

An Education Agenda for the Congress and the New Administration

By Jack Jennings, Director, Center on Education Policy

Core Principles for an Improved Federal Role in Education

- 1) The federal government should continue to encourage high academic standards, but should also demand meaningful accountability from the states for increased student achievement and accept national responsibility to help in the proper use of tests.
- 2) Title I funding should be doubled to help provide all students with a fair chance to learn.
- 3) The numerous federal education programs that exist now should be consolidated into fewer categories, but separate programs should be retained if they are fulfilling an important national purpose which can only be addressed by targeted aid. The three conditions that must exist in any consolidation are that there is a clear purpose and accountability, that there is an assurance of increased appropriations, and that the funds are distributed to school districts based on the number of low-income children they are serving.
- 4) The federal government should continue the principle of equitable participation for private schoolchildren in federal education programs, but should not get caught up in divisive battles over vouchers. Instead, a reasoned dialogue ought to take place between the public and private school leaders of the country.

During the next two years, our national leaders have an opportunity to help improve our schools and increase children's learning — an opportunity that they can seize or squander. Much could be accomplished if President George W. Bush and the Congress, and the Republicans and the Democrats, put an end to the divisive and energy-consuming squabbling that has characterized recent education debates in Washington and made a serious bipartisan effort to refashion the federal government's role in education.

The public wants its leaders to make education a priority. That is why George Bush and Al Gore talked so much about education during the presidential campaign and made so many proposals, some of which overlapped one another. An immediate opportunity for bipartisan agreement is here because the major federal programs aiding the schools expire during the next two years, and the Congress must take action to renew them. So the elements are in place for political leaders to reshape federal education programs in a coherent and positive way that builds on what we've learned from past experience.

Whether this will happen will depend on the choices our leaders make. Since the Republican and Democratic parties are equal in strength in the country, as reflected in the near equal balance of power in the Congress, the president and the congressional leaders can view this situation in one of two ways. They can take hard positions on issues with the expectation of losing in the short term but hoping to win in the next election. Or, they can seek agreement on issues where commonality exists.

As regards elementary and secondary education, our leaders should adopt the second course of action — seek agreement. For nearly three decades through work in the Congress, I helped to fashion many of the federal education programs, and more recently

have closely followed federal actions in education through the Center on Education Policy. Based on these experiences, I believe that this is the time to reach bipartisan agreement on the federal role in education. Each side will have to compromise — the Democrats will have to agree to merge many current programs, and the Republicans will have to agree to put aside tuition vouchers for private schools, but the winners will be millions of children who will be given the chance to learn more through better focused and supported efforts to improve education.

Any agreement on the federal education role should be based on four fundamental principles: excellence, equity, accountability for results, and respect for the primary roles of state and local governments. President Bush's proposal, Senator Lieberman's bill, and all other ideas for federal legislation affecting elementary and secondary education ought to be evaluated in light of these principles.

As the overall goals, the federal role in education should strive for excellence in education by encouraging improvements in academic achievement while securing greater equity in schooling by helping those who are having the most difficulty in mastering academic content. Beginning in the 1960's, a paramount federal goal was to achieve equity in education. Since the 1990's, pursuing excellence through raising academic standards for all children has emerged as the more predominant national goal. Today, we must reconcile these two goals. All students should learn more, but the greatest challenges are faced by children in the schools with the largest numbers of poor students.

Excellence cannot be attained while equity is ignored; these two objectives are interdependent. For a historical perspective on the federal government's efforts to promote educational equity, excellence, and other objectives, see Carl Kaestle's paper in this volume.

Simply put, our country cannot raise educational achievement for the population as a whole without substantial improvements among low-achieving children. The students who are having the greatest academic difficulties include a disproportionate share of children from low-income families and from racial/ethnic minority groups. Therefore, we cannot attain excellence without ensuring equity for these children. To underline this point, we need look no further than the recent decennial census, which shows how dramatically the racial and ethnic composition of the country is changing.

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While pursuing excellence and equity, the federal government must assure that there is accountability. Taxpayers need to be assured that the money that the federal government is spending on their behalf is in fact producing results, no less in the area of education than in every other area. As discussed below, accountability should be more comprehensive than just imposing more tests on students.

The last principle undergirding federal programs must be respect for the way that education is structured in the United States. The states have the constitutional responsibility for education, but in effect many major decisions are made at the local level. What matters the most is what happens in schools and classrooms. The federal government can have an impact on teaching and learning, but only if it is modest about what it can require in light of the limited amount of aid it provides. The greatest impact is likely to come from federal objectives that are

clearly defined, reasonable in scope, and structured as simply as possible.

These last two principles create tension in fashioning any federal program. How far can the federal government go in demanding results for the funds it makes available, while respecting the primary role that states and local governments play? This tension is especially high in the area of education because of our longstanding respect for local control and because the federal contribution to total education funding is so small—about 6% in the aggregate for all school districts and 12% for the poorest districts.

To carry out these broad principles, the Center on Education Policy makes several specific recommendations for federal policies in education. These are discussed below. Although we have gained valuable input from many people, especially those who attended our December 2000 meeting on the federal role in education, we emphasize that the recommendations outlined here are our own. Some of the same ideas, however, have been made by other organizations and individuals, and hopefully this indicates that broad agreement may be emerging on a more focused and more effective federal role in education.

1. The federal government should continue to encourage high academic standards, but should also demand meaningful accountability from the states for increased student achievement and accept national responsibility to help in the proper use of tests.

The federal government must continue to encourage states and local school districts to raise their academic standards. In 1994, amendments to Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act created a framework for promoting this improvement, and the experiences since then have shown that federal advocacy for chal-

lenging standards is invaluable in moving states toward coherent systems of standards, assessments, and accountability. But those same experiences also show the limits of such national action and the need for enhanced capacity and knowledge to help these systems succeed.

The states are all at different points in this journey, and each is moving in accordance with its own history and unique forces. Papers in this volume by Margaret Goertz, Paul Barton, and David Cohen and Susan Moffitt document both the strengths and weaknesses of federal support for state standards-based reform since 1994. This past January, *Education Week* released its annual survey of the states which reinforced what these observers have concluded: progress has been made in raising standards and in writing tests (although both need improvement), but the support side for the improvement of schooling—training teachers, providing additional aid

for students, making available curriculum guides—has received far less attention.

In seeking greater accountability for results, President Bush and the Congress should draw several key lessons from these experiences. First, the federal requirements should be few and simple—and they must be enforced. Paul Hill's paper in this

volume describes the history of the lax interpretation of the comparability requirement in Title I. If the new law insists on greater accountability, then the federal government must stick to that requirement.

Furthermore, the accountability must be

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meaningful. In the last Congress various proposals were made that claimed to demand greater accountability for results, but those demands were weak. Under those proposals, states would have determined their baseline levels of student achievement and established their goals for increasing achievement, and then they lost a little bit of federal funding for hiring administrators, e.g. 1% of a state's Title I grant, if they did not achieve most of their goals. States could have set low goals and mostly met them without repercussions, or they could have easily absorbed the loss of federal administrative funds if they did not mostly meet the goals.

The federal government should consider other ways to achieve greater accountability that could be enforced while respecting state and local control. For example, an objective national group, such as the National Academy of Sciences, could work with states to determine each state's baseline levels of student achievement by income and racial/ethnic group, using a combination of state assessments and other appropriate measures. Each state could then establish three-year goals for increased achievement for all students and for students by income and racial/ethnic group. If states did not meet their goals, they could agree to make available additional state-level funding targeted on the students who fell short or provide real assistance to local school districts to reconstitute failing schools. Having a state agree to take action if it does not raise student achievement makes more sense than withdrawing a little federal money from a state that does not succeed.

Another lesson learned from recent experiences concerns the lack of capacity at the state level to set proper standards, to create good assessments, to educate people about appropriate test use, and to help educators use standards and

assessments to improve teaching and learning. Even if the federal law helps states to establish clear expectations, and even if the federal government encourages states to carry out these agreements, standards-based reform will not succeed unless administrators and teachers have the capacity to carry it out.

If the nation, acting through the new president and the Congress, wants more testing of schoolchildren, then the federal government must be willing to help the states and districts develop better assessments, build the expertise to use them appropriately and fairly, and implement effective strategies to increase learning for students who are low-achieving. Our leaders and national government must also accept some of the responsibility for improving understanding among policymakers, teachers, administrators, and the public about such issues as effective ways to interpret and report test data and the need to use multiple measures for high-stakes decisions. Perhaps most importantly, the federal government must help states and school districts do the hard work of translation between standards and

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assessments on one hand, and real changes in curriculum, teaching, and learning on the other. Higher standards and better assessments must be seen as tools to improve student learning.

In short, demands must be accompanied by assistance to build capacity and knowledge. The paper by David Cohen and Susan Moffitt pro-

poses national strategies for providing that assistance through a public-private partnership. Paul Barton and Margaret Goertz, in their papers, suggest various kinds of support and policies that could help make standards-based reform work. In addition to those ideas, we describe below how current federal programs could be refashioned to assist in this task.

2. Title I funding should be doubled to help provide all students with a fair chance to learn.

Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act ought to be retained and its funding doubled. Since 1965, that program has signaled that achieving equal educational opportunity is a national purpose. The nation must recommit itself to that goal, especially if federal legislation places demands on schools to improve the academic performance of low-achieving and poor children, as President Bush and others have proposed.

This commitment must include additional financial resources for school districts and schools serving large numbers of disadvantaged children. The General Accounting Office has shown that current federal aid, especially Title I, has been more successful than state aid in targeting additional resources on low-income students. Greater flexibility can be embedded in Title I — for example by expanding school-wide projects — but the requirements to target aid to the school districts and to the schools attended by disadvantaged students must be retained. In fact, greater targeting of resources ought to be the goal.

If the federal government is demanding greater accountability from educators for the performance for all students, including disadvantaged students, it is only fair that the federal government should provide more resources to help

do the job. In the last several years, the federal government has enacted various categorical programs to assist poorer schools, such as the Reading Improvement Act and the Class Size Reduction Act, but has kept appropriations for Title I relatively stagnant in terms of inflation-adjusted dollars. If the number of federal categorical programs is reduced, as we next recommend, Title I will remain as the primary vehicle for aiding schools with disadvantaged children, and it therefore must grow. Currently, Title I is funded at about half the level of its authorization, and therefore we propose fully funding the main federal effort to assist disadvantaged children.

As part of a meaningful, new accountability system, states should be encouraged to provide state-level funding for Title I programs if they do not meet their goal of raising the achievement of low-income children. Title I funds are the monies

which can be used to help disadvantaged low-scoring students to meet more demanding state academic standards, and therefore if states fail to raise the test

scores of those children, states could agree to target more funding on that purpose. That is a far more productive way to bring about greater educational achievement than the threat to take away from a state some federal administrative funds.

3. The numerous federal education programs that exist now should be consolidated into fewer categories, but separate programs should be retained if they are fulfilling an important national purpose which can only be addressed by targeted aid. The

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The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) contains many other programs in addition to Title I, including some new programs created during the last few years. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act exists separately from ESEA with its own major state grant program and several smaller programs. There are too many federal education programs, and this has

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made the jobs of local school administrators and teachers even more complex than they already are. In addition, the purposes of federal aid to education have become blurred, as representatives of business and charitable foundations observed at our December meeting.

The number of federal programs should be reduced; instead of many programs, we should have a few major categories of aid, focused on a limited number of clear goals. In her paper appearing in this volume, Elizabeth Pinkerton offers a useful starting point for a discussion on how to consolidate federal programs. Ms. Pinkerton, a leader in both the California and national associations of state and local administrators of federal programs, proposes that the federal K-12 role be reduced to four main categories, as a way of both easing administrative

complexity and raising educational achievement. Her categories include programs (1) to aid children of poverty; (2) to help educate children with special needs; (3) to recruit and train teachers and other staff; and (4) to improve academic achievement. President Bush and Senator Lieberman have proposed somewhat similar categories.

In deciding which programs should be folded into a broad category of aid, the following question needs to be asked: Is the purpose of this program important to the nation, and would that purpose be adequately addressed if federal aid was not targeted on it? This is the crucial question because the federal government ought to concentrate on meeting national needs which are not being adequately addressed by state and local governments.

Once programs are identified for consolidation, then three other questions need to be asked. The first question is: Will the consolidation have a clear purpose, and how will states be held accountable for achieving that purpose? All too frequently, current federal programs are imprecise about their purpose, and very often there is no accountability burden on the states to show progress in achieving a stated goal. I make these assertions based on my own experiences in drafting federal legislation and guiding bills to enactment over the course of nearly three decades. Proposals for consolidations of programs and block grants, both in the far past and in the recent past, have also suffered from the same imprecision. Today, in this era of demands for increased accountability, Congress and the President ought to state much more clearly what is to be achieved by federal aid, and how the states will be held accountable for securing progress in reaching that goal.

The second question which must be asked about any proposed consolidation is: Is there any assurance that this consolidation will receive

increased funding to carry out its purpose? The so-called Title VI education block grant, which was created in the early 1980's, has shrunk in appropriations, as measured against the programs consolidated and even against the initial sums appropriated when it was created. That experience is common among block grants across the federal government. If the strategy of combining programs is meant to assist teachers, principals, and superintendents in doing a better job of educating children, then there must be some assurance that the funding will be there to perform that task.

Lastly, the question of how the funds are distributed must be addressed: Will this consolidation distribute funds to school districts based on the number of poor children they are educating? The General Accounting Office has clearly documented that current federal aid is better targeted on poor children than is state aid, and this ought to continue as a primary federal objective. Poor children are those who are most frequently having the greatest difficulty achieving well in school, and teachers and principals in poor schools ought to be given the resources to assist them to do better, as greater accountability is demanded. Richard Rothstein's paper calls for a much stronger federal role in equalizing funding disparities across the states than is happening now. At the minimum, his paper is a reminder not to backslide in any consolidation of programs on the equalization of resources achieved to date.

4. The federal government should continue the principle of equitable participation for private schoolchildren in federal education programs, but should not get caught up in divisive battles over vouchers. Instead, a reasoned dialogue ought to take place between the public and private school leaders of the country.

President Bush and congressional leaders ought to put aside any proposals for tuition vouchers for private schools. No such proposal will survive congressional consideration, and the battle to secure passage will threaten the spirit of bipartisan cooperation necessary to make the other major improvements in the federal role outlined above. Expanding students' choice among public schools is a realistic national goal, but arguments over the constitutionality of tuition vouchers for private schools cannot be resolved as the Congress is now constituted.

The question of aid to private school children, though, ought not to be ignored. Title I

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should retain the principle of federal aid following disadvantaged children to the schools they attend, whether public or private. This provision has been an integral part of that program since 1965. Furthermore, any consolidation of programs should incorporate the

principle of equitable participation of private schoolchildren and teachers, which has long been a part of most of the programs to be consolidated.

We also recommend the creation by legislation of a National Forum on Public and Private Education. In a democracy, reasoned dialogue ought to be encouraged among all parties involved in an issue, even those issues which are very contentious and emotional. For that reason, we believe that an independent national forum composed of an equal number of public and private school representatives, appointed equally by Republican and Democratic congressional lead-

ers, ought to be formed to discuss matters of mutual concern. Topics could include improving teacher training and creating more demanding curricula for students. It is a common practice for teachers to work in private schools and then to move to public schools, and vice versa; and, likewise, students often will attend a public and then a private school, or the reverse. Leaders of both sectors must strive to find ways to improve education for all students.

We also propose that this Forum consider the difficult issues, beginning with the effects of some recent changes in state tax law that may affect both public and private schools. Four states have recently enacted tax credits and deductions for aid to private schools, and several more states are poised to do the same. The implications of these policies for both public and private schools should be examined jointly by public and private school leaders.

CONCLUSION

Now is the time for Republicans and Democrats to reach agreement on a refashioned

federal role in education. The beginning of a president's term in office is the best time to forge bipartisan legislation; as election time approaches, the task becomes more difficult as the political parties jockey for advantage. This opportunity for bipartisan agreement to seek both excellence and equity in education must be seized before the moment passes.

President Bush and his congressional supporters should put aside their advocacy of tuition vouchers, and should agree to retain Title I with increased funding to show their commitment to helping schools raise the achievement of students with the greatest needs. The Democrats should put aside their commitment to a variety of individual categorical programs, and agree on consolidations of programs with clear purposes and real accountability.

Working together, Democrats and Republicans can help to instill greater accountability for educational results, raise achievement among children who are having the most difficulty, and bring more clarity to the federal purpose in education. The nation would gain better schools for all children.

THE CENTER ON EDUCATION POLICY is the independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. We do not represent any special interests. Instead, we help citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create the conditions that will lead to better public schools.



1001 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 619, Washington, D.C. 20036

Phone: 202-822-8065 Fax: 202-822-6008

Email: ctredpol@ctredpol.org Web site: www.ctredpol.org

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