

Conclusion: Reform Realism in Action

By now, readers should have a clear understanding of Reform Realism as it can (and we think should) be applied to real education-policy dilemmas, at least to the ten big issues facing Congress as it considers ESEA reauthorization. But how do the ten issues add up? Let’s examine three key principles: “tight-loose,” transparency over accountability, and incentives over mandates.

Table 3 shows what’s “tight” and what’s “loose” under our proposal. In essence, we’re proposing that transparency requirements associated with standards and outcomes be “tight,” and that everything else—approaches to interventions, teacher credentials, etc.—be “loose.” We recommend that, in return for Title I funding, states commit to ambitious academic standards and to serious transparency when it comes to student achievement results and school-level spending. For transparency to be real and trustworthy, the data to be collected and released must be based on rigorous standards, solid assessments, and sophisticated analytical tools (such as value-added analyses).

Table 3. The “Tight” and “Loose” of Reform Realism’s ESEA

Issue	Tight	Loose
1. Common Core standards (or their equivalent)	X	
2. Adoption of rigorous cut scores	X	
3. Mandatory use of growth measures	X	
4. Science and history testing	X	
5. Prescriptions concerning school ratings		X
6. Interventions for failing schools		X
7. Requirements concerning teacher quality or effectiveness		X
8. Title I comparability		X
9. Flexibility options		X
10. Competitive grants, including Race to the Top and i3		X

Developing such a data infrastructure is no small task, but we think federal taxpayers have a right to know where their dollars are going and what they are buying in terms of student learning.

What we don't think is wise is for Congress to pretend that it can mandate "accountability"—interventions for failing schools, or even school choice options for the kids stuck in them—from Washington. The Department of Education lacks the capacity, tools, and know-how to enforce such a federal accountability system, and it's an overreach of a proper federal role anyway.

We applaud the Obama administration's call for more funding to flow competitively. Thus our support for turning Title II into a series of competitive programs to promote teacher reforms, charter schools, school choice, innovation, school turnarounds, and more—and to authorize the Race to the Top and i3 programs. While competitive programs have their drawbacks—especially for states and districts without the capacity to submit strong applications—they are the best vehicle for operationalizing the reform instincts of Congress.

To be clear, our vision for the federal role in education is a significant departure from No Child Left Behind. It would mean a greater federal role in prescribing standards, tests, cut scores, and data systems, and much less federal say-so about sanctions, teacher quality, and everything else. It would mean greater transparency for student achievement and school spending and less accountability for raising test scores. It would mean more competitive programs and less formula funding. Still, it's not so out of step with the Obama administration's "Blueprint," and it's certainly the direction that Republicans on Capitol Hill are heading.

In other words, Reform Realism might be a realistic way forward, after all.