AT FIRST sight, it sounds woefully familiar. The Democrats complain that George Bush has created a costly quagmire. Conservatives say he was not radical enough in the first place. Confusion reigns on the ground. In this case, the battlefield is not Baghdad, but the schoolyard--and, on the whole, the news from the front line is a little more positive.

Last month, more than 47m public-school students trudged back to their classrooms, starting the second year of the president's sweeping No Child Left Behind Act, a 12-year plan to raise national academic standards in America's public schools. The NCLB Act, hailed by Mr Bush as "the cornerstone of my administration", has tended to be forgotten in all the fuss about the economy and Iraq. But it is a useful reminder of his pragmatic, reforming side.

To get the law through, the president quickly dropped the conservative idea of school vouchers. He focused instead on national standards and increasing accountability--the sort of issues that New Democrats had talked about before, albeit with a wary eye on their party's paymasters in the teachers' unions. Indeed, the NCLB Act bears a striking similarity to an effort by Bill Clinton in 1994.

The starting point is simple enough. By any available international standard, America's public schools deliver poor value for money: they cost a lot and their results overall are dismal. The goal of the NCLB Act, which Mr Bush signed into law in January 2002, is for all students to be "proficient" in reading, mathematics and science by the 2013-14 school year. The bill provides more money for schools, particularly those in poor areas, but, unlike similar efforts in the past 40 years, it ties that money to progress in annual tests. Underperforming schools face penalties. In the most severe cases (if schools fail to improve after four years), their principals—as Americans call headmasters—can lose their jobs. Schools also have to send parents regular reports, and parents are theoretically given the chance to transfer their child to a better school, or get money to hire a tutor, if their school fails to improve within the first two-to-three years. The administration of all this is left to the states, who are also allowed to define what "proficient" means.

The main success so far has been to make school performance more transparent. The states do not have to start annually testing every student between eight and 14 to the new standards until 2005; but their performance can still be measured by existing mandatory exams. Most children had taken tests of some sort by spring 2003, and the results have been sent to parents and the press.
In New York City, for instance, parents have been notified that 497 schools, out of the city's 1,200, are "in need of improvement". For 46 of these schools, this is the second year of underperformance, as measured by previous tests, so students in these schools technically had the right to be moved to a different school.

The results have not pleased everybody. Parents and teachers have complained that not all the "failing" schools deserve that title. In some cases, they blame a quirk that requires schools to break down their test results into "subgroups", based on factors like race and sex--and to show progress in every category. The idea is to prevent schools neglecting harder-to-teach groups, such as Spanish-speaking Latinos. Yet it also meant that Midwood High School in Brooklyn, which often wins science awards and boasts a high graduation rate, was deemed "in need of improvement" because 33 students with disabilities did not meet the benchmark.

Yet most parents seem to like being able to measure how good their schools are, however crudely. Last month, instead of covering bus routes, the back-to-school stories in local papers reported which schools were on the "needs improvement" list. Across America, parents now ask whether their child’s teacher is "highly qualified" and why their school has failed to show "adequate yearly progress".

Most of the problems have come from trying to implement the various sanctions that follow from the tests. Many of those New Yorkers who "won" the chance to move their children were told this only a few days before the start of the new school year. That can surely be speeded up, but there is also the problem of making space for these transferees at better schools.

In Chicago, for instance, some 270,000 students qualified to transfer this year, but only 1,097 spots were available at better schools. Of the 19,000-odd students who applied, only 529 had enrolled in new schools by September 23rd. The remaining slots will stay empty. Some students who requested transfers have changed their minds, and as it is already the fourth week of the school year, administrators say moving children around is disruptive. Similarly, some 133,000 students in Chicago are eligible for extra tutoring, but city school officials say they only have money to pay for 25,000 to 30,000 of them.

Eugene Hickok, Mr Bush's under-secretary of education, says such numbers are an anomaly that will be ironed out in time. In other countries, the first year of education reform has been fairly chaotic. But Arne Duncan, the chief of the Chicago school system, calls the NCLB Act an "underfunded mandate": the federal government has saddled the states with a lot of hidden costs to do with setting up the tests and solving the problems the tests reveal.

This may be unfortunate timing as much as anything else. States everywhere are desperate to cut costs, education included. Far from stinting on schools, America spends far more than the international average, and the federal government is spending record amounts on elementary and secondary education. On the other hand, there are definitely schools in poor neighbourhoods that are struggling just to get proper textbooks (while praying for inspiring teachers).

Unsurprisingly, the loudest protests against No Child Left Behind have come from the teachers' unions, which are still talking of filing a lawsuit against the Department of Education. The law's (outrageous) demand that all teachers be qualified to teach their subjects has the union quaking. The teachers say that results can be affected by factors like class size as well as their competency. "I've never known any test to raise any standard," Reg Weaver, the president of the National Education Association, told The Economist.

If testing is a battle the Democrats want, it will surely delight Mr Bush. Voters might ask why teachers should not be assessed as other Americans are in their workplaces. In the longer term, a broader acceptance of the NCLB Act may also give a spur to those who want to introduce even greater accountability in the shape of vouchers that would give parents the power to spend their education dollars where they want to.

On September 24th, a budget bill was introduced into the Senate that included money for a small voucher experiment in the District of Columbia. The idea has the support of the capital's Democratic mayor. Yet most Democratic senators are prepared to filibuster the bill. The Republicans were looking for a compromise as this newspaper went to press.

**GRAPHIC:** George Bush's main domestic achievement so far has a distinctly Democratic edge

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