Leave No Child Behind

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Both liberals and conservatives have a big problem with George W. Bush: he is fulfilling his campaign promises. This includes bringing back dignity to the White House, passing the best tax cut he could get the Democrats to agree to, scrubbing the obsolete ABM treaty, and vastly increasing federal control over the public schools.
The liberals in the media and in Congress are gloating over the final passage of H.R.1/S.1, labeled by Bush as "Leave No Child Behind." One Republican House member modified the moniker to call it Leave No Democrat Behind.

The New York Times bragged that the more-than-1,000-page giant education bill will "dramatically extend the federal role in public education," and, indeed, is "a breathtaking intrusion of the federal government on states' control of education." Yet, this sweeping bill was hailed by some of the same Republicans who only few years ago had promised to fulfill the Reagan promise to abolish the Department of Education.

The price tag on Leave No Child Behind is $26.5 billion. That's $8 billion more than the last Clinton education bill and $4 billion more than Bush requested.

The majority of Republicans caved in to White House pressure, but 34 conservative Republicans in the House valiantly voted No. The bill passed by 381 to 41 in the House and 87 to 10 in the Senate.

Senator Paul Wellstone (D-MN) described the bill as "a stunning federal mandate" that strikes at "the essence of local control." The Bush Administration has adopted the approach proclaimed by Bill Clinton in a speech in Chicago on January 22, 1997: "We can no longer hide behind our love of local control of the schools."

This remarkable bipartisan realignment was brought about by Bush's demand to pass any bill that would please the Democrats, plus the hardball tactics of the Daschle-Kennedy-Gephardt Democrats in insisting on whatever their allies, the teachers unions, demanded.

The Administration touted accountability as the supreme goal. But accountability to whom? According to this law, it's to the U.S. Department of Education, not to parents or local school boards.

As the way to achieve accountability, the new education bill requires annual testing of all students in reading and math from the 3rd to the 8th grades, and in science beginning in 2007. In addition, states must test fourth and 8th grade students in reading and math every other year using the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP).

But tests can't improve the schools unless reform in the teaching of reading and math takes place before the tests are given. There is no indication that the federal bureaucrats are better able to teach reading and math than the local schools.

During the months that the education bill was in congressional committees, House conservatives offered several amendments to make the bill less objectionable. Only a few portions of these amendments survived.

Parents have been concerned that many tests, even NAEP tests, are designed to guide attitudes and behavior rather than to test knowledge. One amendment included in the final bill, introduced by Rep. Todd Akin (R-MO), requires that tests be based on objective, measurable and widely accepted professional testing standards and not assess personal beliefs or attitudes of the students.

Since nosy surveys requiring students to reveal personal information about sex, drugs and suicide have been objected to by parents for many years, Reps. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) and Todd Tiahrt (R- KS) sponsored a Parental Freedom of Information Amendment to require parental consent for such surveys. This was watered down to merely requiring a one-time notice at the beginning of each school year to list the surveys that might be given, thus putting the burden on parents to discover such surveys and opt out their children.

A provision sponsored by Rep. Van Hilleary (R-TN) and Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) will deny federal funds to any state, district or school that discriminates against the Boy Scouts of America. This amendment passed the House by a voice vote and passed the Senate by 51- 49, with Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) as the most vocal opponent.

Rep. Tom Tancredo (R-CO) proposed an amendment to require parental consent before a child can be placed in bilingual education, but this was watered down to require only parental notification. The law quadruples federal spending on bilingual education, which is so unpopular with parents that referenda in California and Arizona killed spending funds of those states on bilingual education.

The big controversy about choice for kids to move to another school faded away with a whimper. Only after a school has been identified as failing for two years can a student be allowed to attend another public or charter school within the district.

The original purpose of this bill, which dates from Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and has since been renewed every five years, was to "close the gap" between achieving and nonachieving students. Even though the government's own evaluations prove that billions of dollars have produced no measurable results, this law's only approach is still more federal spending and more federal control. That now goes under the name of Bush bipartisanship.