Congress and Obama feign a course correction on testing

The Every Student Succeeds Act uses new techniques to enforce a widely despised educational paradigm
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The U.S. House of Representatives recently voted to approve the Every Student Succeeds Act, a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that seems to reverse the federal education policies of the past decade and a half. The Senate plans to vote shortly, and if the bill passes, President Barack Obama is expected to sign it before the end of 2015.

The bill states that the secretary of education “shall not attempt to influence, incentivize or coerce” states to adopt the controversial Common Core education standards in math and English language arts and that the federal government should not determine how much student test scores factor into teacher evaluations. It would appear that the era of high-stakes Common Core testing has ended.

Unfortunately, Congress remains firmly committed to test-based education reform. The Every Student Succeeds Act and Obama’s Testing Action Plan simply offer new ways to force states to administer tests that have sparked a rebellion among parents and educators across the country against overtesting and the narrowing of the curriculum to test subjects.
In a recent press statement, the Department of Education offered an apology, of sorts, for the “unnecessary testing” that is “consuming too much instructional time and creating undue stress for educators and students.” Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., said that the Every Student Succeeds Act is “the most significant step towards local control in 25 years.”

Yet the new bill, according to Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., includes “strong federal guardrails to ensure all students have access to a quality education.” As it turns out, these guardrails provide as much freedom to the states as a passenger has on a roller coaster.

The states would have to continue the testing regimen established with the No Child Left Behind Act under President George W. Bush, administering math and English language assessments to students in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school.

In fact, the Every Student Succeeds Act would force states to test an even larger percentage of students than under No Child Left Behind. Under the Every Student Succeeds Act, states would be permitted to provide alternate assessments to no more than 1 percent of the students on the grounds that they possess “significant cognitive disabilities.” Consequently, a much higher percentage of students in special education would have to take the tests. The bill also has provisions that would increase the pressure on states to administer tests and use English-language learners’ and minorities’ test scores for accountability purposes.

The bill would technically allow states to create their own provisions for students who opt out of tests, but it would also require states to measure at least 95 percent of all students annually. Students could refuse to take the tests, but if enough of them do, then their state would risk losing federal education aid. As education blogger Mercedes Schneider wrote, “The federal government is trying to force the testing without taking responsibility for forcing the testing.”
Until federal education policies change, parents of all backgrounds and means will still clamor for the same kind of education that wealthy, connected people demand for their children.

How can people say that the new bill is a U-turn from the education policies of the past 14 years? Under it, the federal government would not be able tell states what academic standards to adopt or how student test scores should be used in teacher evaluations. Nonetheless, states would have to submit accountability plans to the Department of Education for approval, and these accountability plans would have to weigh test scores more than any other factor. Furthermore, under the act, states would have to use “evidence-based interventions” in the bottom 5 percent of schools, determined, again, by test scores.

In short, states would be free to choose test-based accountability policies approved by the secretary of education or lose access to federal Title I funds that sustain schools in low-income communities across the country. In a move that belies Alexander’s claim about local control, the Department of Education has offered to establish “office hours” for states or districts that wish to meet its “policy objectives and requirements under the law.”

Does the bill at least permit states to escape the Common Core? It is hard to see how. According to the bill, each state would have to adopt “challenging state academic standards.” The Obama administration’s testing action plan stipulates that assessment systems should measure student knowledge and skills against “state-developed college- and career-ready standards” — which has long been code for the Common Core. So, yes, states could invest hundreds of millions of dollars to write new academic standards and make aligned tests, but there is no guarantee that the secretary of education would approve standards or tests that implicitly chastise the administration’s education policies.

Advocates of high-stakes Common Core testing have applauded the Every Student Achieves Act. Catherine Brown, the director of education policy at the
Center for American Progress, said, “At the end of the day the bill appears to allow the department to set parameters in key areas and enforce statutory requirements.” John Engler of the Business Roundtable likewise applauded the bill for keeping test scores “a central feature” of state accountability systems. Lanea Erickson at Third Way praised the bill for throwing “some much-needed water on the political firestorm around testing.”

These advocates have not changed their minds about the Common Core or testing. They are just happy to shift the responsibility for administering it to the states rather than the federal government if that would help defuse parent and educator animosity. They misunderstand the justified anger that fuels the test refusal movement.

Parents are in an uproar about the Common Core not because they have been brainwashed by the unions or want school to be easy for their children. Rather, they object to federal education policies that have narrowed the curriculum to standardized test prep in two academic subjects or, more precisely, peculiar interpretations of math and English language arts. Until that changes, parents of all backgrounds and means will still clamor for the same kind of education that wealthy, connected people demand for their children.

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