



Office of the



State Superintendent of Education

District Schools Seek to Leave Behind 'No Child Left Behind' Law

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The No Child Left Behind Act has been the educational law of the land for nearly 10 years. It required school districts to show improvement every year until 2014, when all children were expected to be 100 percent proficient in reading and math. Now, the Obama administration is offering "waivers," which it says will allow districts to continue to make improvements while moving away from "bubble tests and dumbed-down standards."

The District is joining approximately 40 states in applying for a waiver. Kayleen Irizarry, the assistant superintendent of elementary and secondary education for all D.C.'s public schools, both traditional and charter, says there are a lot of aspects of No Child Left Behind she supports, but she echoes the Obama administration's call to move beyond "bubble tests and dumbed down standards."

She says the problem with NCLB is it only focuses on whether a school has made the target or not. And the bar is continually being raised.

"It applied a standard that was uniform to all schools and didn't take into account the uniqueness of a school or other contributions that get at how a school is performing," she says. "Such as how many students are taking advanced courses, how many teachers are rated highly effective, what is our truancy rate."

Irizarry says an overwhelming number of schools in the District are in some form of mandatory improvement. Last year, approximately 70 to 74 percent of elementary and high school students were supposed to hit reading and math targets.

"Under the 187 schools that were assessed under the DCCAS only 25 percent made adequate yearly progress in both subjects," she says.

Of those 25 she says half of those schools didn't actually make their target but managed to qualify for some waiver. She says receiving a waiver will allow D.C. schools to measure effectiveness beyond just two or three benchmarks.

Schools move toward Common Core curriculum

Schools have already begun implementing what's called the Common Core curriculum: rigorous expectations for what students should learn every year from kindergarten through high school.

Approximately 40 states will follow the same standards, which were created to get students ready for college or a career when they graduated.



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Irizarry says the District's application will also look at other measures, such as how many students are ready for kindergarten, how many take remediation college courses, and how many take the SATs. In addition, she says they're looking at students' attendance records and whether students are returning to the same school.

Eleven states applied for the first round of waivers. Several, including Colorado, Florida and Georgia have promised to include additional assessments, such as writing and science. D.C. already tests in those areas. Some states, such as California, has said it will cost too much to meet requirements the waiver application requires, such as using test scores to evaluate teachers. The District already does that, and Irizarry says it will not cost any additional money.

Critics have said allowing states to have different targets will create a "jumble," making it impossible to compare them. The Alliance for Excellent Education looked at the 11 states that applied in November, and say some states give too little weight to whether students are graduating. For example, in Kentucky and New Mexico, graduation rates only count for approximately 15 percent of the accountability system.

D.C.'s application isn't complete, but Irizarry says moving away from NCLB as it's written now is good for the District.

"As a former teacher and school district administrator, it can be disheartening when you've shown such progress and you've made such significant gains and you don't get credit for that because there's a target that has to be made and nothing else matters," she says.

D.C.'s application is due on Feb. 21, and officials will know if they've been granted a waiver in the summer.

[Music: "Everybody's Got To Learn Sometime" by Vitamin String Quartet from VSQ Film School: Cult Classics and Indie Faves]