

ISSUE BRIEF

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What Congress and States Can Do to Reform Education Policy

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Getting American education back on track will require federal and state action to achieve reforms in a number of areas. In both K–12 and higher education policy, federal reforms anticipate state action to advance conservative principles. For example, the Higher Education Reform and Opportunity (HERO) Act introduced by Senator Mike Lee (R–UT) and by Representative Ron DeSantis (R–FL) in the last Congress would delink federal higher education aid from the federal accreditation process, allowing states to assume authority for higher education accreditation. The Academic Partnerships Lead Us to Success (A-PLUS) Act would allow states to opt out of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which is currently undergoing reauthorization in Congress.

The Higher Education Reform and Opportunity (HERO) Act

Federal action: The HERO Act would decouple federal higher education financing (student loans and grants) from the federal accreditation process. States would be free to establish their own systems for determining who can accredit or credential individual courses, programs of study, or institutions. Federal student aid would then be available to follow

students to institutions *and* individual courses that are credentialed under a state’s accreditation system, enabling a student to have a more customized higher education experience.

State action: States have an important role to play. States must take the lead in determining which types of institutions—such as businesses, nonprofits, and universities—can accredit and credential classes and courses of study. For example, South Carolina could allow Boeing to offer accredited aeronautical engineering courses, Clemson to offer accredited courses, and the Mayo Clinic to offer accredited certified nursing courses. At the same time, governors and state leaders in higher education should encourage public colleges and universities to provide competency-based degree models, in which degrees would be awarded for competency in a given subject, not for the number of hours spent in the classroom.

Related Resources:

- Lindsey Burke and Stuart M. Butler, “Accreditation: Removing the Barrier to Higher Education Reform,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2728, September 21, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/09/accreditation-removing-the-barrier-to-higher-education-reform>.
- Senator Mike Lee, “What’s Next for Conservatives,” *National Review Online*, October 29, 2013, <http://www.nationalreview.com/node/362515/print>.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4348>

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The Academic Partnerships Lead Us to Success (A-PLUS) Act

Federal action: A-PLUS would allow states to opt out of the programs that fall under NCLB, and to put funding toward any education purpose or program authorized under state law. Instead of continuing to spend the nearly \$25 billion in federal funding that is authorized under NCLB on dozens of ineffective and duplicative federal programs, A-PLUS would give states the option to decline participation in NCLB and focus that spending on the education initiatives that work for their communities.

State action: A-PLUS would allow state leaders to direct dollars to their state's most pressing education needs. States should, in turn, shift from state-managed, assignment-by-zip-code systems to devolve funding to the most local level possible—parents. Doing so could take the form of school choice options, such as vouchers or education savings accounts, which enable parents to choose educational options that meet their children's unique learning needs.

Related Resources:

Lindsey Burke, "How the A-PLUS Act Can Rein-In the Federal Government's Education Power Grab," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2858, November 14, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/11/how-the-a-plus-act-can-rein-in-the-governments-education-power-grab>.

Conclusion

Policymakers at the federal and state levels should advance reforms that will send dollars and decision making back to those closest to the student in K–12 education. Congress can promote this goal through the A-PLUS Act and by reducing federal competitive grant programs and spending. In higher education, Congress should advance reform through the HERO Act and by limiting federal loan programs that have encouraged families to incur high levels of debt. In turn, state policymakers can take the lead in determining their own students' K–12 education priorities under the A-PLUS Act. They will also need to structure their own higher education accreditation process under the HERO Act. Together, federal and state policymakers can advance education reforms that will provide greater educational freedom and empower parents to make education decisions for their children.

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