As the new school year opens, there are signs that something is different. In scores of school districts, some poor students are opting—as a matter of right—to transfer to another public school because the one they attended is labeled “failing.” Some parents are demanding to know—again as a matter of right—the qualifications of the teachers in their children’s schools. Paraprofessionals are being told that they must finish two years of college within a few years or pass a rigorous test to keep their jobs. Some applicants for teaching positions are being turned away because they are not state certified.

Private companies, religious institutions, and public agencies are preparing to receive federal money from failing public schools, at the option of parents, to be used for after-school tutorial and supplemental services for their children.

All these changes are the result of the No Child Left Behind Act, signed in January by President Bush. The law has surprised many superintendents, principals, and school board members who did not realize the extent of the new federal requirements.

This act does indeed represent a broader and stronger federal role in elementary and secondary education. The federal government is putting more pressure on states and local school districts to raise student academic achievement, especially as measured by test scores. It is also demanding that schools eliminate achievement gaps between different racial, ethnic, income, and disability groups of students. Pressure is also being brought to bear on states and school districts to upgrade the qualifications of teachers and paraprofessionals.

What is happening in schools this fall is the first indication of these changes. Washington is indeed knocking on the schoolhouse door.

A larger federal role

The new legislation marks a significant shift in the governance of elementary and secondary education in the United States. Four major themes mark this expansion of national involvement in public schooling.

First, the federal government now wants to affect every student and every school in the United States. This is quite different from past legislation, which was designed to limit the requirements of federal aid to children with special needs.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the main goal of federal aid was to increase equity in education. Federal programs provided financial assistance to help educate defined groups of children, such as poor, migrant, or limited-English-proficient children and students with disabilities. The requirements of these laws, many of which remain in effect today, were generally limited to ensuring that funds reached the targeted children and provided them with extra services.

The most detailed law is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which seeks to ensure that children with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education. Although IDEA applies to all school districts and in some ways affects the education of other children, its clear focus is on students with disabilities.

The 1990s brought more changes from the federal government. In the early part of the decade, the elder President Bush’s campaign for national academic standards and assessments opened the door for an increased federal role. President Clinton then pushed harder on the door with laws aimed at raising academic achievement for all public school students, not just those who are disadvantaged.

The younger Bush’s No Child Left Behind opens that door widely. No one doubts now that the federal government is in the business of improving the education of all public school students. Students must be tested in three subject areas in grades 3 through 8—regardless of whether their schools receive federal funds—and tested at least once during high school. The achievement gap must be closed for various groups of children, regardless of whether they are the benefi-
ciaries of additional federal aid.

Schools that do not raise academic achievement for all students will be labeled as failing. Only those schools that receive federal dollars under the Title I program for low-achieving children, however, will have to undergo mandatory corrective actions. But all teachers in every school will have to be highly qualified according to the federal definition.

Clearly, the federal government is now involved in elementary and secondary education on a broad scale. In a way, this is a reversion to the role the national government played in elementary and secondary education in the late 18th and the 19th centuries, when it helped to lay the foundations of public education through its policies for land use and statehood.

The public school systems that resulted now cover every community in the nation and serve nearly 90 percent of American children. A noteworthy difference today is the degree of specificity of the federal requirements being placed on the states and school districts to broadly improve education.

**Push for achievement**

Second, the principal reason for the federal government’s increased involvement in elementary and secondary education is to raise students’ academic achievement. This sharpness of purpose is a new development, as are the detailed consequences for schools that do not measure up.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, the federal government worked to expand public schooling, and during the early 20th century, it indirectly supported education through the tax code and the provision of ancillary services. Underlying these eras—including the special-needs movement of the 1960s and ’70s—was the premise that expanding public schooling or providing additional services was good enough. With more public schools focusing more services on the children with the greatest needs, it was assumed that students would learn and the country would benefit from a more educated citizenry.

The elder Bush’s push for change, Clinton’s landmark legislation, and now the younger Bush’s law make clear that the purpose of national support for education has changed, and the bar has been raised. Just providing for public education or paying for additional services is no longer good enough.

Third, enormous emphasis is placed on raising students’ test scores, which are deemed the proxy for improved learning and increased academic achievement. States and school districts must raise test scores overall as well as for various ethnic, racial, income, and disability groups. Accountability now means higher test scores, and clear consequences exist for districts and schools whose students do not perform well.

Low-performing schools that receive federal funds are put into a five-year schedule of changes, unless their test scores go up in the aggregate and for all major subgroups. Schools that don’t raise achievement could eventually be reconstituted or taken over by the state.

This insistence on raising test scores for specific subgroups of children shows that the equity purpose of the 1960s and 1970s has been retained and sharpened. Precise goals have been set to improve the education of disadvantaged children, and detailed time lines have been established for achieving these goals.

States have 12 years to bring up the achievement levels of major racial, ethnic, and other subgroups to a proficient level, as defined by each state’s academic standards. Every school—even one that does not receive a dollar of Title I aid—is held to this same requirement and has to break down, or “disaggregate,” its test scores for these subgroups of students.

Districts must release student test scores to the public in the aggregate, for each major group, and for each school. Schools that receive Title I funds but do not raise scores for each major group are held to accountability measures, such as allowing students to shift to another public school and allowing parents to take their children’s share of federal funds to use for tutorial services provided by an approved public or private entity.

**Improving teacher quality**

Finally, the federal government is demanding major improvements in the qualifications of teachers and paraprofessionals. This demand has broad implications. Elementary and secondary education is labor-intensive, with approximately three-fourths of current expenditures being salary related. Therefore, these new federal requirements will have a major budgetary impact.

This fall, all new teachers and new paraprofessionals hired with Title I funds must meet the qualifications spelled out in the new law. By 2005-06, all teachers must be fully qualified, regardless of whether their salaries are paid with federal funds. Paraprofessionals, except for a few categories, must finish two years of college or demonstrate knowledge through passing a rigorous test.

Congressional proponents of this provision argued that teacher quality must be raised for children to attain greater academic achievement. Their arguments, which were persuasive, were based on studies such as the Tennessee Student-Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) experiment, a longitudinal analysis that tracked the effects of various factors on students’ success and showed the importance of having a qualified teacher. The proponents also noted that schools with concentrations of poor students and children from minority groups had a high number of uncertified or out-of-field teachers.

The impact of the new requirements will be enormous. California, for instance, has a large percentage of uncertified teachers, the greatest number of which are in the state’s poorest schools. Due to the immensity of the problem, California is unlikely to comply with the law by 2005-06.

No Child Left Behind permits some funding flexibility in several federal programs—teacher quality, technology, drug-free schools, and innovative activities. Districts can shuffle up to 50 percent of the funds for each of the programs to one of the others, or to the Title I program.

Even though they have more freedom in how to spend federal money, states and school districts must raise substantially more funds to comply with the law’s broad new requirements. For example, to increase students’ test scores, states will prob-
No Child Left Behind embodies a very ambitious set of goals for improving public schools and increasing academic achievement among all students.

ably have to expand remedial services; to attract well-qualified teachers to low-performing schools, they might have to pay higher teacher salaries. All of these reforms cost money.

Larger state and local roles

The new law’s scope does not end with an expanded federal role in education. It also means a larger role for states and school districts. Standards-based reform, as embodied in No Child Left Behind, means that all three levels of school governance—federal, state, and local—must assume responsibilities they have not previously had or have not fully embraced.

Even as the president and congressional leaders ask the federal government to do more, they are laying many responsibilities on state governments and local school districts. States must expand assessment programs and provide individual test scores that can be used to diagnose student needs. They must provide technical assistance to local school districts struggling to raise their test scores. States must show gradual progress toward closing the achievement gap and take steps toward having highly qualified teaching forces.

Districts must provide technical assistance to persistently failing schools that receive Title I funds. They must show progress toward reducing the achievement gap. They must respond to parental requests about the qualifications of teachers and issue report cards showing the achievement levels of students in each school. School boards and superintendents also have to find highly qualified teachers for every classroom.

Some technical assistance is already provided to failing districts and failing schools, but few states or districts currently do so on the scale envisioned by this act. Some states offer small incentives to teachers to work in the poorest schools in the state, but none provides the higher salaries and other benefits needed to place highly qualified teachers in every classroom in the most challenged schools.

A legitimate question is whether the federal government, in urging these expanded responsibilities up and down the line, is paying its fair share of the costs of these additional duties. To accompany his education proposal, President Bush sought a modest increase in federal spending on education. The Democratic congressional leaders successfully insisted on a larger increase of 17 percent for the first year of the new law.

Bush has asked for a smaller increase for the second year of the new law than he requested for the first. Therefore, it is an open question whether the federal government will match its increased demands with additional assistance to meet them.

What the future holds

No Child Left Behind embodies a very ambitious set of goals for improving public schools and increasing academic achieve-