

Harkin: Bill to revise 'No Child' to reach Senate floor in 2012

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An education bill that would abolish the most-criticized portions of No Child Left Behind will likely not reach the Senate floor until next year, Sen. Tom Harkin said Friday.

Harkin, in Iowa to tour the Downtown School in Des Moines, also said school performance standards and teacher evaluations will likely be added to satisfy concerns from House Republicans and the Obama administration.

The 868-page bill would do away with annual tests that result in sanctions on schools that don't reach progress goals. In its place, states would develop assessments that measure student readiness for college and the workplace.

Harkin, an Iowa Democrat, co-authored the bill with Sen. Mike Enzi, R-Wyo. The legislation last month passed out of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, which Harkin chairs.

The overarching goal of the legislation is to scale back broad federal control granted by the 2001 No Child Left Behind bill, and return most decision-making to states and local districts, Harkin said.

The federal government would retain control of every state's bottom 5 percent of schools in performance and achievement gaps.

"We are entering a new era of partnership," Harkin said at the school.

But critics say the bill doesn't go far enough in demanding high standards from all schools. Last month, more than 20 groups, ranging from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, signed a letter of opposition, because the bill requires student achievement and graduation goals from only the lowest-performing schools.

"In schools which aren't among the states' very worst performing, huge numbers of low-achieving students will slip through the cracks," the letter said.

Harkin's proposal has garnered some bipartisan support, including from a coalition of state and national education groups.

Chris Bern, president of the Iowa State Education Association, praised the bill for doing away with the punitive annual assessments of No Child Left Behind, which demoralized teachers and forced them to teach to standardized tests. The law mandates all students show basic reading and math skills by 2014, a goal Bern said was unrealistic.

Education reforms proposed last month by Gov. Terry Branstad will help the state seek a waiver from the requirements. Details about the governor's proposed changes to areas such as student assessment and teacher pay will be released sometime before the next legislative session.

The Obama administration said states must enact rigorous and comprehensive reforms to be eligible for the waiver, offered because Congress was four years overdue in overhauling No Child Left Behind.

Bern said he could support adding school performance standards and teacher evaluation standards to Harkin's bill, if they don't rely entirely on standardized tests and allow states to determine how to evaluate teachers.

"There's a long way to go," he said.