

Senator Susan M. Collins
December 9, 2015
Every Student Succeeds Act

Mr. President, I rise in support of the bipartisan Every Student Succeeds Act. This is landmark legislation that would reform and reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, also known as No Child Left Behind. As a member of the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, and as a member of the conference committee that resolved the differences between the two bodies' versions of their education reform bills, I want to particularly applaud the leadership of Chairman *Alexander* and Ranking Member *Murray* for doing a truly extraordinary job in putting together a bipartisan, bicameral reform bill that is before us today.

Mr. President Congressional action to fix the serious flaws with No Child Left Behind, while preserving the valuable parts of that law, is long overdue, but that day has finally arrived. NCLB was well-intentioned, and its focus on the education of every child and greater transparency in the performance of our schools were welcomed reforms, but some of the law's provisions were simply unachievable and thus discouraging to teachers, parents, administrators, and students alike.

The current system of unattainable standards and a patchwork of State waivers has led to confusion about Federal requirements. High-stakes testing and unrealistic 100 percent proficiency goals do not raise aspirations; instead, they dispirit those who are committed to a high-quality education for our students.

The Every Student Succeeds Act returns much needed flexibility to the State departments of education and to local school districts. The bill would remove the high-stakes accountability system that was simply proven to be unworkable under No Child Left Behind. Instead, the bill would empower States to set the goals for their schools and students and design ways to improve student achievement. Mr. President The bill would also eliminate the burdensome, overly prescriptive parts of No Child Left Behind, such as the definition of a "highly qualified teacher," that is a perfect example of something that sounds great but proved unworkable in many of the small and rural schools in my State where teachers are called upon to teach a wide range of subjects.

The Every Student Succeeds Act would also reauthorize the Rural Education Achievement Program, known as REAP. I coauthored this law with former Senator Kent Conrad back in 2002. Students in rural America should have the same access to Federal grant dollars as those who attend schools in larger urban and suburban communities. Most Federal competitive grant programs, however, favor larger school districts because they are the ones that have the ability to hire grant writers to apply for those grants, even though that extra money may be needed more by a small rural school. As a result, rural school districts often had to forgo funding because they simply lacked the capacity to apply for the grant money. That is the problem the Rural Education Achievement Program Act was intended to solve, and it has provided financial assistance to both schools and districts to help them address their unique local needs.

This program has helped to support new technology in classrooms, distant learning opportunities, and professional development programs, as well as an array of other activities that benefit students and teachers in rural schools. Since the law was enacted in 2002, at least 120 Maine school districts have collectively received more than \$42 million from the REAP program. And I will tell you Mr. President when I talk to those small Maine school districts, they have been enormously creative in using REAP money to improve the education of their students. They have told me that without the law that Senator Kent Conrad and I authored back in 2002, they would not have been able to introduce technology into the classroom, to further professional development for their teachers or to provide special enrichment activities for their students. That law has been a real success, and I am delighted that this bill reauthorizes it.

I also want to highlight that the final version retains a Senate provision authorizing a pilot program that I worked on with several of my colleagues to require the Secretary of Education to allow seven States to designate alternative assessment systems based on student proficiency and not just on traditional tests. Such systems can give teachers, parents, and students a much fuller understanding of each student's abilities and better prepare them for the college or the career path of their choice. The Federal Government should cooperate with States and school districts that are designing brand new assessment systems, and this pilot project is an important step in that direction.

Mr. President Providing a good education for every child must remain a national priority so each child fulfills his or her full potential, has a wide range of opportunities, and can succeed in an increasingly competitive economy.

I know from having visited more than 200 schools in my State, that this legislation will be welcomed indeed. The Every Student Succeeds Act honors these guiding principles while returning greater control and flexibility to States and local school districts, where it belongs. I urge all of my colleagues to support this landmark legislation. Thank you, Mr. President.