

OTHER OPINIONS

No Child Left Behind can help all students achieve

It has given some students the option to transfer to a better-performing school. It's given teachers higher standards. It's given schools a list of certain student groups that must improve.

It's given deadlines, accountability and, in some cases, partnerships designed to foster improvement.

But mostly, the federal No Child Left Behind Act has given educators across the country heartburn.

Educators complain of having to serve "two masters" — state testing codes, like the Standards of Learning, that judge entire schools' progress, and NCLB, which requires improvement among student groups, such as low income or special ed.

Dozens of superintendents nationally, including Suffolk's Milton R. Liverman, are weighing the costs of eschewing federal funding to escape the law's requirements. And Virginia's House of Delegates voted 98-1 last month to ask Congress to exempt Virginia from NCLB mandates.

In this atmosphere of dissension, Norfolk stands out. Superintendent John O. Simpson has embraced the



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Simpson to expound on his views.

Q: What part of NCLB would you give an A? An F?

A: The requirements that school districts disaggregate data would get an "A." Norfolk Public Schools had committed to this prior to the implementation of NCLB. When dealing with overall averages, it is simply too easy for some children to slip through the cracks. Rigorous assessment of data reveals deficiencies in the system and allows us to develop strategies that ensure all our students receive a powerful education.

I would have to give an "F" to the lack of adequate funding. It is no secret that public education is underfunded. Add new federal man-

law, praising its focus on achievement gaps as well as its alignment with his philosophy of "all means all."

As the law's two-year anniversary passes, Virginian-Pilot education reporter Kristen King asked

Simpson to expound on his views.

As an urban district, many of our students face the increased challenges associated with poverty. You can't just throw money at a problem and make it go away. But, by the same token, you cannot increase services to ensure students have an equitable learning environment without additional money.

Q: How does the law affect teachers in your division?

A: As a district, we had already begun building infrastructure and capacity to make strong decisions based on data. NCLB underscores that need. Our teachers see the benefit and are embracing this strategy.

Obviously, we must ensure that all our teachers are highly qualified. A key challenge comes when we try to hire teachers from outside the commonwealth.

We might have a 12-year veteran — who by any other standard would be considered highly qualified — that we cannot place in a Title I school because she has not met Virginia's definition. We might have a talented

teacher that could fill a need in fifth grade, but because his license specifies only K-4, we cannot place him.

Q: How does the law mesh with your goals for your system?

A: The law conflicts very little with our district goals. Norfolk public schools work each year to improve the quality of teaching and learning for all students — and all means all. In the past, urban students were steered toward "functional literacy." Schools taught them enough to function in minimum-wage jobs and gave little thought to higher-order thinking skills.

Norfolk is committed to imparting "powerful literacy." We want all our students to be problem solvers. We want our students to ask questions and make connections between what they are learning and what they already know.

We want our students to have the skills necessary to be tomorrow's leaders. Regardless of their backgrounds, our children will have the ability to face a changing world and succeed. NCLB helps us in this

endeavor. Previously, the focus was on accreditation alone. But accreditation requires only that you have 70 percent of your students pass. That means nearly one third can fail. That is simply not good enough for the children of Norfolk.

Q: What would you change about the law?

A: My main concern is implementation. There needs to be adequate time to test some of the measurement components rather than rushing to put everything in place.

There will always be tension between state and federal requirements. We need time to tease out those differences and find the middle ground. And we need to set realistic deadlines for implementation.

Finally, there is an expectation that districts will have the technological ability to process data and to write and submit reports to meet the demands of the law. But the lack of funding for developing this infrastructure is a tremendous oversight — not just for Norfolk but also for small and rural districts.