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THE REGION

Teachers Get Lessons on No Child Left Behind

■ Stopping in Anaheim, the federal government's tour aims to show educators how to meet the new standards.

By Joel Rubin, Times Staff Writer

The U.S. Department of Education has taken its show on the road this summer.

Tired of criticism about No Child Left Behind — the sweeping school reform law — federal education officials are making an unusual effort to talk directly to teachers about how to best meet the law's standards. They have hired veteran teachers to offer other teachers a series of workshops on classroom strategies.

Critics dismiss the seven-city tour as a token gesture in the face of what they say are No Child's fundamental flaws. Organizers counter that it is an overdue response to misinformation and confusion surrounding the law.

"Because so many teachers feel the law is punitive instead of supportive, it wasn't having the impact that it could. We decided we needed to go right to the teachers," said René Islas, special assistant to Secretary of Education Rod Paige. "We're trying to communicate the key parts of No Child Left Behind in a way teachers can use in the classroom."

No Child Left Behind imposed increased accountability standards for schools when it was passed in 2001, setting strict qualifications for teachers and growth targets for all students on standardized assessment tests. Supporters praise the higher standards and the focus on disadvantaged,

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Partners



underperforming students, while critics fault the law for being too rigid, underfunded and test-oriented.



Seeking clarity, about 200 teachers, most from California, flocked to a three-day conference that concluded Friday at the Anaheim Convention Center. In all, 1,400 teachers will have attended the workshop when it winds down next month in Boston. The tour will also stop in Pittsburgh; Orlando, Fla.; Denver; St. Louis; and Portland, Ore.

Federal officials picked 50 teachers from around the country to lead the workshops, sharing techniques on how to teach classes ranging from kindergarten vocabulary to high school science. The common denominator for the sessions, organizers said, was the urge to counter criticism from teacher unions that No Child Left Behind sets unattainable standards and forced teachers to focus excessively on standardized-test preparation.

"It is daunting for teachers. They're being held accountable more than ever before and that's frightening," said Cheryl Krehbiel, who scoured the country for the presenters. "We wanted teachers to know that it can be done and to see how it is being done."

On Thursday, Shannon C'de Baca, a science teacher from Nebraska, used bowls of milk, soap and food coloring to demonstrate surface tension and liquid density.

Teachers said that with No Child Left Behind casting a long shadow, they appreciated the practical suggestions and the opportunity to talk shop. Some said they had expected federal officials to berate them for falling short of the law's expectations.

Several teachers, such as Mission Viejo biology teacher Jim Sink, welcomed the reminder that beneath all the policy debate about No Child, the law is "just a title on a concept, and the concept is kids learning.

"When the law was dumped on our doorstep, there wasn't any detailed explanation about what it means," Sink said. "Not all my students [succeed]. And these workshops have given me some ideas on how to help them."

But teacher unions were dismissive of the summer tour. Daniel Kaufman, a spokesman for the National Education Assn., said the workshops did nothing to address the union's concerns about insufficient funding, strict wording on teacher credentials and rigid demands on student testing.

Barbara Kerr, president of the California Teachers Assn., called the tour an "insulting" gesture.

Workshop organizers concede that they are reaching a small number of teachers, but said they will make videos of the workshops available online and hope participants will carry information back to colleagues. Plans to hit the road again next summer and to develop workshops for school administrators are underway.

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