



The Need to Be Watchful Around New Federal Education Law

CABL Commentary

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It's probably a safe bet that most people have at least some vague familiarity with the federal law that was dubbed "No Child Left Behind." What most people probably don't know, though, is that that law was replaced in late 2015 with a new version called the "Every Student Succeeds Act" or ESSA.

In many ways, ESSA marks a major shift in federal policy towards education. It is less prescriptive than the old No Child Left Behind law and gives more flexibility to states, particularly in the area of school accountability. That can be a good thing for Louisiana, but it also has its perils.

For the last few years the big focus in education, both here and across the country, has been on raising academic standards and using assessments aligned to those standards to measure how students are doing. Those are critically important, but there's a third leg to the stool that pulls them all together – accountability.

Once we know how our students are doing through the standards and assessments, we need a strong accountability system to ensure that schools and districts are taking the necessary steps to actually help all of our students succeed. The new ESSA law challenges states and districts to analyze their accountability systems and refine them so that they truly provide the proper pressures, rewards and supports to make sure that all students are prepared for whatever they choose to do after high school.

The good news is that Louisiana has a strong accountability system that has largely been in place for almost two decades. ESSA gives us an opportunity to build on that foundation and make adjustments to make it even more meaningful. The peril arises in the fact that not everyone wants that to happen.

For years some in Louisiana have been fighting to water down our accountability system – to make it more opaque, less transparent and easier to hide the true performance of our schools. This year alone there were a number of bills introduced at the Legislature to do just that. Fortunately, they haven't succeeded, but the ESSA mandate to review our accountability system gives them another springboard to try to move us backwards.

You'll hear about it soon enough. They'll be talking about getting rid of state assessments, ending letter grades for schools, and moving away from seriously measuring student performance. They'll advocate replacing them with things that sound good on the surface, but have more to do with inputs than student outcomes.

We can't do that. Louisiana has worked too hard for too many years and seen too many successes to change directions because some don't want us to know how our kids are doing. But rest assured, they're going to try to muddy the waters and take away some of the public oversight from our public schools. It's up to all of us to make sure that doesn't happen.