

Teachers' union blasts No Child Left Behind, calls for reform by 2020

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WASHINGTON - The National Education Association, the largest teacher's union in the country, attacked the "fundamentally flawed" No Child Left Behind Act Wednesday at the unveiling of its education reform plan.

"No Child Left Behind demanded outcomes and promised resources to achieve those outcomes," NEA President Reg Weaver said. "Those promises to our children, we believe, have been broken."

In a report called "Great Public Schools for Every Student by 2020," the union listed what it considers flaws of the law, including a narrowed curriculum, inappropriate and overemphasized testing, insufficient resources and a failure to prepare students for more than low-level basic skills.

"No Child Left Behind prescribes a one-size-fits-all system to the most changeable and diverse of any population: growing children," the report states.

The group's biggest complaint, however, is that the federal government has taken on too overbearing a role in public education.

"The federal role has lost its balance in No Child Left Behind," said Joel Packer, NEA's director of education policy and practice.

"No Child Left Behind radically altered and expanded the role of the federal government, making it far more intrusive than it had ever been," the report states.

The report emphasizes that the federal government should be involved in education in a role of support and funding, but that it should respect state and local school departments and let them take on the responsibilities of their own communities.

"We want the federal government involved in education," NEA Executive Director John Wilson said. "But they do not need to be the micromanager of education - they need to be the support system."

U.S. Department of Education spokesman Chad Colby emphasized the many rights state and local districts already have.

"States and local districts provide roughly 91 percent of the funding, they set their own standards, they set their own curriculums and they write their own tests to measure against those standards," Colby said.

NEA's report proposes a new framework for the federal government's role in education, with a goal of providing "great public schools" for every student by 2020.

"Every child in our country has a right to a good public education," Weaver said.

Weaver described the current system as a kind of "geographic roulette" in which "some kids win and others lose," depending on where they live.

Among the group's suggestions for the federal government: guarantee sustained funding for special needs students, economically disadvantaged students and English language learners; provide equal access to educational services and supports for all children and require more publicly transparent accountability.

"We're calling for the transformation of public schools," Wilson said.

The group also called for a greater use of scientific research on education topics and more support for teachers.

"For us, the most intriguing and perhaps exciting element is point number three, where they talk about ensuring that all kids have equal access to critical educational resources and tools," said Amy Wilkins, vice president of the Education Trust, a non-profit organization that advocates for low-income students and students of color.

Wilkins said she is deeply concerned, however, that the framework appears to call for less federal accountability.

Colby commented on accountability, as well - at the state level.

"The federal government's role is to supplement funding where there's concentrations of poverty, and in return for that funding, No Child Left Behind requires that there should be results," Colby said.

Weaver also noted at the briefing that Sen. Barack Obama supports the NEA's framework and has sent a letter to the union announcing his endorsement. Sen. John McCain's campaign Web site praises No Child Left Behind for setting common standards for judging educational achievement.

Weaver said the NEA plans to distribute the report to the 9,000 of its 3.2 million members attending the convention, and to call on them to meet with members of Congress, parents and other teachers to share the paper and its policy framework.