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Kirk proposes reforms to No Child Left Behind

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Joined by a small group of teachers and school officials, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, of Highland Park, on Tuesday announced proposed changes to the federal No Child Left Behind Act to address concerns of local school districts. Accompanied by members of his 10th District Education Advisory Board, Kirk discussed bi-partisan legislation he is introducing called the Education Assessment Technical Corrections Act (H.R. 5717), which proposes reforms to the federal education law. Kirk, who supported the No Child Left Behind Act, said the changes seek to reform school performance standards under the act, as a large percentage of schools are failing to meet the standards.

"Parents got a right to know how their children are performing, and the assessment tools we use should be scientifically based and completely non-partisan," said Kirk.

Kirk said his bill would give schools in areas facing teacher shortages additional time to meet the "highly qualified teacher" provision established as part of No Child Left Behind. Kirk said the bill also would call for more flexible assessments of the Adequate Yearly Progress provisions of the act, particularly for students in certain "subgroups," such as children with special needs or with Limited English Proficiency. Kirk said he expects the bill will be considered next year when Congress reviews federal education assessment programs. Janet Joy, a teacher in Arlington Heights School District 25, who serves on Kirk's Education Advisory Board, said she agrees that reforms to the law are needed. "The basic concern for most school officials is (the testing standards) for special education children and children that come from bilingual backgrounds," she said.

Steve Cordogan, director of research and evaluation for Township High District 214, which covers six high schools in Buffalo Grove, Elk Grove, Arlington Heights, Mount Prospect, Rolling Meadows and Wheeling, said current Annual Yearly Progress standards in the No Child Left Behind Act are unrealistic for even high performing school districts. He said only half of the schools in their district meet the standards and less than half of more than 60 suburban school districts failed to meet Yearly Progress standards set forth in No Child Left Behind. However, Cordogan and other school officials who attended Kirk's event Tuesday agreed that the law should be changed but not abolished.

"We're not backing off from assessing children's performance and we're not backing off on accountability," said Karen Roloff, board president for Northbrook-

Glenview School District 30. "We're making technical corrections to improve the law."

"We have learned more about assessing school performance over the last four years than in the previous 14," said Kirk. "We can now apply the considered data and peer reviewed judgment of education experts to ensure our assessments accurately tell parents how their child is doing and how their school is performing."

Kirk's Democratic opponent in the November election, Dan Seals of Wilmette, said he agrees No Child Left Behind needs overhauling but questioned the timing of Kirk's proposed legislation during an election year.

"This is a law that needs to be funded and it needs to be fixed but it's too little too late as far as I'm concerned," said Seals. "He voted for the original bill but voted against funding it. It all seems very political to me."

Meanwhile, on Tuesday, Seals visited at a gas station in Lincolnshire touting his plan for increasing energy independence. Seals said his plan calls for eliminating subsidies to the oil companies and using the money to research alternative fuels.

"Why should we subsidize the oil companies when they're making record profits?" he said. "Why should we speed down a dead-end street?"