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# 'No Child' Act in peril

■ Education chief Spellings trying to drum up support in Texas

By GARY SCHARER

AUSTIN BUREAU

AUSTIN — U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings isn't sure that Congress will renew the signature accomplishment of President Bush's presidency — the six-year-old No Child Left Behind program.

And she could not provide much help Friday for a state senator from Dallas looking for solutions to chronically high dropout rates among minority school children.

Spellings addressed a joint meeting of the state Senate and House education committees in



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the Texas Capitol, where she spent much of her time as education adviser to George W. Bush during his years as governor. She is now traveling the country, trying to generate support to keep No Child Left Behind in place, which could be difficult during an election year and an impending change in the White House, she conceded.

## Critics take issue with tests

Its goal is for all students to perform at grade level in reading and math by 2014.

The focus has been on grades 3 through 8. More attention now should be given to high school academic performance, she said.

But objections to high-stakes testing and complaints about funding have created a chorus of critics that a president in his final year may not be able to satisfy.

"I hope that it will get done. I don't know. But I certainly am not going to put all my eggs in that basket," Spellings said.

The program is tainted, Texas American Federation of Teachers President Linda Bridges said. Academic gains have been smaller than in the years before the law took effect, promised funding for schools that miss "adequate yearly progress" has fallen short by tens of billions of dollars and standardized testing has created an obsession, Bridges said.

"Congress has heard a grassroots outcry from parents, educators, and business and civic leaders who are fed up with this fundamentally flawed law and ready to curb the testing monomania it has spawned in the name of accountability," Bridges said.

## Concern for dropout rate

The accountability system is here to stay, but necessary adjustments will be made to improve the law, predicted Senate Education Chair Florence Shapiro, R-Plano.

"Parents know a lot more about their schools than they ever have," Spellings said of the data now available charting the success of students and their schools. "It's going to be hard to take that away."

Sen. Royce West, D-Dallas, asked Spellings how the federal education department could help schools with 50 percent dropout rates for minority students. One of every nine African-American males is in jail, he reminded her.

"It's going to come back and bite us in the butt if we don't (graduate) these minority students. We have to do something about it," he told her.

## Problem 'undiagnosed'

Spellings said not enough data is available, adding, "We cannot correct a problem that we have not adequately diagnosed. We just cannot."

West said the dropout problem was a problem when he arrived in the state Senate 15 years ago.

"There are no best practices on a national basis to deal with the issue, and that should alarm all Americans given the fact of the changing demographics of this country," West said.

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