Connecticut files suit, arguing that it should not have to spend state money to pay for the federally mandated tests required by No Child Left Behind. This report examines the discussion over standards, reporting and accountability in education.

Keywords
Transcript

No Child Left Behind: Three Years Later, States Begin to Sue Federal Government

BRIAN WILLIAMS, anchor:

NBC News IN DEPTH tonight, taking orders from Washington. The federal government tries to give all of its programs a nice, comforting name. And this one is no different. It's called No Child Left Behind. It turns out now three years after this law was passed, a growing chorus of critics say it's leaving the states and local school systems behind by requiring expensive testing but not paying for it. Our report tonight from NBC's Dawn Fratangelo.

DAWN FRATANGELO reporting:

Students have barely opened their books and the talk is about testing. That's due to the No Child Left Behind law, the cornerstone of the Bush administration education policy.

President GEORGE W. BUSH: (From file footage) Under the No Child Left Behind act, standards are higher, test scores are on the rise.

FRATANGELO: Still, a new poll shows half of Americans know little about the law. Passed in 2002, it mandates that every public school test every child to improve education, especially for minorities and those with special needs.

Mr. JACK JENNINGS (Center on Education Policy): That spotlight is forcing school people to pay attention to children who were difficult to deal with before, and they may not have made the greatest effort to help them. And now they are helping them.

FRATANGELO: Some administrators embrace what No Child Left Behind aims to do.

Ms. NANCY GRASMICK (Maryland Superintendent of Schools): I do believe that this law is on the right track. I believe that we should have high expectations for our students.

FRATANGELO: While the administration says the law has already improved test scores across the country, education experts say it's too early, and this school year will be the real test. Already there's a growing chorus of concern about too much testing.

Ms. JANE HIRSCHMAN (Time Out From Testing): They've exchanged learning and good education and critical thinking skills and creative work for prepping for an exam.

FRATANGELO: And some states say it's too expensive. Connecticut yesterday became the first to file suit.

Mr. RICHARD BLUMENTHAL (Connecticut Attorney General): Making history across the country for the first time...

FRATANGELO: Arguing it shouldn't have to spend state money to pay for federally mandated testing. And that discontent is spreading. Over the last two years, four states have drafted legislation to stop spending state money on the law, and 16 states are considering opting out altogether. Still, Penny An, a mother and former teacher, believes it's overdue.

Ms. PENNY AN: I feel very good about there is something being done, that makes me, you know--the administration, they're looking after the little children and the schools.

FRATANGELO: And so the first lesson this school year is already under way. Dawn Fratangelo, NBC
News, New York.