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ACCOUNTABILITY + FREEDOM = STRAIGHT A'S

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House Education Committee chairman William Goodling (R-PA) and Senator Slade Gorton (R-WA) recently introduced the Academic Achievement for All Act, or "Straight A's." Under this bill, states or large school districts would receive maximum flexibility to administer up to 14 federal K-12 education programs so long as they improved academic achievement for all their students. The Straight A's approach is a radical departure from current federal micromanagement, and it has the potential—as a similar strategy demonstrated in welfare reform—to achieve dramatic results.

To receive this greater flexibility in administering federal funds, the Straight A's program would require states to:

- **Set clear performance objectives.** Each state or qualifying school district would enter into a binding agreement with the federal government (much like charter schools do) with clear performance objectives and a timetable for student improvement. The plan would have to include target goals for students previously served by those programs. To measure academic improvement, states could administer the state-level National Assessment of Educational Progress test, a commercial test, a state test, or another mutually acceptable test.
- **Provide rewards for meeting goals.** States or school districts that met their performance goals would be entitled to receive bonus funds. Those that failed would lose their flexibility, and in egregious cases suffer monetary sanctions.

- **Guarantee the ability to remain in the current program.** States or school districts that did not wish to consolidate funding for categorical programs under this plan would not have to do so. They could continue to operate the programs as prescribed under the new Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) plan to be reauthorized by Congress.

The Straight A's program would fulfill three important goals:

1. **In acknowledging that education is a state and local responsibility, it would allow states and localities to use federal funds (without the bureaucratic strings) to fulfill their unique goals.**
2. **Its bold approach to reforming current ESEA programs would shift their focus to boosting academic achievement instead of conforming to bureaucratic requirements.** After 34 years and \$118 billion, ESEA's key program, Title I, has not reduced the gap in achievement between low- and upper-income students. Instead of cutting federal red tape and

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spurring states and localities to figure out what is best for their students, President Bill Clinton would offer them more of the same. His recently introduced ESEA plan shows he thinks *accountability* is making sure states diligently put in place whatever is fashionable in Washington, D.C. Straight A's, on the other hand, would demand academic results.

3. **It would allow the federal government to evaluate the effects of its policies.** Because some states would choose the Straight A's option but others would not, states that participated in Straight A's could be compared with those that remained in the old system. This would help states and the federal government to design better policies in the future.

HOW TO ASSURE STRAIGHT A'S WON'T LEAD TO STRAIGHT F'S

In its current format, Straight A's is a bold step in the right direction, but it easily could fall prey to pressure from special-interest groups that are eager to keep power in Washington. Already, a "hold harmless" provision in Title I Part A of the bill focuses attention on where dollars to disadvantaged students should go, instead of encouraging academic outcomes. To assure the success of Straight A's and protect it from those who oppose real reform based on achievement, Congress must:

- **Make sure the Title I program remains in the bill.** Funding for Title I comprises \$8 billion of the \$13 billion proposed in Straight A's. Because it is the bulk of the funding and regulation in ESEA, removing Title I from Straight A's would gut the entire bill. Congress also should remove the "hold harmless" provision.
 - **Reward success and punish failure.** ESEA has failed in large part because dollars are not yanked from states that fail to perform. Nor are states rewarded for success. Lawmakers must keep the focus of Straight A's on accountability by rewarding success and punishing failure; otherwise, Straight A's will fail as well.
 - **Guard against requiring additional paper-**
- **work and other mandates.** Straight A's should succeed because its premise is a simple equation: *Accountability + Freedom = Academic Achievement*. Instead of focusing on filling out Form X to get Grant Y, Straight A's would demand only that states boost academic achievement for all their students in exchange for maximum freedom. Adding mandates for funding for specific programs and in specific localities would complicate that formula.
 - **Keep the scope of Straight A's limited and focused.** Lawmakers should refrain from allowing the U.S. Secretary of Education to do anything under Straight A's except to make sure the application form is filled out properly. The plan should be open to any state or school district that wants to apply.
 - **Keep the focus on academic achievement, especially for poor students.** States must disaggregate their numbers to show how their schools educate their poor students as compared with their rich students. If the bill was stripped of this process of comparison, poor students would lose.
- The federal government's role under Straight A's is to demand results in exchange for federal funds; states could spend the funds as they saw fit to achieve those results. The plan would go a long way toward eliminating federal micromanagement of day-to-day activities of schools.
- Congress must make sure that opponents of reform do not weaken the bill. If lawmakers can keep the legislation intact, they will achieve a new partnership between Washington and the states to the benefit of America's children. As Kentucky Governor Paul E. Patton (R) recently told *The Los Angeles Times*, "We need the federal government as a limited partner and us as a general partner." Straight A's respects this balance of power while assuring that every dollar spent on education is a dollar spent boosting academic achievement.
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