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Inside the Law

Analyzing, Debating and Explaining No Child Left Behind

by Angela Pascopella

Maine's Attempt to Be Exempt Axed

After the state Senate and House of Representatives in Maine passed a resolution requesting a waiver to exempt Maine from the federal No Child Left Behind legislation, the U.S. Department of Education rejected the plea.

"To opt out of the law basically would mean leaving behind the neediest kids," says Jo Ann Webb, department spokeswoman.

State Sen. Peggy Rotundo, D-Lewiston, and a co-sponsor of the resolution, says the federal law is "irrelevant," considering that Maine demands high standards under the state's Learning Results program. Maine students in grades 4-8 already take the Maine Educational Assessment, the state's standardized test. The federal law requires testing of students in grades 3, 5, 6 and 7. Forcing more testing will take away valuable teaching time in class, Rotundo says.

"To put another level of assessment on us and the body of information that teachers need to teach, we felt that was unfair," Rotundo says.

Rotundo adds that NCLB, considered an unfunded mandate, seems to have been developed more for failing urban schools. Maine has mainly rural schools. "We have respectfully asked Washington to leave us alone," she says.

Some members of the state Senate sent a letter in late June to the state attorney general to explore any legal action they could take. Webb would not comment on that idea, saying it was a state issue.

Do Unto Others...

Treat others the way you want them to treat you. It's the backbone of The PoliteChild, a company that assists schools in offering courses that teach children the importance of the three C's--courtesy, caring, and compassion.

When it comes to No Child Left Behind, unfortunately there's no room in the law for social skills and proper etiquette, says Corinne Gregory, founder and program director for The PoliteChild. Repeated studies show, however, that up to 85 percent of a child's future success depends on his or her social skills--more than academic achievement, or economic or family background, she says. And Public Agenda's annual Reality Check surveys show that almost half of high school students, 49 percent, say teachers spend more time trying to keep order in class than teaching. Many high school teachers agree.

"Teachers can't teach anyone without getting their attention, and you can't get their attention if a child is being unruly," Gregory says.

NCLB encourages parents to ensure children have proper social values and skills necessary to succeed. However, it does not suggest any solutions to the problem of ill-mannered students who sit in class.

www.politechild.com

Thinking Out of the Box

No more Ds or even that pesky F. Efforts to meet goals set forth in No Child Left Behind are showing results in Putnam County (Fla.) School District. Every one of the 19 schools earned an A, B or C under the state's school grading system. Not bad after

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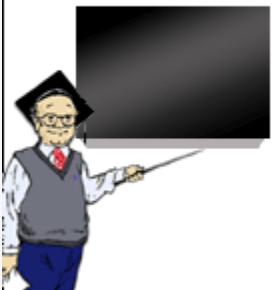
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three schools had Ds and one school had Ds and an F since 1999 under the A+ Plan for Education.

School grades are determined by measuring student achievement, learning gains, and improvement of the lowest-performing students according to the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. "The bottom line is that we're having to really dig deeper and think out of the box in ways we can personally identify each student and not treat them as just a number on a sheet," says Superintendent David Buckles.

In line with No Child's requirement to boost low achievement and ensure children are proficient in various subjects, the district started summer school this year to improve reading skills. Third-graders who scored in the lowest 25 percent of the FCAT in reading and second-graders who scored in the lowest 25 percent of SAT 9 test in reading, or 244 students, attended one of five sites in the community, such as local libraries or churches, over four weeks, three hours a day, four days a week.

Phase II of the project involved only the third-graders and they attended an additional three weeks, three hours a day, four days a week of summer school focused on reading.

And for the first time this past year, the district started using a software program, called FCAT-STAR, that tracks how students performed on the test. It helps teachers hone in on a student's weak and strong spots, says Grace Smith, director of career, technical, adult education, and media for the district.

And for high school seniors who failed the FCAT and did not receive their diplomas in June, they attended a three-week summer program to focus on their weak skills. If they still failed the FCAT, they are transferred to an adult education program in the fall to work on skills. They can then retake the FCAT and still earn a standard diploma, Smith says.

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