

## EDUCATION WEEK

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# The Case for Partisanship in Rewriting ESEA

By **Marcus B. Weaver-Hightower**

December's news that Republicans were considering writing a GOP-only version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act reauthorization seemed to strike many as scandalous. Democrats on the House Education and the Workforce Committee tweeted almost despairingly: "GOP says they are quitting bipartisan rewrite of NCLB, ESEA. Kids don't deserve partisanship," and "Partisanship means the end to NCLB reform in this Congress." In a non-tweeted statement, Rep. George Miller of California, the ranking Democrat on the committee, added: "Our nation's children deserve a real process for achieving consensus, not partisan political games."

To which I say: *Bring on the games.* Yes, bring on the partisanship. Maybe that way we'll finally see some real ideas for improving education that don't rely on testing kids into the ground.

While partisanship has become a dirty word in political debate—akin to suggesting you're pro-puppy-kicking—we have to remember that the absence of partisan debate is not always the same thing as the achievement of moderation or neutrality or even compromise. Sometimes the lack of partisan politics is a sign of political capitulation.

In the case of the ESEA, better known in its current incarnation as the No Child Left Behind Act, or NCLB, the voices and ideas of progressive teachers, administrators, and policymakers have been silenced in the face of a completely conservative program for school reform, one that says: Test every year; hold teachers' and administrators' feet to the fire for every test result; privatize schools; allow personal and corporate profit from schooling; staff schools with emergency and temporary workers; demonize unions; and attack teachers for being "overpaid."

What has bipartisanship gotten America's schools? All of that and more of the same. The Democratic Party, though taking money hand over fist from teachers' unions, has talked a great deal about giving teachers the respect they deserve and basing decisions on more than tests. When it comes time to make policy, though, they cloak themselves in bipartisanship and vote for the conservative ideas that their Republican colleagues created. If that's what bipartisanship gets us, you can keep it.

Members of the education committees and pundits often present it as positive, or even progressive, that educational policymaking has been highly bipartisan in recent years. Yet sometimes party politics are needed to resist movements away from social justice and equity. Don't get me wrong: The solution does not

lie in partisanship for its own sake; rather, dissenting opinion breeds caution and reflection into political processes that can otherwise be easily overrun by those with political might. With Republicans in control of the U.S. House of Representatives, it's understandable that Democrats want them to remain committed to bipartisan talks. Otherwise, some might think, the Democrats get left out altogether.

I suggest a different way of thinking about this.

If Republican members want to write a separate ESEA, they should. Democratic members should take the opportunity to do the same. That way, voters, citizens, taxpayers, and educators will get to see whether there really are any differences between the parties on which we can build a new future of education, or if new players need to be at the table after the 2012 elections to protect progressive views of education.

**"Bring on the partisanship. Maybe that way we'll finally see some real ideas for improving education that don't rely on testing kids into the ground."**

We'll also get a lot of our questions answered: Are there any progressive ideas being forwarded? Who will stand up and say that we need a testing regime that doesn't take away so much time from the already-short school year? Who will pledge enough money to pay for authentic assessments, not just bubble sheets? Who will suggest that rather than narrow the curriculum to test preparation, we actually expand the curriculum to make our kids fuller, richer, more knowledgeable human beings? Who will suggest that we hold lawmakers accountable for fixing poverty, poor health, and school funding—maybe linking their pay to "adequate yearly progress" in, say, childhood hunger—rather than always blaming teachers for not being able to overcome those realities? These are the kinds of partisan positions we need to fight over, not just ignore so that we can all get along.

If we always strive for bipartisanship for bipartisanship's sake, we will be just as guilty of letting down our children as when we are partisan for partisanship's sake. It is time for some partisanship in education policy so that progressive ideas can make the comeback they deserve.

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