

Nine California school districts are drawing up a more comprehensive way of measuring student progress.

About half of the schools in the country have been labeled "failing," thanks to the federal No Child Left Behind Act and its rigid, unhelpful measurements. We've called on Congress for years now to overhaul the law, and in the absence of any action, the Obama administration has begun offering waivers to states and some individual school districts that meet its definition of progress.

Someone had to step in. Under No Child Left Behind, a school is labeled as failing if it does not bring students up to an arbitrary level of proficiency — even if it is a formerly underperforming school that has succeeded in making major improvements and is moving forward. Or it is deemed failing if it brings almost all of its students up to proficiency but misses the bar slightly with one demographic group, such as students who aren't fluent in English.

So the waivers were a good idea in theory. But the Obama administration used them as leverage to dictate its own terms to states, especially on the subject of how to evaluate teachers. In our view, it makes sense for student test scores to be used, in limited ways, in teacher evaluations, but the administration's insistence on this in order to win a waiver is an overreach. What matters is whether schools have solid academic standards and strong accountability systems in place for measuring progress, not the details of how they make that progress.

Largely because of its refusal to yield to the administration's demands on teacher evaluations, California's bid for a waiver last year was unsuccessful. But now nine school districts in the state — including Los Angeles, Long Beach, Santa Ana and San Francisco — have formed a group to seek a waiver.

The districts are drawing up a more comprehensive way of measuring progress that includes lowered dropout, truancy and suspension rates, and they are looking for ways to measure students' resilience as well. All promise to develop better ways of evaluating teachers, including using student progress on test scores, though most of the districts would have to get the agreement of the teachers unions to make this happen.

Even if they don't get a waiver from No Child Left Behind, the districts plan to go ahead with their reforms, working together over the long term. It's a novel idea, and the districts' sincerity about improving academic achievement seems genuine. One of them, Long Beach Unified, has gained a reputation for continual improvement without embracing extreme reforms or igniting the kind of divisive rancor that has touched many other districts.

The U.S. Department of Education would be making a mistake if it rejected the attempts of these ambitious school districts to improve without the cumbersome and counterproductive requirements of No Child Left Behind. These districts might prove a helpful example to the rest of the state as well.