

(January 17, 2007) Education Week: Standards Get Boost on Hill

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Standards Get Boost on the Hill

Bills before Congress aim to raise the bar in states.

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Washington

The politically sensitive idea of increasing the rigor of state standards and tests by linking them to standards set at the national level is getting a push from prominent lawmakers as Congress moves to reauthorize the No Child Left Behind Act as early as this year.

Sen. Christopher J. Dodd of Connecticut, the second-ranking Democrat on the Senate education committee and a newly announced candidate for president, introduced a bill with Rep. Vernon J. Ehlers, R-Mich., last week that would provide incentives for states to adopt voluntary "American education content standards" in mathematics and science, to be developed by the governing board for the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., the new chairman of the committee, introduced a bill Jan. 4 that would encourage states to benchmark their own standards and tests to NAEP, but would stop short of calling for the development of national standards.

About 40 organizations have endorsed the bipartisan Dodd-Ehlers bill, including such Washington-based groups as the National Education Association, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, the Alliance for Excellent Education, and the Council of the Great City Schools.

Studies over the past year have found that, in many states, a far higher percentage of students score at the proficient level on state tests than on NAEP. Those findings have led to concern that states' standards and tests may not be stringent enough, and that pressure to meet achievement targets under the NCLB law may be providing the perverse incentive of encouraging states to lower their standards.

"Core American standards would set high goals for all students, allow for meaningful comparisons across states, and ensure that all of our students are prepared for higher education," Sen. Dodd said at a Jan. 8 event held here to unveil his bill. Creating incentives for states to adopt such standards voluntarily is the way to go, he stressed, emphasizing "there are no mandates here."

'Troubling to Many'

Still, some experts voiced concerns last week about renewed attention to the topic of national standards. Among them were David L. Shreve, the senior committee director for education at the National Conference of State Legislatures, which has no official position on either bill.

"The whole idea of national standards is troubling to many at the state level, especially given the difficulties they've gone through as NCLB was implemented," he said. "If you're going to develop voluntary standards, how do you make sure that's not opening the door toward national voluntary federal standards, and then that evolves into national mandatory federal standards?"

The Dodd-Ehlers bill-called the Standards to Provide Educational Achievement for all Kids, or SPEAK, Act-would authorize grants of up to \$4 million each for states that adopted the new math and science standards as the core of their own state content standards.

As a further incentive, the bill would permit the U.S. secretary of education to extend the 2014 deadline for states to get all students to the proficient level on state reading and math tests under the NCLB law by up to four years. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings has indicated, however, that she has no interest in shifting the 2014 deadline for all students to reach proficiency.

The sponsors have begun circulating the bill on Capitol Hill in an attempt to gain the backing of additional lawmakers. By late last week, at least three Democrats-Sen. Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico and Reps. Ruben E. Hinojosa of Texas and Daniel Lipinski of Illinois-had signed on.