

Education law rewrite gives power back to states

WASHINGTON (AP) — Those federally mandated math and reading tests will continue, but a sweeping rewrite of the nation’s education law will now give states — not the U.S. government — authority to decide how to use the results in evaluating teachers and schools.

The Senate on Wednesday voted overwhelmingly, 85-12, to approve legislation rewriting the landmark No Child Left Behind education law of 2002. On Thursday, President Barack Obama will sign it into law.

One key feature of No Child remains: Public school students will still take the federally required statewide reading and math exams. But the new law encourages states to limit the time students spend on testing, and it will diminish the high stakes for underperforming schools.

Republican Sen. Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, who leads the Senate Education Committee, called the legislation a “Christmas present” for 50 million children across the country. Alexander was a chief author of the bill along with Democratic Sen. Patty Murray of Washington — and in the House, Education Committee Chairman John Kline, R-Minn., and ranking Democrat Bobby Scott of Virginia.

“You’ll see states taking the opportunity to serve kids better, meaning it’s not just a



House Speaker Paul Ryan signs legislation on Capitol Hill in Washington on Wednesday that changes how the nation’s public schools are evaluated.

conversation about labeling schools but also a conversation about when a school’s not doing right by kids,” Chris Minnich, executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, said in an interview.

The new law will give states flexibility beyond using testing results to consider additional performance measures such as graduation rates.

There are risks that states may set goals too low or not act quickly enough, said Daria Hall, vice president for government affairs and communication at the Education Trust. But she also said, “Those risks are also really opportunities for states to

really step up to the plate and be leaders.”

Three presidential candidates missed the Senate vote — Republicans Ted Cruz of Texas and Marco Rubio of Florida and Vermont Independent Bernie Sanders.

Cruz said the legislation doesn’t go far enough to get the federal government out of the nation’s schools.

Here’s how the major stakeholders fare:

Teachers

The legislation eliminates the federal mandate that teacher evaluations be tied to student performance on the statewide tests.

Teachers’ unions hated that

previous idea, saying the high stakes associated with the tests were creating a culture of over-testing and detracting from the learning environment. States and districts will still be able to link scores or consider them 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 to fix accountability systems and develop teacher evaluation systems that are fair and aimed at improving and supporting good instruction,” Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, said in a statement.

Students

Don’t start applauding yet, kids. The nation’s 50 million students in public schools will still have to take the federally mandated statewide reading and math exams in grades three to eight and once in high school — so parents, teachers and others can see how they are doing against a common measuring stick. But the legislation also encourages states to set caps on the amount of time students spend on testing.

More children from low- and moderate-income families will have access to preschool through a new grant program that is to use existing funding to support state efforts.

Schools

No more Common Core — maybe.

The bill says the federal government may not mandate or give states incentives to adopt or maintain any particular set of academic standards, such as Common Core.

The college and career-ready curriculum guidelines were created by the states, but became a flashpoint for those critical of Washington’s influence in schools. The administration offered grants through its Race to the Top program for states that adopted strong academic

standards for students.

Already states have begun backing away from the standards.

Parents

The bill provides for more transparency about test scores, meaning parents and others in the community will 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.

States

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, but other measures of success or failure could include graduation rates and education atmosphere.

To make sure all children get a fair shot at a quality education, states will be required to intervene in the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools, in high schools with high dropout rates and in schools with stubborn achievement gaps.

Saudi women run against men

Associated Press

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia — Outside of the Saudi capital, in one of the country’s most conservative provinces, Jowhara al-Wably is making history. She’s running in this weekend’s elections.

Saturday’s vote for local council seats marks two milestones for Saudi women: Not only can they run in a government election for the first time, it is the first time they are permitted to vote at all.

The municipal councils are the only government body in which Saudi citizens can elect representatives, so the vote is widely seen as a small but significant opening for women to play a more equal role in Saudi society.

Still, women face challenges on the campaign trail: Because of Saudi Arabia’s strict policy of segregation of the sexes, they cannot address male voters directly and have to speak from behind a partition — or have male relatives speak for them.

In an effort to create a more level playing field, the General Election Committee banned both male and female candidates from showing their faces in promotional flyers, billboards or in social media. They’re also not allowed to appear on television.

This suits al-Wably, a 52-year-old community activist and Ministry of Education employee. Like all women in Saudi Arabia, she wears a loose-flowing black robe called an “abaya.” She also covers her face and hair under a veil called a “niqab” when in public.

When she meets with female voters, she talks to them at the hotel conference hall she’s rented in Buraydah, 220 miles northwest of Riyadh. But when she makes her pitch to male voters this week, she won’t be doing the talking. Her two sons, both in their mid-20s, her husband and her brothers will address the male crowd and she won’t be present.

With around 5,000 men registered to vote in her district compared to 620 registered female voters, al-Wably says she can’t afford to rely solely on Internet campaigning through Twitter and Facebook to reach men.

“I want to be part of the development of my city,” she told The Associated Press. “I want to be a positive force on the ground in my community.”

While the councils do not have legislative powers, they do oversee a range of community issues, such as budgets for maintaining and



In this Nov. 10 photo, a journalist takes photos at a palace in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

“I would be happy to have a woman’s vote.” — Bassam Akhdar, Candidate for council in Saudi Arabia

improving public facilities like parks, roads and utilities. All major decision-making powers rest solely in the hands of King Salman and the all-male Cabinet of ministers.

The first local council election was held in 2005 and the second in 2011, with only men taking part. This time around, state-affiliated media report there are 979 female candidates and 5,938 male candidates vying for seats. About 130,000 women have registered to vote versus 1.35 million male voters.

Up for grabs are around 2,100 council seats. An additional 1,050 seats are appointed with approval from the king. While there is no quota for women, the king may use his powers to ensure at least some women get onto the councils.

While calling the vote a “step forward for women,” Rothna Begum of Human Rights Watch noted that because male candidates cannot directly address women, they could easily disregard the female vote because it is proportionally so much smaller. And the high cost of running a visible campaign has proven prohibitive for some female candidates, she said; at least 31 dropped out because it was too expensive.

At his campaign headquarters in Saudi Arabia’s second-largest city of Jiddah, Bassam Akhdar said he allocated a night specifically to reach out to the female electorate, with female staff lined up to explain his platform.

But no women showed up and none have passed by his office to inquire about his campaign. So he ended up allocating the entire space to his male constituency, who come every night.

“I would be happy to have a woman’s vote. This is a gain for me,” said the 47-year-old businessman, who won a seat in the past two elections — and spent \$106,000 on his latest campaign.

Despite vast differences between Saudi Arabia’s cultural sensitivities and the bombast often associated with campaigns in the West, criticism of women’s participation has largely been muted, though one prominent cleric warned against this being a Western-style election.

Sheikh Abdelrahman al-Barrack admonished his more than 161,000 followers on Twitter that the vote is not religiously permissible if it Westernizes the “land of the two holy mosques,” a reference to the holy sites in Mecca and Medina, and when it allows for the mixing of men and women.

The decision to allow women to take part is seen as part of the late King Abdullah’s legacy. Before he died in January, the king appointed 30 women to the country’s top advisory Shura Council. Women were also given licenses to practice law, and labor rules were changed to allow women to work as sales clerks in lingerie and women’s clothing stores. The government also began issuing identification cards for women.

In the Saudi capital, Riyadh, 40-year-old candidate Randa Baraja said her No. 1 supporter has been her father.

“He is very keen about education and the idea that women ought to rely on themselves. ... My brothers are supportive too,” said Baraja, a health care professional.

Still, when she presented her campaign platform to a group of men this week, she did not stand in front of them. In line with election rules she was out of view behind a partition; she used a projector and a microphone to discuss her ideas, while a camera allowed her to see the audience.

GOP calls mine spill report ‘whitewashed’

Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. — Republicans alleged a “whitewash” of a Colorado mining accident that unleashed 3 million gallons of toxic wastewater and requested a nonpartisan investigation after the Interior secretary said Wednesday there was no evidence of criminal negligence.

A U.S. Environmental Protection Agency cleanup crew doing excavation work triggered the spill in August at the inactive Gold King mine near Silverton, Colorado. It fouled rivers in Colorado, Utah and New Mexico with contaminants including arsenic and lead, temporarily shutting down drinking water and raising concerns about long-term effects to agriculture.

The accident prompted harsh criticism of the EPA for failing to take adequate

precautions despite warnings a blowout could occur. Yet Interior Secretary Sally Jewell said a review by her agency showed the spill was “clearly unintentional.”

“I don’t believe there’s anything in there to suggest criminal activity,” Jewell testified during an appearance before the House Natural Resources Committee.

Republicans were dissatisfied. They pointed to earlier statements in which Jewell and other agency officials said the Interior review focused on technical mining issues — not the potential culpability of those involved in the spill.

California Republican Rep. Tom McClintock later added that the Interior review was “a complete and deliberate whitewash.”

The EPA Inspector General’s Office is conducting a separate investigation.



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