



The Every Student Counts Act

The Every Student Counts Act (ESCA) creates a graduation rate calculation that is consistent across states, requires reporting of subgroup graduation rates, sets meaningful graduation rate goals and targets, and removes incentives for schools to push out low-performing and at-risk students.

Background: ESCA was first introduced in the 110th Congress by Congressman Bobby Scott and Senator Tom Harkin. Both Congressman Scott and Senator Harkin wanted to respond to the nation's worrisome graduation rates, which lag behind those of our international economic competitors. In the United States, one out of every three students who enters ninth grade each year fails to graduate from high school four years later. Worse, almost half of black and Hispanic students fail to graduate during the same timeframe. Special education students also have graduation rates that hover just over 50 percent.

At that time Congressman Scott and Senator Harkin introduced their bills, little was being done to remedy the nation's dropout crisis. Federal policy permitted the use of inconsistent and misleading graduation rate calculations that overestimated the number of graduating students, failed to require meaningful increases in graduation rates over time, and did not require the graduation rates of student subgroups to increase as part of adequate yearly progress (AYP) determinations. It was clear to many in the civil rights, special education, and education communities that change was needed.

Recognizing the need for new policy in this area, the Department of Education released regulations in October 2008 that created a uniform graduation rate calculation and ensured that improving graduation rates for all students was part of the federal accountability system.

Although the graduation rate regulations are a laudable step in the right direction, there remain areas of concern including that they do not go far enough in setting consistent, high graduation rate goals and aggressive, attainable graduation rate growth targets. The Department of Education has indicated that these policy areas can be resolved only through legislative action. This bill is that legislative action.

The Every Student Counts Act would do the following:

- **Make graduation rate calculations uniform and accurate.** The bill would require that all states calculate their graduation rates in the same manner, allowing for more consistency and transparency.
- **Set meaningful graduation rate goals and growth targets for *all* students.** The bill sets a graduation rate goal of 90 percent for all students and disadvantaged populations. Schools, districts and States with graduation rates below 90 percent, in the aggregate or for any subgroup, must increase their graduation rates an average of 3 percentage points per year to make AYP.
- **Balance testing and graduation rates for accountability purposes.** The bill would ensure that test scores and graduation rates are weighted equally when determining AYP so that schools have balanced incentives to both graduate their students and raise their test scores instead of doing one at the expense of the other.
- **Recognize that some small numbers of students take longer than four years to graduate.** Instead of treating certain students differently for accountability purposes and predetermining when certain students would graduate, the Every Student Counts Act includes a cumulative graduation rate provision. Under this provision, schools, school districts and states would be given credit for graduating students who may take longer than the typical four years when they graduate with a regular diploma. Providing for a cumulative rate also creates incentives for schools, districts, and states to create programs to serve students who have already dropped out and are over-age or undercredited. The bill also maintains the primacy of graduating the great preponderance of *all* students in four years by requiring that at least 90 percent of all graduates be four-year graduates.