

# A Case of Congressional Test-Phobia



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Nobody likes tests. Not third-graders and, apparently, not Congress.

The 114th Congress is moving quickly to overhaul the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—better known since 2001 as *No Child Left Behind*—the law that governs nearly all federal policy around K-12 schools. Loud voices on both sides of the aisle already have called for gutting its testing and accountability measures and for giving states federal education dollars with no strings attached.

These are bad ideas no matter where you fall on the political spectrum.

Republicans see themselves as defenders of our tax dollars. Yet many Republicans are now saying we should ditch the Bush-era accountability framework, including annual reading and math tests, and instead hand out \$25 billion annually for states to do as they please. Under the draft bill proposed by Senate Republicans, the federal government would have no real say in how its funds are used, nor would states need to provide evidence that they're spending it on something that works. Rather, a state must simply give an "assurance" that it is trying to improve its worst performing schools in some way. This is a perplexing stance from the party that treasures fiscal responsibility: let's do away with goals, the ability to measure how we're doing, and all mechanisms for forcing changes if we're failing.

The stance of anti-testing-and-accountability Democrats is even more puzzling. After decades of stagnant school test scores and yawning achievement gaps, *No Child Left Behind* spurred tremendous academic gains, especially among low-income and minority kids. Just a few of the many examples: according to the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#), the largest ongoing nationwide assessment, a full

57% of low-income students were “below basic” level in fourth grade math the year before NCLB was enacted. Today that rate is 27%. For African American students, those numbers went from 65% to 34%. For Latinos, they went from 59% to 27%. Today, the average 9-year-old African American student scores at the math level an African American 13-year-old did in 1973. The same is true for Latino students. Students with disabilities are making gains as well—and for the first time, those gains are being tracked and we can measure progress.

How can Democrats, who built two winning Presidential coalitions by arguing they are the only ones who will stand up for African Americans and Latinos, be willing to throw out the policies that incited such progress?

Of course there are things not to like about NCLB and pieces of it could use tweaks and improvement. And some thoughtful lawmakers are already suggesting ways to directly address those concerns, like asking states and districts to review the tests their students are taking and toss out those that are duplicative or low quality. But after decades of stagnant scores and watching American students fall behind those of our global competitors, we are now on an upward trajectory, with our average 9 year old student gaining seven times as quickly in reading and five times as quickly in math as they did in the pre-NCLB era.

The gravitational pull of anti-testing-and-accountability forces is so strong, however, that it’s causing many in Congress to become “repeal and replacers,” even if it means jettisoning deep values cherished by their own party. This is the legislative equivalent of repealing the entire *Affordable Care Act* because of opposition to its medical device tax.

We cannot let test-phobia undercut the significant progress the United States has made toward giving all children an education that prepares them to succeed. Tossing out the tests and the accountability ushered in by *No Child Left Behind* might be politically convenient, but it would be a step backwards.

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