

# Built to Teacher Specifications

How the President's Plan to  
Fix *ESEA* Empowers Teachers



U. S. D E P A R T M E N T O F E D U C A T I O N

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# Built for Teachers

How the President's Plan to Fix  
*ESEA* Empowers Educators

U. S. D E P A R T M E N T O F E D U C A T I O N  
2011



## Dear Teaching Colleagues:

This is a tough time to be a teacher. You went into teaching with a great heart and a great passion because you want to make a difference. Though you work tirelessly and spend your own money to make sure that your students have futures full of choices and opportunities, many of your salaries are frozen or cut in tough economic times. As I have listened to your stories, I have become convinced that many of you must get dizzy juggling the barrage of mandates in federal, state, district, and school programs.

In recent years, the federal government hasn't helped. The *No Child Left Behind Act* created incentives for states to lower standards and measure students' skills by using low-quality bubble tests. The law focused on punitive measures when students didn't reach standards, yet failed to acknowledge their growth. And it identified too many schools as failing when they didn't meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

As I've travelled the country, I've met with so many teachers in practically every state, and I've heard their fears and concerns. Teachers are asking: *Are these reforms that the president proposes just the Next Big Thing, here today but gone tomorrow? Will they focus on low-quality standardized tests in a way that further narrows the curriculum and denies students the great education that we seek to bring?*

President Obama's plan to revise the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* addresses those concerns and proposes common-sense strategies to move us in the right direction. Until Congress acts to fix *ESEA*,

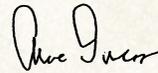
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President Obama has authorized me to allow states that are taking bold steps to improve instruction and achievement for all students to apply for flexibility from some of the burdensome requirements of *NCLB*.

This brochure outlines ways that the president's plan to fix *NCLB* supports teachers in their efforts in the classroom. I also invite you to read his *Blueprint for Reform* as well as the Department's strategy to grant states flexibility until *ESEA* is reauthorized. Finally, I encourage you to work within your schools and states to continue helping all students become prepared for college and careers. With teachers, parents, and schools working together, I'm so encouraged by what's possible.

Thank you for all you do to support our schools, families, and communities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Arne Duncan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Arne" being more prominent.

Arne Duncan  
Secretary of Education  
U.S. Department of Education

## How the President's Plan to Fix ESEA Empowers Teachers

The president's plan works because it is designed to meet the needs of students while accomplishing objectives that teachers have been concerned about for a long time.

### Respecting Teachers as the Professionals They Are

***Our Challenge:** We all know that not all teachers are alike, nor should they be. Yet, for too long, many educators have been treated like cogs in the system, interchangeably generic employees whose strengths and contributions go largely unnoticed. Unlike evaluations in other professions, teacher performance reviews don't provide meaningful feedback, and they have little to no impact on professional development. Furthermore, the most effective teachers are generally not rewarded for doing a great job or for taking on greater responsibilities.*

### The President's New Direction:

**Recognizing the Importance of Teachers.** The president's plan is based on two principles that we all know are true: 1) Great teachers matter; and 2) Not all teachers are equally effective. Under this plan, teachers are recognized and supported as unique professionals. Principals and other school leaders will take the time (and they should be given the training) to evaluate teachers comprehensively and fairly based on individual performance. The plan proposes that evaluations be based on multiple measures, acknowledge successes, provide meaningful feedback, inform staff development and staffing decisions, offer teachers more responsibility, and compensate them more reasonably. Teachers deserve to be evaluated fairly and paid for the hard work they do.



## Broadening the Curriculum

***Our Challenge:** No Child Left Behind's focus on AYP has put history, the arts, and other critical subjects on the back burner. Schools spend far too much time on tests and not enough on lessons that foster engagement, critical thinking, and a well-rounded education.*

### The Plan's New Direction:

**Painting with a broad brush.** The effect of the president's plan will be to broaden what teachers teach, not limit it. Because most schools will have relief from the relentless emphasis on year-to-year test scores, teachers and principals will be able to focus on ensuring a high-quality education for every student, including long-neglected subjects like art and foreign languages. The president's budget and plan would also provide funding to support high-quality instruction in these subjects, especially in our highest-need schools. Finally, because states will have the flexibility to include a range of academic subjects in their accountability systems, teachers of traditionally untested subjects will no longer feel ignored.

**Better assessments.** The Department is investing \$350 million in support for states to develop better assessments that measure complex skills, ensuring that students are gaining the knowledge and skills they need in the real world—not just filling in bubbles. States are also able to use alternative assessments, such as portfolios and projects, in addition to state tests. States are encouraged to work with a coalition of state colleges and universities to create standards that are fair and to ensure that students who meet them have the skills to succeed in college and careers.



## Using Data the Right Way

**Our Challenge:** *Teachers can speak for hours about the misuse of testing data: requiring all students to be on the same level all at once, labeling schools and teachers as failures even if scores are growing, using scores as the sole measurement of success, and teaching to the test.*

### The Plan's New Direction:

**Focus on Growth.** The plan encourages schools to use data in fundamentally different ways. Schools are measured not only by achievement level but also by growth. Under this plan, if a teacher helps a fifth-grade student's reading to move from a second-grade to a fourth-grade level, he or she is not labeled as a failure but as a model for others to emulate. And progress over time will matter—one bad year will no longer cause a school to be identified as “failing,” because data from several years are reviewed to determine how a school is doing.



## Empowering Teachers and Schools

**Our Challenge:** *While NCLB helped schools to focus on specific student groups, its emphasis was more on punishing than empowering. If schools were identified as “failing,” they had no real choices for fixing their plans because the one federal track was prescribed—“one size fits all.”*

### The Plan’s New Direction:

**More funds to reach high goals.** The plan takes a much more positive and empowering position on student achievement. The plan encourages states to adopt rigorous goals for student performance and rewards and provides incentives for accomplishing those goals and for showing progress. What’s more, districts interested in reform to achieve their goals can compete for *additional funding—beyond what they currently receive through regular (formula) programs*—through grant programs, such as Race to the Top, Promise Neighborhoods, and Investing in Innovation. The plan will maintain funding for foundational programs such as Title I and *IDEA*, and approximately 80 percent of the funds the president has requested are for programs funded through formula grants.

**Fewer restrictions about how to get there.** In the past, schools not making AYP were required to follow prescribed programs, but the plan’s strategy is more fluid, offering school systems an array of local choices and control. While maintaining a high bar for accountability, it recognizes that what works in a rural school, for example, may not work in a school in urban areas or other regions.



## Making a Bold Case for Reform

***Our Challenge:** There have been so many reforms proposed over the last few decades that teachers may feel at times they are just going through the latest motions, checking off the latest “to do” items on an agenda that merely patches problems in education without a clear sense of purpose or direction.*

### The Plan’s New Direction:

**A World-Class Education.** The president’s reform agenda calls teachers to take even more bold and courageous steps to completely transform what we offer students in this country so that all have equal access to a quality education. Others may see the goal of preparing every student for college or career as pie in the sky, but not the president. He believes that education is a great equalizer. Skeptics say we must first solve our country’s economic problems, but the president knows that we have to educate ourselves into economic security.

What teachers tell me they like most about the plan is that it asks them to deeply examine their practice and to be willing to improve it to meet the needs of students today. The president’s plan challenges us all to live what we believe—that all students can learn and that they are all worth our best efforts.



## Addressing Teachers' Concerns

*This section addresses concerns that Secretary Duncan has heard consistently when talking with teachers about education reform.*

**Why does the government seem to blame teachers for problems schools face?** The president understands that most teachers are doing a very good job and that all of the problems in education can't be balanced on the backs of teachers. Instead of blaming teachers, he calls for teachers and school leaders to collaborate with one another to raise achievement so that all students are college- and career-ready. If teachers aren't performing up to that level, they should get the support they need and the opportunity to improve.

**How is the proposed plan for testing different from what we have had?** Assessment is important because educators use the data to evaluate student learning and determine what to focus on to help each student. *Under this plan, student achievement levels should NOT be the sole measure of performance. Instead, the focus should be on growth.* The plan focuses not on one point in time but on progress over time. Schools with low achievement shouldn't be singled out for the most dramatic turnaround unless they persistently remain in the bottom 5 percent of all schools and show no growth.

**Since teachers can't control the environments from which their students come, isn't it unfair to hold all teachers to the same standards for student achievement?** No two students are alike, and some come to us with baggage that makes them harder to teach than others. The plan recognizes this by suggesting state school systems focus on the whole child and on rewarding growth, not just on arbitrary achievement levels. The plan also helps teachers to reach difficult students by providing resources to help implement comprehensive approaches to meeting students' needs.

**Why does the plan ask schools to compete for federal dollars?** Eighty percent of federal dollars for K–12 schools will come through the same funding sources as before—without any competition. The plan includes new competitive programs that offer incentives for school districts and states to develop strategies and plans for improving their students' achievement. These programs will direct resources based not only on the quality of the proposed plan but also on the needs of the students who will be served.

**Why should teacher pay be determined by test scores?** Test scores should not be the sole indicator of a teacher's performance, but, if used correctly, they should indicate how well students are learning. If done right, it makes some sense that growth in student achievement should be one part of a teacher's evaluation. Under the president's plan, a comprehensive teacher evaluation system must consider multiple measures, such as classroom observations, peer reviews, professional development, and other contributions that the teacher makes to the school.

**How will my classroom change when the president's reforms become law?** Highly effective teachers could be rewarded with more recognition, higher pay, and leadership opportunities, including mentoring others, and incentives for teaching in high-need schools or subject areas. Effective teachers should participate in professional development that builds on their current skills and improves their practice to make them more effective. Struggling teachers could be given more intensive training and mentoring and be observed more frequently in efforts to improve their practice. If their performance does not improve, they may be counseled to consider taking on a different role at the school or choosing another profession.

All teachers will use data to assess students' progress and to redirect their teaching. With the new accountability system's emphasis on growth, *teachers will feel less pressure for all students to perform at the same level.* Since schools won't be labeled as "failing" based solely on the results of one test on one day, teachers won't feel the need to focus only on students just below the proficiency bar. Because the plan gives most schools the flexibility to determine the right strategies to help them improve instead of mandating a single set of interventions for every school, teachers will be able to work with school leaders to make the changes needed for students. Teachers will also be given more time to meet with teams in their schools to evaluate data and make plans to address areas of concern as a community.

**Why does the plan require that teachers be fired?** It doesn't. However, it does focus on dramatically reforming the schools whose students' test scores consistently fall in the bottom 5 percent—schools where performance is extremely low and not improving.

Most of the plan is about supporting teachers and leaders in our schools, recognizing and rewarding those who are doing a great job. The budget provides a 10 percent increase in funding for programs that support teachers and leaders, more than has ever been requested.

**What about principals? What part do they play in the president's plan for reform?** The plan recognizes the need for school leaders who understand what resources and support systems teachers need to succeed. States are encouraged to invest in principal development, enhancing their training and evaluations, and restructuring their jobs so that they are free to work with teachers collaboratively and make authentic assessments. To make this happen, the president is proposing to increase fivefold the funding for programs that prepare effective teachers and other school leaders to be effective principals.

**Does the president's plan to fix ESEA favor charter schools? Under the new plan, do charter schools receive preferential funding?** The plan does not favor one form of public school over another. Secretary Duncan says he is for whatever works well for students. Of the \$40 billion the president requested for the 2012 budget, *less than 1 percent* is set aside specifically for charter and other autonomous public schools.

**Do the Obama administration's competitions favor urban schools over rural populations?** No.

One of the strengths of the plan is that it focuses on need, which exists in both rural and urban areas. For this reason, the president's plan offers rural and other high-need communities a competitive priority in competitions. Furthermore, the plan's emphasis on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) has the potential to improve the technology that rural schools can access, offering students a broader range of courses.

**What is there in the plan for rural schools?** In addition to maintaining a dedicated funding stream for rural schools, much in the president's plan addresses rural needs, including support for rural districts that use distance education to provide students with access to a more complete education. It also removes barriers that make it difficult for rural schools to recruit and keep the best teachers. And it increases funding, cuts the red tape necessary to get it, and allows local communities more spending flexibility.

**Under this plan, what are families and communities asked to do to contribute to their children's success?** Families and communities play absolutely critical roles in student success. Both President Obama and Secretary Duncan have listened to parents telling their stories and relaying their concerns about the current crisis in education. The president's plan actually doubles the federal funding required to be set aside for family engagement and encourages school systems to come up with innovative and effective approaches, through programs such as Investing in

Innovation and Promise Neighborhoods, for school systems to tap into these resources. Based on feedback to the president's plan, it proposes to double funding for parent engagement—from 1 to 2 percent of Title I dollars—or a total of \$270 million. At the same time, states will be allowed to reserve 1 percent of Title I dollars for grant programs that support, incentivize, and help expand districts' evidence-based parental involvement practices.

## More Information

To read the *Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, visit <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/publicationtoc.html>.

To read about *ESEA* flexibility, visit <http://www.ed.gov/esea/flexibility/>.

To post a comment, visit <http://www.ed.gov/blog/>.



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