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COMMENTARY

Reading, 'Riting, Reform

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The No Child Left Behind law is now a little over three years old. As with my own children, those first three years have been packed full of activity and have laid a solid foundation for a long and fruitful life ahead.

Passed with overwhelming bipartisan support, the law set forth some rock solid principles -- making the educational system accountable for results, providing in-depth information about quality of schools, enhancing choice, parent options and competition, and using high quality research to inform educational practices and policies -- using what we know works. Those ideas, which are standard operating practice in the business world, were almost revolutionary in an educational setting.

The past three years have helped us be smarter about how this law is working in schools. I have been involved in our public schools for more than two decades in many different ways -- at the local, state and now federal levels -- and have been meeting with educators from around the country to get their input. I am also an education consumer: I have two children in school and view policy from that vantage point as well. Therefore, I fully recognize that it is the educators in the states who are closest to the students and it is they who are making this law work, which means teaching all children and closing the pernicious achievement gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots."

It is the educators who are demanding more and getting more -- refusing to accept old excuses for poor performance. Thanks to them, we are seeing significant educational improvement on a national scale.

And so, in an effort to build on the success of the last three years, I am announcing today a new way of doing business with the U.S. Department of Education in regard to the implementation of this historic law.

If states are raising student achievement and closing the achievement gap -- which we will only be able to see if they regularly assess their students and report results by student subgroup -- then, in exchange, we will apply a more sensible, workable approach on the other aspects of the law. In other words, it is results that truly matter, not the bureaucratic way you get there. That's just common sense, often lost in the halls of Washington.

This comprehensive approach to the implementation of this law means that states seeking additional flexibility will get credit for the work they have done to reform their educational system as a whole.

How will they demonstrate reform? For instance, we will look at whether children are reading by the third grade, which we know is an important marker -- if not reached, children start to fall behind. We will also look at whether states are improving students' preparation for college, and at how well states use student achievement information -- as well as at whether states are reforming high school or planning to; and how well states are working to improve the quality of teachers in the profession and removing barriers to entry for those who are qualified.

We intend to reward those innovative and effective reformers and we intend to use what we've learned from science and the field over the last three years to move the law forward. We are willing to show states a more sensible and informed approach on other aspects of the law, such as how students with persistent academic disabilities will be tested. From now on, more students with academic disabilities will be allowed to take tests that are specifically geared toward their abilities, as long as the state is working to best serve those students by providing rigorous research-based training for teachers, improving assessments and organizing collaboration between special education and classroom teachers.

This new approach recognizes that these children should not all be treated alike. By relying on the most current and accurate information on how children learn and how to best serve their needs, this new policy focuses on the child. They continue to be included in the accountability system because we know that otherwise, they risk being ignored, as was the case before No Child Left Behind. My department, for its part, is unveiling a comprehensive technical assistance plan that will provide resources to improve instruction, assessments, and accountability for all students with disabilities that is a coordinated classroom approach among all teachers. These resources have been developed due to the priority that the law has placed on these children.

As we continue to watch this law grow and mature, we will address other concerns raised by educators -- again, as long as the children are learning. Ultimately, that is the mission of this law. States which recognize that fact will be gratified and recognize that this new policy makes sense, plain and simple. Others looking for excuses to simply take the federal funds, ignore the intent of the law and have minimal results to show for their millions upon millions in federal funds, will think otherwise. But I intend to work with all states to make this law work for them and for the children of our great nation. I am counting on state leaders to work with me and to continue to put the needs of their children first.

Ms. Spellings is the secretary of education.