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A big step on NCLB

By A.B. Stoddard

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When Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.) left his leadership post in 2012, because he wanted to “do more to make the Senate a more effective institution,” any attempts to reauthorize No Child Left Behind (NCLB) remained tightly lodged “in a ditch.” But within the coming days or weeks, Alexander will shepherd a big, controversial and consequential bill to the floor that could do just that.

If he prevails, the Senate and then the House could reauthorize NCLB, producing not only a huge legislative victory, and reforming the nation’s ailing elementary and secondary education system but killing off the politically toxic Common Core standards mandate in the process.

The reforms give significant control back to states and local school districts, reduce the role of the Department of Education considerably, and increase flexibility for spending federal funds, as well as for testing and evaluating student performance while preserving the support Democrats seek for the poorest schools.

Alexander is among the Senate’s sharpest policy wonks, but his special talent has proven to be his ability — and willingness — to navigate common-sense paths through partisan chaos and reflexive gridlock.

He found a willing partner in Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.), the ranking member of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee that he chairs, whom he credits with a reputation for getting results. They managed such an equitable process that every senator on their committee, from Rand Paul (R-Ky.) to Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.), voted in favor of the bill, withholding controversial amendments until floor consideration to enhance its prospects.

Stakeholders from across the spectrum of interests have praised the effort by Alexander and Murray, including the National Governors Association, the American Federation of Teachers, the National School Boards Association, the National Conference of State Legislatures, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Third Way and the National Education Association.

The White House called the bill “an important step,” and thus far, the president has honored the request Alexander made to him on a trip to Tennessee aboard Air Force One not to issue a veto statement early on. Though a House bill stalled earlier this year, there, too a thorough effort has led Alexander to trust that a true, old-school conference committee can bridge the differences and yield something President Obama could sign.

Murray said, while there is consensus that the law is broken, “We’re not at the end of this, there is a lot of work ahead of us.” But she said as chairman, Alexander created a process building on that consensus. “He certainly could have come in with a partisan bill; we saw the House do that, but to his credit, he has brought about the atmosphere and the ability for every one to compromise and move forward,” Murray said.

Alexander doesn’t believe any of this unlikely deal-making is complicated. He said he and Murray share the same goals — “We’re both here to get a result and not to make a speech,” he said — and pointed out that Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) opened up the Senate to regular order, where bipartisanship could return. The administration has been helpful as well, he added: “If you give them an opportunity, sometimes they take it.”

Having worked with the president on the student loan issue, Alexander now plans to work with the administration again on legislation concerning higher education, medical innovation, precision medicine and the human genome. “You develop trust in one area, and it transfers to another area,” the senator said.

As for his fellow Republicans, Alexander is hoping they will trust him, too, that these are significant reforms that can actually become law. And if the bill passes in this Congress, it will eliminate Common Core, thereby removing it as an issue in the 2016 elections. “Conservatives need to know if they vote ‘no,’ they are leaving in place the Common Core mandate,” Alexander said.

Now that’s effective.

Stoddard is an associate editor of The Hill.