



Insight

# Education Exchange

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## Impotent Alliteration

Tuesday, March 15th

Fair, flexible, and focused. This is the plan that President Obama and Secretary Duncan have prescribed to save our nation's schools and our future. Today, after a week of campaigning for education in Florida with Jeb Bush and in Boston with Melinda Gates, President Obama urged Congress to fix NCLB before the start of the school year.

Last week, when Secretary Duncan testified on the Department of Education's budget before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, he announced the exact same message: "This law (NCLB) is fundamentally broken and we need to fix it this year. It has created dozens of ways for schools to fail and very few ways to help them succeed. We want to get out of the business of labeling schools as failures and create a new law that is fair, flexible, and focused on the schools and students most at risk."

What exactly does he mean by fair? "When we say fair, we mean a system of accountability based on individual student growth — one that recognizes and rewards success and holds us all accountable for the quality of education we provide to every single student in America," said Secretary Duncan.

Secretary Duncan also announced last week that 82% of schools will be labeled as failing under the NCLB law or more than 80,000 of the nation's 100,000 public schools, critics argue that this number is exaggerated and merely being used as justification for overhauling the law.

The day after Secretary Duncan testified on the budget, President Obama had a meeting with Senators Tom Harkin, Mike Enzi, Jeff Bingaman, and Lamar Alexander and Representatives John Kline, George Miller, Duncan Hunter, and Dale Kildee on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. He addressed raising standards, teacher quality and results for students, providing flexibility and incentives for innovation and improvement in the education system, and rewarding success.

This was all part of a highly coordinated effort to persuade the public and congress to fix NCLB. But how does the President intend to fix NCLB?

Does he plan to "recognize and reward" successful programs that have shown a track record of working? Then, surely, he would reauthorize the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program. The DC Voucher program as evaluated by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), showed that the program raised a student's probability of completing high school by 12 percentage points, from 70 percent to 82 percent, showed gains in reading scores, and an increase in parent satisfaction of student education. Despite the success of the program, it was cut by the White House and democrats in 2009.

According to a domestic policy advisor to the President as stated to Politico, President Obama "doesn't believe

that vouchers are the way that we're going to solve the comprehensive problems that we have in our school systems right now," said "We need a holistic approach."

Despite lack of the President's support, the Scholarships for Opportunity and Results (Soar Act), which would renew the DC Voucher program, was introduced by Speaker of the House John Boehner and Senator Joseph Lieberman in January. Last week it was approved by the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform.

The President, during his speech at Kenmore Middle School in Arlington, Virginia, today affirmed that he will not cut education spending. Because, he argued, fixing failing schools costs money. After a decade of deficits, we can't be irresponsible about what we cut, he reasoned. Then why did he cut the Voucher program which was showing results? Responsibility, reform, and results. They make sense and alliteration is nice to hear, but useless if devoid of meaning.