



## **Editorial: Modifying No Child Left Behind**

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An episode of Friday Night Lights might leave the impression that high schools today are little more than places where teenagers meet to hook up.

Sure, high school has always been a good place for teens to find a date. But its more important role hasn't changed. High school is still where most adolescents begin to choose their path to adulthood.

Some get on the road to college. Others take a more direct route to a vocation.

Too many drop out.

About 30 percent of teenagers don't finish high school; in Philadelphia, it's 50 percent. Those numbers explain why Congress, in reauthorizing the No Child Left Behind Act, should pay more than lip service to improving high school education.

Toward that end, nine civil rights organizations, including the NAACP and the National Council of La Raza, have formed a coalition called the Campaign for High School Equity. They seek changes in the NCLB law as well as other systemic reforms that will improve graduation rates.

Only half of African American and Native American students and 58 percent of Latinos graduate from high school on time. Many get discouraged and join the 1.2 million children who drop out each year; dropping out is closely associated with poverty, crime, and poor health care.

Minority children are four times more likely than white children to attend a high school with a low graduation rate. Not coincidentally, those schools tend to have fewer resources and more teachers who aren't certified in their field of instruction.

Working with the coalition is the Alliance for Excellent Education, an advocacy group focused on high school education. Alliance president Bob Wise, a former governor of West Virginia, says coalition members spent two years deciding its core mission. Now they're ready to act - both separately and collectively.

It makes sense to focus on No Child Left Behind, which appears destined for modification with both conservatives attacking it as usurping local education officials' authority and liberals pointing out that it is inadequately funded.

Wise says the law's emphasis on what happens in lower grades is appropriate; those early years are crucial.

But the law's systems of measurement and accountability can't just shrug off what happens by the time students reach high school. Newer studies show that even well-prepared students can falter without the right kind of environment and help in high school.

One basic thing Congress should do is add graduation rates to NCLB's assessments of school performance. What good is it to grade the yearly progress of students if you are not going to consider the ultimate outcome?

The law should standardize how states calculate graduation rates; the original law's willingness to allow a crazy quilt of different measurements in different states on a whole range of indicators is one of its great flaws.

Some states even include GED recipients in graduation rates, which is misleading since those children technically are dropouts.

Right now, the law even gives schools a perverse incentive to encourage poorly performing students to drop out. If they remain, they could bring down the standardized test scores that the law uses to judge a school's academic improvement. A variation of that problem occurred in Houston while that city's school system was being led by Rod Paige, the U.S. secretary of education who ushered NCLB into existence.

As it considers No Child Left Behind, Congress ought to also think about spending more money on high school education.

According to the Alliance, about \$18 billion in federal education money was allocated this year for children in grades pre-K through sixth; an additional \$16 billion went to students in college. But less than \$5 billion went to grades 7-12.

Some school districts recognize that special efforts must be made to improve high schools. In its recent reforms, for example, Philadelphia has worked to increase rigor and course options in high school, while creating smaller high schools to improve the learning environment.

No Child Left Behind is based on the belief that educators should never throw up their hands and give up on any student.

By the same token, the federal government shouldn't do that with the nation's public high schools.