



Every Student Counts Act: Q & A

What problem is this bill trying to solve?

More high school graduates would mean a more skilled and productive workforce, a critical prerequisite for economic growth and competitiveness. In order to come closer to this goal, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has focused the nation's attention on the unacceptable achievement gap and the need to improve outcomes for all students.

However, NCLB does not place enough importance on ensuring that the nation's high school students graduate. This lack of accountability goes against the original intent of NCLB, which was to shine a light on schools that were failing to teach students and prepare them for college and work. Although the graduation rate regulations released by the Department of Education in October 2008 are a laudable step in the right direction, there remain areas of concern, such as goals and growth targets, which can be resolved only through legislative action. This bill would move beyond the regulations towards ensuring that all students attend schools committed to graduating all of their students.

Why should all states use the same graduation rate?

The current system of allowing states to use one of several allowable graduation rate calculations makes it difficult to compare graduation rates across states and to get a clear picture of which states are doing a good job of graduating their students and which need to improve. The first step towards accountability is transparency—we need an accurate baseline before we can know where and how to target our resources.

Why is this bill necessary when we already have Department of Education regulations on graduation rates?

The bill is similar to the Department of Education's regulations in that it seeks to create a uniform graduation rate calculation for reporting and accountability. Where the two differ is on the specifics of the graduation rate goals and growth targets and how AYP is calculated, both of which are left up to the states under the regulation. The Department of Education indicated that this is because further clarity on these issues would require Congressional action. The Every Student Count Act is necessary, therefore, both to codify the ideas included in the regulation and to specify the high standards (in the form of specific graduation rate goals and growth targets and primacy of 4 year graduation requirements) toward which schools, districts, and states should be working.

Schools don't want more accountability. Can you tell me why this is necessary?

There is a documented phenomenon of schools pushing low-performing students out before the tenth grade in order to improve test scores. This unfortunate situation is occurring because of a combination of strong accountability for tenth-grade assessments and weak accountability for graduation rates, resulting in a loophole in which schools can improve test scores by pushing out low-scorers without having to raise student achievement. Balanced accountability is necessary to ensure that schools are held responsible for educating students throughout high school until graduation.

Some students have trouble graduating from high school in the standard four-year period. What does this bill do to ensure that schools graduate students who take more than four years?

The bill uses a cumulative graduation rate for AYP determinations. This gives schools credit for graduating students who may take longer than the typical four years when they graduate with a regular diploma without creating different standards for predetermined subgroups of students. Providing schools, districts, and states with credit for graduating students in longer than four years also creates incentives for the creation of programs that serve students who have already dropped out and are over-age or undercredited. The Every Student Counts Act also maintains the primacy of four-year graduation by requiring that at least 90 percent of all graduates, both overall and for disaggregated subgroups, be four-year graduates.

How did you decide on 3 percent annual growth target?

The 3 percent number was devised after looking at research on schools with high dropout rates. Many of these low-performing schools achieved a similar rate of improvement when focused on their dropout problem, so the bill sets an improvement goal of 3 percent as a baseline that is both aggressive and achievable.

Why doesn't this bill use cohort reassignment?

Cohort reassignment is the removal of a predetermined group of students from the group expected to graduate in a given year and placement of those students into a different expected graduation year. The graduation rates originally proposed by the Secretary of Education (but not the final regulations) as well as the National Governors Association Compact allow for cohort reassignment of some students, meaning that certain categories of students such as English language learners or special education students could be exempt from the four-year requirement. Cohort reassignment thus lowers the expectations of these populations rather than holding all students to the same high standards. Because cohort reassignment also leaves it unclear who has moved into an alternate cohort, it renders the graduation rate calculation less accurate, transparent, and comparable than the cumulative rate in the Every Student Counts Act.