

Science and Math Education Challenges Face Next President, Congress

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Science and Math Education Challenges Face Next President, Congress

By Rob Boisseau
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College Park — With dire economic news dominating the presidential race and many of the 470 Congressional contests, discussions about the U.S. education system, particularly how children learn science and mathematics, have faded into the background. Yet the major challenges of the K–12 education system challenges that many experts consider critical to the future economic well-being of the country await the next president and Congress.

Regardless of whether the next president is Barack Obama or John McCain, or which party controls Congress, the most contentious education issue will undoubtedly be the fate of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The law is reviled by some, and seen as a significant step forward by others.

In fact, NCLB, passed by Congress in 2001, was a bipartisan effort to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The main goals of NCLB—to improve math and reading competency, make schools accountable for poor student performance, and give parents the opportunity to move their children to better performing schools—are generally lauded. But some parents and teachers have made policymakers aware of their objections to the way NCLB works.

Perhaps the most controversial component of NCLB is the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) measure that requires schools to reach 100 percent proficiency in math and reading by 2014. Schools must demonstrate progress in their AYP measure every year, and those that fail to demonstrate AYP for consecutive years are labeled as in need of improvement and face penalties including student transfers and intervention by a state's department of education.

Only reading and math scores count towards AYP, science scores do not. As a result, many in the science community feel that their content is undermined as schools teach to the test, focusing class time and resources on math and reading.

Patti Curtis, managing director of the Washington office of Boston's Museum of Science, said the first thing legislators are likely to do is change the name of NCLB to try to free it from its controversial past. According to Curtis, the changes won't stop there. Legislators may soften the implications for testing, by allowing multiple measures, like graduation rates, to contribute towards AYP.

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But Curtis warns that the fuzzier we get, the easier it is to sweep the bad news [about student progr