

# Education Policies Worthy of the Name ‘Reform’

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The month before standardized tests begin each school year, Stephen Lazar, a National Board-certified history and English teacher at Harvest Collegiate High School in New York City, tells his students that he is going to “turn into a bad teacher. ... No more research, no more discussion, no more dealing with complexity, no more developing as writers with voice and style.” Instead, they practice mindless repetition of facts so they can perform well on a standardized test that, in its perverse way, Stephen says, “works.”

But he knows it doesn’t *really* work—that is, if we want to equip our kids with the skills and knowledge they need to be successful in life, college and career. When Stephen testified before Congress earlier this year, he told lawmakers that top-down, test-based accountability, which “values three hours of testing over a year of learning and development,” should be replaced with more valid and useful measures of student achievement.

Stephen is one of thousands of educators, union leaders, parents and students who have called for changes to policies that essentially reduced kids to test scores and teachers to algorithms. AFT members alone took more than 100,000 actions online, submitted 20,000 comments to Congress, and met with numerous congressional leaders and staff. After all these years of test-and-sanction policies, Congress listened and acted.

In a rare display of finding common ground, Congress recently passed the Every Student Succeeds Act by overwhelming majorities. ESSA replaces the broadly discredited No Child Left Behind Act, a law whose test-punish-repeat approach has left students alternately stressed or bored, has frustrated parents, and has deprofessionalized and demoralized teachers.

Under the newly passed ESSA, high-stakes testing and sanctions are no longer the be-all and end-all in education. States still will administer standardized tests, but they can now limit the consequences of these tests and the time students spend taking them, and eliminate unnecessary or poor-quality tests. States have an explicit obligation to help struggling schools succeed, not simply close them. And they are obliged to build an accountability system grounded in what students need to know and be able to do—for

example, by allowing project-based assessments, which can replace regular state standardized assessments in seven pilot states. ESSA focuses on populations of students who need the most, providing funds that can be used for early childhood programs, class-size reduction and community schools. It maintains high certification requirements for para-professionals, and it gets the federal government out of the business of teacher evaluation.

Does this law solve all the problems of public education? No law can. Indeed, just this week researchers recognized (again) the impact of poverty, finding that poor kids start school a year behind wealthier kids.

But this new law can create positive change. States will now take the lead on accountability, interventions and teacher evaluation systems. While some states will mess up, we hope most will learn from the failures of NCLB and give teachers and schools the latitude and support to deeply engage students and to focus on the whole child.

There are other signs the tide is turning. Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s Common Core Task Force, on which I served, last week urged a reboot of education policy in New York after its disastrous implementation of the Common Core. The task force calls for the development of new state standards, along with curriculum, tests and training, that focus on kids’ unique needs and foster a joy of learning. And it recommends a moratorium on evaluating teachers using students’ test scores. Now that the federal law has been overhauled, every state should do what this task force

did—diagnose what’s working and what’s not, and make the necessary fixes.

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When state officials err, we will still have to fight, as in New Mexico, where educators and union leaders have long called for changes to the state’s teacher evaluation system, which is based on a flawed “value-added” model. Earlier this month, a judge granted a preliminary injunction that halts the use of this system, calling it a “Beta test where teachers bear the burden for its uneven and inconsistent application.”

The people closest to our kids have shined a light on harmful education policies and practices. Responsibility now moves to the states, and officials must use this opportunity to get this reset right. I call on them to work with educators, parents, unions and other partners to help bring back the joy of teaching and learning, and to empower teachers to stoke students’ curiosity and help them pursue their interests, work in teams, and wrestle with and master concepts. Because wonderful educators like Stephen Lazar should have the resources and latitude not simply to prepare kids to take tests, but to prepare them for the challenges and opportunities that await them.



Weingarten at a town hall meeting in Albuquerque, N.M., on reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

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