New law changes U.S. education policy, empowers states
By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff
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WASHINGTON, D.C. — President Barack Obama signed a sweeping overhaul of the No Child Left Behind education law on Thursday. The revisions usher in a new approach to school accountability, teacher evaluations and the way the most poorly performing schools are pushed to improve. Getting the changes through, the president said, was a "Christmas miracle" — a holiday gift to schools, students, teachers and parents.

Joined by lawmakers, students and teachers in a White House auditorium, Obama praised the George W. Bush-era No Child Left Behind for having the right goals. He said that in practice, it fell short or applied rigid and standardized approaches that failed to produce desired results. Under the new law, the federal government will shift more decision-making powers back to states.

"With this bill, we reaffirm that fundamentally American ideal that every child — regardless of race, gender, background, zip code — deserves the chance to make out of their lives what they want," Obama said. "This is a big step in the right direction."

The overhaul ends more than a decade of what critics have called unhelpful, one-size-fits-all federal policies. These policies have dictated how the nation's 100,000 or so public schools must measure teacher and student performance, and have forced schools to meet certain rigid standards.

Statewide Reading, Math Tests Still Required

One key feature of No Child Left Behind remains, however: Students will still take federally required statewide reading and math exams. The new law does encourage states to limit the time students spend on testing, however, and it diminishes the high stakes for underperforming schools.

The long-awaited bill to replace the 2002 law easily passed the Senate on Wednesday and the House last week. Its passage was a rare example of the Republican-controlled Congress and Obama finding common ground on major legislation.

"That's something that you don't always see here in Washington," Obama said. "There wasn't a lot of grandstanding, a lot of posturing, just a lot of good, hard work."

Republican Congressman John Kline, who chairs the House's education panel, said under the new approach, American classrooms will no longer be "micromanaged" by the Education Department in Washington.

"Instead, parents, teachers, and state and local education leaders will regain control of their schools," he said.

What Changes For Which Groups?

Here is how teachers, students, schools, parents and the federal government are affected:

The legislation eliminates the federal requirement that teacher evaluations be tied to student performance on the statewide tests. Teachers' unions hated that idea, saying the high stakes associated with the tests led to over-testing and detracted from the learning environment. States will still be able to consider scores as a factor in teacher performance reviews, but they will not be required to do so.

"We will continue to be vigilant as work shifts to the states," said Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers. She said she will keep a close eye on states to see if they "develop teacher evaluation systems that are fair and aimed at improving and supporting good instruction."

States Can Cap Testing Time

The nation's 50 million public school students will still have to take the federally required statewide reading and math exams in grades three to eight and once in high school. The testing will allow parents, teachers and others to judge each student's performance against a common measuring stick. However, the legislation also encourages states to set caps on the amount of time students spend on testing.
Standardized sets of learning goals such as Common Core will no longer be required. Common Core lays out what each student must learn in math and English by a certain grade. The federal government has heavily pushed states to use Common Core standards, in part by offering grants to states that adopted them.

The new bill says the federal government cannot require or push any particular set of academic standards. It will now be up to individual schools whether or not to stick with Common Core. Already, some states have begun backing away from it.

**It Should Be Easier To Compare Students, Schools**

The bill makes information about test scores much more available. Parents and others will now get a better look at how students in their states and in local schools are doing.

The legislation requires that test scores be broken down by race, family income and disability status.

Parents also will be able to see how per-pupil funding breaks down by state, district and school.

**It is now up to the states to shape school programs.**

States and districts will now be responsible for coming up with their own goals for schools, designing their own measures of achievement and progress, and deciding independently how to turn around struggling schools. Testing will be one factor considered. Other measures of success or failure could include graduation rates and education atmosphere.

The bill seeks to ensure that all children get a fair shot at a quality education. States will be required to step in when schools are performing particularly poorly. The requirement will apply to the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools, to high schools with high dropout rates and to schools in which some groups of students consistently do worse than others.

**Federal Government's Role Is Limited**

The bill substantially limits the federal government's role. The Education Department is now barred from telling states and local districts how to measure school and teacher performance.

The bill also ends the special exemptions the Obama administration has given to more than 40 states. These waivers exempted states from having to meet certain particularly difficult No Child goals. They were granted when it became clear that requirements such as having all students reach certain math and reading skill levels by 2014 would not be met.

**How will this new law change education in America? Include at least four changes:**

- **What is the main idea of this article? Explain why you think this is the main idea:**
Using evidence from the article, explain if this is a good law or not. In the text, circle, underline, or highlight evidence to support your claim. State your claim and then use your evidence from the article to support it: