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President Obama has made a push to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—also known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB)—and the U.S. Chamber is weighing in with a call for improved accountability for school systems, rewards for effective teachers, high standards for students, and real choices for students and parents.

In a string of speeches on education, President Obama has recognized student achievement gains under NCLB. The fundamental building blocks that the law put in place—annual assessments in reading and math, accountability for closing achievement gaps, and consequences for lack of improvement—have resulted in students making progress in elementary and middle school. African-American, Hispanic, and the lowest achieving students have shown the greatest improvement.

However, the Chamber and the administration agree that the federal education law must be updated to catalyze greater improvement. Achievement gaps among groups of students persist, and nearly a third of all high school students—and half of minority students—do not graduate from high school in four years. Those who go to college often need remedial courses. Among students in 34 developed countries, U.S. students rank 17th in science and 25th in mathematics.

“In business today, no competition is tougher than the global race for talent and workers,” says Dave Adkisson, president and CEO of the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce. “But with high dropout rates, devastating achievement gaps, and mediocre international rankings, we’re not only letting our children down, we’re also threatening our nation’s continued prosperity and global competitiveness. Educational underperformance amounts to a direct assault on our cherished values of equal opportunity and the American Dream.”

The Chamber is working hard to ensure that the administration and Congress improve NCLB while not abandoning accountability. Following are some of the Chamber’s principles for ESEA reauthorization:

- Rigorous accountability provisions that are clear, transparent, and include all students and schools.
- Real choices for students and parents.
- Recognition and rewards for effective teachers and principals.

“Building on the progress we’ve made, the next ESEA should set high expectations for all students, allow states to determine how to reach those high expectations, hold schools accountable for achieving them, and apply consequences if they do not,” says Margaret Spellings, former secretary of education and president of the U.S. Forum for Policy Innovation.

Improve Accountability, Provide Choices

The Chamber recommends that states establish a grading system, such as A–F, for school performance to provide the public with clear and meaningful information. The grading system would classify all schools in the state based on the actual performance of their students on state assessments, the academic growth of students over time, and the progress in closing achievement gaps between student groups. States must then target assistance and interventions to schools in each grading category.

The U.S. Chamber’s Institute for a Competitive Workforce (ICW) created its own snapshot of all 50 states and the District of Columbia, launching an interactive website that assesses K–12 education in nine categories. ICW’s The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly website has an interactive map enabling the business community, taxpayers, parents, and other stakeholders in each state to find information on student achievement, return on investment, teacher policies, and more.

The Chamber believes that all families should have access to meaningful education options, particularly those whose children are trapped in persistently low-performing schools. One key Chamber proposal would permit education funds to “follow the child” to wherever parents believe that their children can receive a better education, including free tutoring, public school choice, charter schools, online learning, and private school choice.

ESEA should also support the identification, development, and retention of effective teachers and principals who produce real gains in student achievement. The Chamber recommends state principal and teacher evaluation systems based, in part, on student growth; performance- and market-based pay programs to attract and retain the best educators; and an overhaul of teacher tenure policies that currently guarantee lifetime job protection after only a few years in the classroom.

Move Forward—But Don’t Reset the Clock

Perhaps the biggest concern among education reform advocates and the Chamber is the possibility that a new law would restart the accountability clock, thereby allowing schools to avoid making needed improvements. NCLB calls for all students to be on grade level in reading and math by 2014. The Chamber believes that students would be ill-served if Congress allows schools currently identified for improvement under NCLB to escape accountability.

The Chamber stands ready to work with the administration and congressional Democrats and Republicans alike to get a new law passed. “As Congress considers ESEA reauthorization legislation, there can be no retreat from our national commitment to the success of every child,” Spellings says.

See how your state’s education system stacks up at www.uschamber.com/edustates.

