

States to get waivers on No Child tests

States getting a way out of 10-year-old policy

By Associated Press, Journal Sentinel staff

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The Obama administration effectively gutted the Bush-era No Child Left Behind law Monday, giving states a way out of a decade-long policy that focused on holding schools accountable but labeled many of them failures even if they made progress.

To get a waiver from the program, however, states must agree to education reforms the White House favors, from tougher evaluation systems for educators to programs tackling the achievement gap for minority students.

Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction will seek a waiver for the state, Superintendent Tony Evers said Monday.

The federal law, which requires every student to be proficient in science and math by 2014, is four years past due for reauthorization. But it's become mired in the increasingly partisan mood on Capitol Hill despite repeated calls from President Barack Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan for changes to be made before the school year starts. Obama sent an overhaul proposal to Congress 16 months ago.

Duncan has warned that 82% of U.S. schools could be labeled failures next year if the law is not changed. Education experts have questioned that estimate, but state officials report a growing number of schools facing sanctions under the law.

Republicans bristled at the move.

"I share the sense of urgency felt by state and local education officials across the nation. Unfortunately, more questions than answers surround the secretary's waivers proposal," said House education committee chairman John Kline of Minnesota.

Under the law, states were required to show that a higher proportion of students were reaching proficiency each year. Many had planned to achieve their biggest leaps in the later years because they counted on the law being rewritten by now.

A handful of states had already filed waivers begging for flexibility, while others simply said they were going to ignore the requirements of the law this year.

Calling No Child Left Behind a "broken" law, Evers said that Wisconsin officials intend to create a different accountability system for all traditional public schools, public charter schools and private voucher schools in the state.

Evers added he would include the new accountability system in his waiver request.

Green Bay Public Schools Superintendent Michelle Langenfeld called the potential for Wisconsin to get a waiver an "extremely positive development so schools can focus on student growth."

Green Bay did not meet the law's progress targets for reading in 2009-'10 and math in 2010-'11. But it is not under sanctions; those are only placed on districts and schools that miss progress targets for multiple years in a row.

Officials from the Kenosha Unified School District expressed caution about moving too quickly on the waiver plan, despite the fact that the district missed the latest reading and math progress targets in 2010-'11. Kenosha's public schools met the progress benchmarks in 2009-'10.

Superintendent Michele Hancock questioned whether it was wise to seek a waiver without knowing the exact reforms the government would require of states, said spokesman Gary Vaillancourt.

"It's something everyone needs to look at, but right now it's not something where we could say, 'Yes, let's do this,'" Vaillancourt said.

Journal Sentinel staff writer Erin Richards contributed to this report.

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