

Should Education Standards Vary By State?

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In December 2015, President Barack Obama signed into law the biggest changes to American education in almost 15 years. The bipartisan measure, called the [Every Student Succeeds Act](#), replaces the controversial No Child Left Behind Act with what many hope will be a kinder, gentler educational mandate, one that loosens federal control of [education](#) and reduces dependence on standardized testing.

What's the difference?

The new law preserves federally mandated standardized testing for diagnostic purposes, but eliminates punitive consequences for states and districts that perform poorly. The federal government will no longer impose academic standards forcing schools to “teach to the test,” or require students’ test performance to be part of teachers’ evaluations.

Schools across the nation complained that No Child Left Behind hamstrung teachers, who felt obligated to spend substantial time on test preparation at the expense of effective teaching, while penalizing them for results over which they had little control. [Academics agree](#) that standardized test scores, while a valuable tool in measuring student progress, are a poor standard by which to judge students’ overall academic strength or teachers’ effectiveness.

Under the new law, it will be up to state and local officials to set the standards for performance, determine school rankings, and most importantly, settle on strategies for improvement when objectives are not met. Every Student Succeeds specifically bars the federal government from requiring states to implement the [Common Core](#) curriculum or making any other specific curriculum requirements. Under the new law, states and local government will be free to choose whatever curriculum and teaching methods they see fit.

This is good news for innovators and educators who believe in individualized teaching plans. Unfortunately, the new law also may enable cost-cutting bureaucrats and culture warriors to influence educational agendas in negative ways.

So it's about states' rights?

While it was almost universally agreed that No Child Left Behind went too far in its attempts to standardize education, some groups are worried that the new law gives too much power to states. Civil rights groups like the NAACP Legal Defense Fund have expressed concern that many states will not take sufficient action to improve academic performance in the most vulnerable communities. Another fear is that the new law makes it even easier for states to institute curricula that [rewrite history](#) or reject scientific fact.

The apprehension is not without cause. Controls in the new law set a floor for performance, but leave a lot of room for failure. States will only face federal requirements for the lowest-performing five percent of schools and where more than a third of high school students do not graduate on time.

What does the change mean for my child?

It's not clear how much will actually change under Every Student Succeeds. Forty-two states and the District of Columbia already have waivers that allow them to set their own performance goals. In a sense, then, Every Student Succeeds is merely codifying the ad hoc system already in place for circumventing the most onerous elements of No Child Left Behind.

And while the elimination of penalties for low test results takes some of the pressure off of standardized testing, the new law does not eliminate the requirement for students to take any tests. In fact, many of the standardized tests students take now are required at the state level.

In the end, the rewrite of America's education system may be more significant for what it stands for than for what it actually does. In an era marked by partisan gridlock, the Every Student Succeeds Act is a rare bipartisan compromise. Led by unlikely partners Republican Senator Lamar Alexander of Tennessee and Democratic Senator Patty Murray of Washington, the act is based on a foundation of shared interest—improving education by eliminating the one-size-fits-all approach of No Child Left Behind. Everyone gets the main thing they want—Democrats reduce reliance on standardized testing, Republicans return power to states—without getting everything they want.

When it comes to Congress, that's an accomplishment.

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