



September 17, 2003

POLITICS AND POLICY

Education Plan Is Falling Short

States Struggle to Meet Standards
Of 'No Child Left Behind' Law

By **JUNE KRONHOLZ**
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

OKEECHOBEE, FLA. -- The children here at South Elementary School averaged such high scores on their standardized tests last spring that Florida's education department declared South an "A" school, and Gov. Jeb Bush showed up recently with a check for \$54,300 -- a \$100-per-student reward for the school to spend as it chooses.

But 3% of South's Hispanics didn't score high enough on the state math test, and 6% of its disabled students didn't do well enough on reading. So South failed to meet the benchmark the state set to comply with No Child Left Behind, President Bush's signature education plan, along with 2,600 other Florida schools -- or 87% of those in the state.

Gov. Bush insists Florida's poor showing under the new federal law "doesn't bother me," and he vows to plunge ahead with his school-overhaul plans. "No Child ... what's it called?" he asked his staff dismissively as he toured the state to distribute school bonus checks two weeks ago. Still, No Child Left Behind's demands for student tests, yearly learning goals, sanctions and rewards is largely modeled on the program Gov. Bush put in place four years ago. So, if the program is giving Florida headaches, the pain could soon reach migraine proportions for other states only now getting their programs in gear.

President Bush, Gov. Bush's brother, signed the massive education law last year, but states were required to make their first reports on student-test results only this month. So far, there is little good news. In Delaware, 57% of the schools didn't meet the federal law's yearly progress goals. Half of Missouri's schools and 45% of West Virginia's missed their targets. Maryland said 518 of its 1,400 schools missed the federal goals. Red-faced, the U.S. education department dropped the "failing" label it used to describe the schools, and dubbed them "in need of improvement" instead.

The pressure on states is likely to get even worse as other parts of the law kick in.

TESTING THE WATERS



¹ Read ongoing coverage of New York's [Harbor School experiment](#)².

The law requires the states to raise the grading bar over the next 11 years until everyone is proficient at reading and math. For a Florida school to avoid the "needing improvement" label now, for example, only 31% of its youngsters must be reading at grade level. But that rises to 48% next year, 65% in 2008 and 100% in 2014. To make

the targets even tougher, each of eight subgroups must meet the same goals or they will land the school on the "needing improvement" list, which is what happened at thousands of schools this

year. In Florida, 80% of white fourth graders read at grade level on their tests last spring, but only 22% of English-language learners, 20% of disabled children and 48% of blacks -- three of the eight groups -- cleared the bar.

Most of this year's failing schools face little more than embarrassment over their needing-improvement label. But as sanctions kick in over the next four years, states will be required to pay for private tutors, bus transport to better schools, teams of turnaround specialists -- and if all that still fails, take control of the schools from local districts.

So far, the political heat for governors such as Gov. Bush has been comparatively low, in part because many states have been slow to report bad news. Indeed, test results are tough to find on most state Web sites.

And Gov. Bush says that if No Child Left Behind creates a political flap by labeling thousands of schools as failures, "it's a national problem, not mine." Still, the prospect of failing grades and angry voters is beginning to worry some of the country's governors, very few of whom have control over their schools. In New Mexico, Gov. Bill Richardson has a measure on this month's ballot that would let him run the state education department. Some states already also have begun pressing the U.S. Education Department to revise how the law measures yearly progress. But reopening a program that President Bush sees as a major policy victory seems unlikely.

The law isn't just about testing students, either. Beginning this year, states can hire only teachers who can prove their competence in the subjects they are to teach, and by 2006, all teachers must be "highly qualified." But Florida says about one-fifth of its teachers don't meet that definition now, and that it needs as many as 22,500 new teachers every year -- far more than its universities are turning out. States also are gasping at the multimillion-dollar cost of computers, software and technicians needed to handle all the data the law requires them to collect. Florida is one of only a half-dozen states with sufficient computer capacity now.

The added costs that states predict they will have to pay already have prompted state legislators in Hawaii and New England to propose opting out of the federal program, and losing the funding that gives Washington its leverage over the schools now. Gov. Bush says the law isn't costing Florida anything extra. But New Hampshire calculated it will cost the Granite State \$575 per student to implement, while only bringing in \$77 per student in new funding. Researchers have calculated that Maryland would have to raise school spending by almost \$7,800 a child -- about 70% more than it currently spends -- to get its low-income students past the proficiency bar.

Adding to the complications, no two states have to jump over exactly the same bar to satisfy the law. To preserve states' control over their schools, each state negotiated with the education department to set such measures as how much a child needs to know to be proficient, what makes for a highly qualified teacher, and how much yearly learning progress is sufficient. In Missouri, for example, a school meets its yearly progress goals if 19% of students score "proficient" in reading; in Connecticut, the benchmark is 57%.

Gov. Bush insists Florida's failure rate is so high because "we didn't game it. We didn't lower our standards." But Michigan, with among the toughest proficiency standards, quietly lowered its bar this year to avoid failing too many schools. Colorado includes what it calls "partially proficient" youngsters in its count. And in Kansas, a test score that was labeled "satisfactory" before the law was passed has been relabeled "proficient" this year. "Proficient" is now "advanced," and what was "advanced" is "exemplary."

Some 21 states also pledged to get the bulk of their youngsters to grade level in the final six years of a 12-year timetable. Ohio plans to take eight years to raise the proportion of proficient learners from 40% to 60%, for example -- and then four years to boost it to 100%. That is long after President Bush and many of the country's governors and mayors leave office, however, meaning the toughest gains are required on someone else's watch. Gov. Bush, who faces a two-term limit, has only three years left in office.

Write to June Kronholz at june.kronholz@wsj.com³

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Updated September 17, 2003

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