



Research Memo

South Carolina Policy Council

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Ditching No Child Left Behind – all of it

If you saw last week's *New York Times* [headline](#), "Obama Turns Some Education Powers Back to States," you might have wondered *which* powers the federal government plans on handing back. You'd be right to wonder. The feds don't hand back power very often.

At issue, of course, is the law No Child Left Behind (NCLB), now in its tenth year. To understand what the news is all about, you need to understand what No Child Left Behind means for your child's school.

- Every year, the federal government offers – and South Carolina legislators accept – around \$300 million in No Child Left Behind funds. For that price, federal education bureaucrats buy the right to impose *one* model of education – a standards and test-driven model – on all the state's public schools.
- NCLB standards stress math and reading, and de-emphasize history, civics, economics, music, and art. South Carolina school administrators and teachers have no choice but to make their schools' curriculums reflect NCLB's emphasis. (See the Center on Education Policy's report [here](#).)
- NCLB forces schools to meet up to 33 goals. If a school fails to meet even one of those goals, the federal government can deem that school a failure and force it to restructure. In fact, the feds have done that to at least one South Carolina school.

It's easy to see, then, why No Child Left Behind has been so unpopular – and therefore why the Obama administration recently announced it would allow states receiving NCLB funds to apply for "waivers."

Getting one of these federal "waivers," however, doesn't mean states are free to take the money with no strings attached – that is, without abiding by the federal government's demands. Here's what it means:

- South Carolina's public education system will still be dependent on Washington DC for yearly bailouts of roughly \$300 million. So, for example, instead of finding a way to fund poor school districts adequately, we'll keep getting DC to do it.

- The state’s Department of Education will still be required to administer federally mandated assessments.
- South Carolina will still be at the mercy of whatever new federal regulations the U.S. Department of Education dreams up.

In essence, getting a “waiver” wouldn’t mean an end to federal strings. It would exchange a tight set of strings for a slightly looser set of strings.

So should South Carolina apply for the waiver or not?

Perhaps the more important question to ask is this: Why are states in the position of having to get permission from the federal government to improve their public education systems in the first place? The federal government has no Constitutional role in education, and it’s extremely far-fetched to think a building full of bureaucrats 400 miles from South Carolina has the capacity to manage our state’s school system in a way that improves its quality.

It’s worth asking, then, what would it look like if South Carolina were to refuse No Child Left Behind Funds altogether?

- South Carolina could decide what to teach and how to teach it.
- Without NCLB funds, South Carolina can re-introduce parental input into public education. With NCLB funds, by contrast, parental input is limited by inflexible federal mandates.
- The definition of “student success” would no longer be determined by education bureaucrats in Washington DC, but by South Carolinians in South Carolina.
- Rather than mindlessly trying to meet arbitrary federal criteria, the South Carolina public school system would be free to create new, innovative ways of fixing failing schools.

What South Carolina needs isn’t more federal money or looser federal mandates. What we need is independence.

