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Advocates Putting Lens on High School In NCLB Renewal

Fresh off his re-election three years ago, President Bush said improving high schools was his highest K-12 priority.

He proposed to add annual tests in grades 9-12 to the No Child Left Behind Act's testing-and-accountability rules, which currently assess students in reading and mathematics in grades 3-8 and once during high school, and which also test students' science knowledge at three grade levels.

His proposal never advanced in Congress. "There are very few people who truly believe that testing in three more years is going to lead us to the promised land" of better high schools, said Bethany Little, the vice president for federal advocacy and policy development for the Alliance for Excellent Education.

But Ms. Little's group and other advocates for improved high schools are optimistic about ideas being considered as Congress works to reauthorize the nearly 6-year-old NCLB law.

"Since then, the conversation has moved significantly," Ms. Little said at a forum last week, comparing the climate now with three years ago.

Congress is considering bills that call for intervention in schools with the nation's highest dropout rates and aim to entice states to align their academic standards with colleges' and employers' expectations.

The Campaign for High School Equity held a Dec. 6 forum to push for high school improvement as part of NCLB reauthorization. The coalition includes Washington-based groups such as the Alliance for Excellent Education, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, and the National Council of La Raza.

Although most Washington observers doubt that Congress will finish an NCLB bill in 2008, the Campaign for High School Equity is pushing for completion. "Every year, those dropout factories will lose thousands of their students," Ms. Little said, referring to the estimated 2,000 schools where half the nation's dropouts were enrolled. The schools serve a disproportionate number of minority students.

"It's time to bring home some true change to high schools serving students of color," Ms. Little said.