would be "premature to allow for states to no longer abide by the law." He added that problems with No Child Left Behind should be examined as lawmakers seek to reauthorize the law this year.

Regula said he supports the "underlying concepts" of the law "because we can hardly afford to abandon high education standards as we prepare our students to compete in the global economy."

Sen. George Voinovich, R-Cleveland, originally an opponent of No Child Left Behind, favors changes in the law to give schools more flexibility, his spokesman Chris Paulitz said.

Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Avon, has criticized the administration and Congress for not providing enough funding to states to carry out the law.

The landmark education law requires schools to meet academic proficiency goals as measured by federally mandated tests. Schools whose students fail to make progress can lose federal funds.

President Bush, a champion of the law, has defended it as a means of making sure schools are held accountable to provide a quality education to all students. Bush favors reauthorization of the law.

Critics say schools have not received enough federal funding to carry out the mandates of the law, which they say needs revision.

The Hoekstra bill would allow a state to opt out of the No Child Left Behind requirements without losing federal funding as long as the state promised to provide annual reports to the public demonstrating student progress.

A state's governor and legislature, governor and top education official, or top education official and legislature would have to agree to withdraw from the law's mandates.

The bill is co-sponsored by 51 Republican lawmakers, including House Minority Whip Roy Blunt of Missouri. No Ohio lawmakers are co-sponsors of the bill.

Similar legislation introduced by Sens. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., and John Cornyn, R-Texas, would allow states to negotiate an agreement with the federal government to escape the law's mandates.

Miller and Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass., who chairs the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, favor reauthorizing No Child Left Behind with large increases in federal funding and other revisions.

Miller criticized the House bill, saying it would "send billions of federal taxpayer dollars to the states with no accountability for how it is spent."

"Our committee is engaged in a serious bipartisan effort to improve the No Child Left Behind law, based on understandable concerns with the law raised by parents, teachers, administrators and others," he said.

Miller accused Hoekstra and the GOP co-sponsors of the bill of "trying to dismantle" the law.

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