

Education 2001: Getting the Job Done

A Memorandum to the President-Elect and the 107th Congress

From

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With

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December 2000

December 14, 2000

Dear Colleague,

Regardless of the final outcome of the presidential election, it's clear that education will be high on the policy agenda for the new administration and the 107th Congress. Concerns about U.S. elementary/secondary schooling topped the list of voter worries and both presidential candidates vowed to be vigorous education reformers. So did many members of Congress—and their challengers.

It's not just politics, either. Early December brought yet more evidence—from the latest international assessment of student math and science prowess, this time in 8th grade—that American pupils are still not learning nearly as much as they need to for their own or the country's good.

What is Washington's role in trying to solve these knotty problems, problems that have plagued us at least since the United States was declared a "nation at risk" nearly eighteen years ago? For the first time in memory, both major parties and both sets of candidates agree that the federal government has important contributions to make in reforming America's schools. This consensus coincides with the fact that all the major federal K-12 programs are due for reauthorization during the next two years. (Some, in fact, are overdue.) As a result, 2001 and 2002 are likely to be the busiest time in the history of federal education policy, at least since the advent of Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society."

The new President and Congress will not lack advice about what to do. Plenty of organizations, interest groups and experts are generating policy recommendations for them. Indeed, one is tempted to smile at this profusion of unsolicited counsel. Yet it carries a message that goes beyond the self-interests and policy enthusiasms of those proffering it. It signals widening agreement that Washington's present approach to K-12 education policy—an approach that has scarcely changed since LBJ's time—is broken and needs fixing. It's not accomplishing its policy goals, it's not getting the hoped-for return on an ever-larger investment, and it's getting in the way of promising reforms being undertaken by others.

Implicit in the flood of policy advice, therefore, is recognition that it's time for serious change, not perpetuation of failed programs and faltering strategies.

That's our view—and that's why we're offering our own suggestions. They arise from several years of research and analysis by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and from—literally—decades of experience in education policy, practice and scholarship on the part of the principal authors. In truth, we've tracked these issues since LBJ's time.

This memorandum shares the lessons we've learned and suggests the major reforms in federal K-12 education policy that we believe are called for in the new millennium. Not everyone will agree with those suggestions. But we hope that readers will consider our advice as they try to imagine something different and better for America's children.

"We" is people associated with the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, which supports research and action projects in K-12 education reform at the national level and in the Dayton

area. In 1999, the Foundation published *New Directions: Federal Education Policy in the Twenty-First Century*, a research volume whose findings underlie many of the recommendations in this memo. (Further information about the Foundation, as well as electronic editions of our publications, may be obtained at www.edexcellence.net.) The lead authors are Chester E. Finn, Jr., Diane Ravitch and Bruno V. Manno, all of whom have served in senior federal education policy posts as well as academic and philanthropic positions.

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Respectfully,

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Elementary and Secondary Education Act.....	3
Title I.....	7
Research, Statistics, Assessment and Evaluation.....	13
Head Start.....	17
Appendix I: ESEA Today.....	21
Appendix II: Principles for Reauthorizing OERI, NAEP and NAGB.....	22

Introduction

If Election 2000 revealed a politically divided America, it also suggested key elements of a common agenda for the future. In no policy area is this agenda more striking than education. Both major presidential candidates focused relentlessly on the topic; voters ranked it as the most important domestic issue facing our nation today. In this area, at least, the mandate is clear: Do what it takes. Spend what it costs. But fix the schools. And start now.

The National Context

The U.S. education system is a patchwork of clashing arrangements and contradictory traditions. We pay homage to local control of the schools, yet we also

expect much of state and federal governments. We say that educators should be trusted to act as professionals, yet we surround them with red tape.

We want parents to be in charge of their children's education, yet we give them very little leverage over the formal, school-based part of that education—and the poorer they are, the less leverage they have. States bear constitutional responsibility for providing their citizens with an education, yet for a long time they played a rather passive, largely bureaucratic role; today, increasingly, they are shouldering the financial burden as well as assuming responsibility for academic standards, teacher qualifications, and more. The federal government provides only seven percent of the total funds, but serves as an important bully pulpit and defender of the interests of the least advantaged students and the source of numerous regulation-bound programs. Both presidential candidates vowed that Washington should do more on many fronts.

Ours is also an evolving education system. Many reforms are underway. The states are an especially active locus of this reform activity, and several big districts are also starting to get into the game in a thoughtful, promising way. There are reasons to be cautiously optimistic that America's schools are starting their long—

and overdue—journey to equality of educational opportunity.

The Federal Role

In the next four years, federal policymakers face a major challenge. We already knew that student achievement was inadequate and that Washington's role in revitalizing American K-12 education was both complex and unclear. We already knew that many federal programs suffer from inertia and need reforming. We already knew that the public was eager to see genuine progress in improving our schools. What we didn't know until November 7 was how closely divided was the nation—and the 107th Congress—on the crucial question of who

is to be in charge and whose agenda is to take the lead.

The result could be paralysis. Or it could be an unparalleled opportunity for bold change grounded in a nascent political consensus.

That, however, will take vision, leadership and reasonableness from the leaders of both major political parties. Given that context, how can the new administration and the 107th Congress best meet the nation's needs and the voters' demands in the field of education? How can federal policies and investments make a difference for children without making things worse? Here are a few principles to guide the way.

In education, the mandate is clear: Do what it takes. Spend what it costs. But fix the schools. And start now.

1. Offer freedom in return for results. The only strings attached to federal dollars should be those that insist on demonstrable results, particularly in terms of better student achievement. Decisions about how to achieve those results should be left to states, districts, schools, educators and parents. This allows greater federal investment without hindering promising local and state reforms, educator judgment and parental priorities.
2. Prevention is always better than remediation. Federal programs should focus on assisting young children to

succeed educationally the first time around. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of compensatory services.

3. Power to the people. As in other important domains of American life, Washington should rein in monopolies and protect the interests of consumers—in this case, children and parents.
4. Fund children, not institutions. The number one concern of the federal government should be the education of our nation's least fortunate children. Washington's foremost obligation is to the kids, not "the system." By building all its education programs atop this principle, the federal government will also foster the growth of innovative schools and diverse educational arrangements, such as charter schools, which are hobbled and weakened by current funding formulas.
5. Inform, inform, inform. The federal government's longest-running mandate is to provide timely, accurate information about how things are working and whether students are learning. This information should allow states and localities to identify the most promising reform strategies—and the pitfalls to avoid.
6. Stop funding failure. Schools that consistently fail to educate poor children should not receive federal dollars—and states should be accountable to Washington for ensuring that this does not happen. Federal programs that can't demonstrate results should themselves be replaced by different strategies. Though innovation and experimentation should always be encouraged, rigorous evaluation is vital and federal funds should not flow to activities that do not yield results for children.
7. Use the bully pulpit to empower and inspire. Federal policy affects more

than federal programs. It shapes the national conversation about education. It influences state and local programs. Washington policy makers must take this responsibility seriously. Speak on behalf of needy children and their families. Shine the spotlight on those who would allow the status quo to continue or who place institutional interests first. Celebrate success. Recognize promising practices and heroes. Remind parents that they are their children's first and most important teachers. Recognize and honor great teaching.

In this memorandum, we look at these principles in action as they relate to three major sets of federal programs that need urgent attention in 2001.

First, we examine the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), including the cornerstone Title I program. ESEA is overdue for reauthorization—and way overdue for reform.

Second, we review the areas of research, statistics, National Assessment and program evaluation. These vital programs are also overdue for attention—and for much needed reconstruction and revitalization.

Third, we take up the Head Start program. Though Head Start's current authorization extends through fiscal 2003, this important program needs urgent attention if America is finally to be serious about substantially narrowing the learning gap between rich and poor children—and doing so at the earliest stage in their formal education.

The fourth big federal K-12 policy domain that needs fundamental overhaul is special education, as embodied primarily in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Because this statute does not expire until 2002, however, and because we expect federal education policy makers to have their hands full for the next few months with the programs mentioned above and discussed below, we will defer our IDEA analysis and recommendations until early in the new year.

Elementary and Secondary Education Act

Background

In 1965, Washington embarked on its first major K-12 education initiative when Congress overwhelmingly passed Lyndon Johnson's Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). This was the era of the War on Poverty and ESEA's initial goal was to ensure equality of educational opportunity through programs like Title I (compensatory education for disadvantaged children). In each of seven subsequent reauthorizations, new programs were added to ESEA to address a broad range of goals that states were believed to be ignoring or handling badly. Today, ESEA includes over sixty different programs, including federal funds for school safety, teacher training, arts in education, technology, and gifted and talented children. With fourteen major titles and a total appropriation in excess of \$14 billion annually, ESEA is indisputably the centerpiece of federal K-12 education policy.

Because the 106th Congress was unable to agree on a plan for reauthorizing ESEA, this will be among the first orders of business for the 107th Congress and, inevitably, for the new administration. How to think about this? The experience of 35 years of ESEA persuades us that the federal role in education should be substantially reinvented and the programs recast and redirected.

Access Without Excellence

The existing programs have three basic problems: they are ill-suited to today's pressing education problems, harmful to the main mission of schools, and unsuccessful even in their own terms. The original (1965) goal of ESEA was to remove legal barriers and provide equality of access for needy children, children who don't speak English, and others facing special difficulties. (Disabled children, however, came a decade later, and IDEA is not part of ESEA.) This goal was mostly achieved: the formal barriers have been eliminated and for

the most part, needy children now have access to school and to special services intended to ease their way.

Today's great challenge, therefore, is not expanding access or delivering services. It is boosting student performance. Yet today's federal programs may actually interfere with the goal of boosting pupil achievement because they distract schools from this main mission. Besides diverting energy and attention from core issues of standards, curriculum and

instruction for all the children in a school, the federal funds for particular populations come with many strings attached. Thousands of state and local school staffers are tasked with ensuring compliance with federal rules and properly accounting for Washington's funds.

Even when all the rules are followed, however, and all the money is spent as intended, ESEA's programs are not achieving the goals that Congress set for them. Title I, the centerpiece of the federal role in education and its most ambitious effort, has become perhaps its greatest disappointment. While the program may have succeeded in making the education of disadvantaged children a national goal, it has, in fact, failed to narrow the achievement gap between poor and advantaged children. (A more detailed analysis of Title I is provided in a separate section of this memo.)

The smaller ESEA programs have been no more successful. Title II, the Eisenhower Professional Development Program, was created to boost student achievement in math and science by strengthening the skills of their teachers, yet there is no evidence that it has had any real impact on teaching and learning. Title IV, the Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program, is meant to curtail student drug use and violence, but millions are spent every year on activities with no record of success. Title VII, the Bilingual Education Program, was aimed at ensuring access to education for non-

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English speakers, but today it often supports efforts to instruct students in their native language to boost their cultural awareness and self-esteem rather than providing youngsters with structured opportunities to gain English fluency as rapidly as possible. (A list of the programs covered by ESEA's fourteen Titles is included as Appendix I.)

New Directions for ESEA

Federal education policy ought not be a litany of good intentions gone awry. America's neediest children cannot afford for Washington's \$14 billion per year to accomplish so little for them. Today, the federal role in K-12 education is ripe for reform, and it could be substantially reshaped via a re-conceptualization of this one statute. Instead of merely calling attention to issues and directing money at them, the new ESEA could focus laser-like on actual performance. Making this shift would involve discarding 1965 assumptions about what is wrong and how to fix it. Instead of funding intentions, concentrating on services and inputs, and monitoring progress via compliance with detailed regulations, the new bottom line would be results: student achievement.

This would also bring federal policy into sync with the remarkable reform efforts now underway in states and school districts across the country. No longer are states neglecting their poor children. No longer are state and local education systems oblivious to the need for change. Whereas Washington may once have been an engine for change in K-12 education, today it's the caboose on the reform train.

Federal policy, like state and local policy, needs to awaken to the central concepts that are driving K-12 education reform throughout the land: on the one hand, high academic standards coupled with careful assessment and clear accountability for results; on the other hand, a willingness to provide schools with wide-ranging freedom to achieve results as they think best—in return for concrete evidence that improved results are in fact being achieved.

Performance-Based Grants

Federal policy makers should support this promising dual strategy by rethinking ESEA so that it gives states and school districts the freedom to innovate, and to deploy federal funding as they judge best, all the while insisting on real accountability for results, with tangible consequences for success and failure. This would, in effect, treat states and school districts like giant charter schools, which operate on performance contracts that maximize their flexibility, minimize regulation, and insist on measurable results as a condition of continuation.

ESEA needs simplification, too. Instead of a federal program for every challenge or problem that schools encounter, ESEA should be consolidated into a handful of performance-based grants

aimed at boosting academic achievement via coherent strategies of the state's devising. Each such grant would require states to set specific goals and measure progress toward them; states that do not hit their targets would face sanctions, while states that exceed their targets would be rewarded. Performance-based grants have bipartisan appeal. After the Progressive Policy Institute proposed transforming ESEA in this way, Senator Joseph Lieberman crafted a bill (known as "The Three R's Act") around this idea. Early in his presidential campaign, Texas governor George W. Bush proposed a similar plan as the main focus of his K-12 education reform strategy.

Reinventing ESEA around the idea of freedom in exchange for results would significantly redefine the relationship between the federal government and the states. Funds would be sent to states by formula, yet with few strings attached. States would have the flexibility to use the aid to meet specific needs, but future federal funds would be contingent on meeting the goals the state sets for itself. Unlike "block grants," which flow regardless of how well they are spent and what results they yield, performance-based grants are more like contracts. They're only renewed if states accomplish what they promise. In this way, they serve to focus states on the goal of raising academic achievement for all children.

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Performance-Based Grants in Action

What would a reinvented ESEA look like? Borrowing from the Progressive Policy Institute, Senator Lieberman, and Governor Bush, we recommend that ESEA's sixty-plus programs be consolidated into six separate state grants, enumerated below. Our approach, however, is less prescriptive than the Lieberman bill. We believe that states should be trusted to do what they say they will do—so long as suitable "verification" mechanisms are in place for each of the six new programs. Later, we also recommend a major option (known as "Straight A's" or "Super Ed-Flex") that cuts across the six programs for states that want to try a boldly different approach to boosting the achievement of their disadvantaged pupils.

The six performance-based grants are aimed at:

- Closing the achievement gap between disadvantaged and advantaged pupils.
- Helping children become proficient in English.
- Raising teacher quality.
- Expanding school options for parents and students.
- Fostering worthwhile innovations.
- Demanding accountability.

The first grant relates chiefly to the Title I program and is described below in a special section devoted to Title I. Here's how the second through sixth of these grants will work.

Helping children become proficient in English

Existing bilingual education programs funded by ESEA tend to emphasize instruction in students' native languages rather than in English. Indeed, there is a statutory cap on how much of a state's federal bilingual grant can be spent on anything other than "transitional bilingual education." This approach usually subordinates learning English to other goals such as cultural awareness. This new performance grant will focus federal policy on the goal of accelerating English language learning for non-English speakers. These funds must be used to help immigrant children become fluent in English in an accelerated fashion. States will set targets for moving

students with limited English proficiency into classes taught in English, as well as specific goals for the proficiency that students are expected to achieve. They may meet these goals using whatever strategy for teaching English they find most effective. No caps or preferences will be imposed by federal enforcers. All that matters is that LEP children learn English as quickly as possible. The best way to find this out is by measuring the "gap" in English proficiency (and other key academic skills) between LEP children and other children.

Raising teacher quality

Today's ESEA contains funds for many different professional development programs. These will be consolidated into a single grant aimed at improving teacher quality through training, licensing, hiring, and new approaches to compensation. This might involve opening alternative paths into teaching for mid-career professionals or new liberal arts grads, boosting salaries for teachers in hard-to-staff schools or shortage fields, or offering high-quality professional development opportunities linked to state academic standards. Because the best measure of teacher quality is the student learning that a teacher produces, states will be held accountable for producing gains in student achievement, rather than for increasing the percentage of teachers with any particular credential.

Expanding school options

Schools that have to attract students are doubly accountable: both to the state and, via the marketplace, to their clients. Washington is already helping to promote new educational options with start-up dollars for charter schools. This grant will add to that initiative and permit these funds to be used to promote a wide range of educational options for students. The funds can be used to support charter schools, magnet schools, and efforts to provide parents with more information about schools they can choose from, such as school report cards. Once again, student achievement is the best way to determine whether this reform strategy is working over time.

Fostering innovations

Instead of launching a new federal categorical initiative to promote the latest silver-bullet solution for schools (such as reducing class size or wiring classrooms for the Internet), states will be given funds to pursue their own reform strategies. This allows states to target their own particular needs and try out new approaches to boosting student achievement. Once states decide on reform strategies to pursue using these funds, they will develop the performance objectives through which they will be held accountable.

Demanding accountability

The performance-based grants described above (and in the Title I section below) give states unprecedented flexibility to identify and attack the most pressing education challenges they face. In return, states must demonstrate that they are meeting the performance targets they set for each grant. This means that states will need accountability systems that allow them to determine whether the targeted students are making appropriate gains. (In addition to their own tests, linked to their own academic standards, states—and federal policy makers—may obtain "external audit" information on state academic performance via the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), although it's essential that NAEP results themselves not be used for "high stakes" purposes.) The funds provided by this grant can be used to create and maintain high academic standards, effective assessments and workable accountability systems.

States that fail to meet the student achievement goals they set (for all students, for disadvantaged students, and for limited English proficient students) will have the administrative portion of their federal funding (roughly five percent of the total) docked, the amount depending on how many goals were not met. States that exceed their performance goals will be rewarded with bonus funds.

States Can Opt for Even Greater Freedom

While the performance-based grants

described above give states a great deal of freedom (together with substantially increased accountability for results), some states may want to try a different and bolder approach. These states should have the option of consolidating any or all of their six performance-based grants into a single grant aimed at improving academic achievement for disadvantaged children. This arrangement essentially turns states into "charter states;" like charter schools, they are given maximum flexibility in return for results. Under this arrangement (known in the 106th Congress as "Straight A's" or "Super Ed-Flex"), a state may amalgamate its federal dollars for programs of its own devising, but will be held strictly accountable for the achievement of its children over a five-year period. If Title I is included in Straight A's, then narrowing of the rich-poor achievement gap must be part of the accountability plan (and states are free to design their own Title I program—or blend it with their other reform strategies). If the English-language proficiency dollars are included, then achievement gains by LEP youngsters must be part of the plan as well.

Whether states choose the "Straight A's" route or stick with the six separate performance-based grants, they are entering into a new kind of compact with the federal government. Washington's role will change from regulator to education investor, helping states and school districts to reach a common goal: boosting academic achievement. While federal dollars comprise just seven percent of America's total budget for K-12 education, Washington's role is enormous when it comes to setting state and local priorities and determining the tenor and content of the national conversation about education.

Outside Washington today, that conversation is all about reform. It's past time to bring ESEA into harmony with the very promising developments underway across the land, to make it stop doing harm, start producing results, and finally honor its 35-year-old promise.

Title I: Making the Investment Matter

At \$8 billion per year, Title I is the cornerstone of the federal involvement in K-12 education. It is a monument to America's desire to boost the academic performance of disadvantaged children and close the gap between rich and poor youngsters, but it is also a testament to the failed school reforms of the past 35 years. Title I is still not accomplishing its purpose. It urgently needs fundamental reform.

Title I is a monument to America's desire to boost the academic performance of disadvantaged children.

A Brief History of Title I

To understand today's complex program, it is useful to look at its evolution over the past 35 years. This program has already gone through three main phases. During the first, Washington sent money to local school systems with relatively few regulations attached—and no demands for results. In the second phase, the federal government cranked up the regulations but still ignored results. Not surprisingly, there weren't any results to speak of. In the third—and current—phase, Washington has ratcheted up the focus on results and snipped a bit of the red tape. Let's take a closer look.

A Decision to Fund Schools, Not Children

As a key component of his War on Poverty, President Lyndon B. Johnson pushed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—dominated by Title I—through Congress in 1965. Its goal was to close the rich-poor achievement gap; its strategy was to send dollars to school districts to create special programs for disadvantaged students.

It's important to highlight this decision to fund *institutions* rather than individual *students*. This was especially ironic considering that the political compromise that made E.S.E.A. possible was based on the "child-benefit theory," i.e. that Washington would parcel out its education aid on the basis of pupil neediness rather than institutional subsidy. (Only by that reasoning could disadvantaged children attending Catholic schools become eligible for help, without which the long-standing political

logjam surrounding federal education aid could not have been broken.) Still, while Title I dollars were distributed by a formula based (in part) on the number of low-income children living in a district, the money went to the school districts themselves and did not follow the child. That is still true today.

Congress made the opposite decision seven years later when, after a long debate, it created what is now the Pell Grant program for low-income students seeking higher education. In 1972, Congress decided that all eligible students should receive grants that they could take to any accredited college or university. Instead of funding institutions, the Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress agreed with the Republican White House that the right thing to do was to assist individual students. That remains a defining characteristic of federal higher education policy today. To obtain the money, a college must attract students who bring their federal assistance with them.

Besides directly aiding institutions serving disadvantaged children, a secondary goal of E.S.E.A. was to encourage states to boost their school spending; accordingly, high-spending jurisdictions like New York received more money through the Title I formula. For political reasons, however, every school district with at least three percent of its students living in poverty received some Title I money; as a result, federal funds were spread quite thin.

The first years of the program proved disappointing. School districts and state education agencies had little experience in designing effective programs for poor children. Schools that received the funds saw them as just another revenue source. Title I became something that most of its creators didn't want: virtually a general aid program, a pass-through to the overwhelming majority of school districts.

Regulatory Creep

Each time Title I was reauthorized, Washington tried to correct the mistakes of the

previous cycle, usually by tightening the regulatory screws. Most of the emphasis was on ensuring that program funds were spent on the intended beneficiaries—disadvantaged children—and their schools. Each reauthorization cycle brought new rules:

- “Maintenance of effort” required that state and local spending remain at least as high as prior years (to prevent localities from lowering their taxes because of the new federal aid).
- “Comparability” guidelines required that, within a district, each school received the same resources *before* Title I funds were added in.
- The “supplement, not supplant” provision required that federal dollars not be used to pay for services otherwise given to children or required by the state.
- “Targeting” requirements mandated that, within school districts, high-poverty schools should receive scarce funds before low-poverty ones did.

All these regulations more-or-less succeeded in ensuring that Washington's dollars were spent on the intended children. If one were content to view Title I as a resource-redistribution program, all would be well. But in fact the red tape yielded disappointing academic results. The gap did not close. It didn't even narrow. The program's stated objective went unmet. Moreover, local schools' concern about federal audits led to some bizarre practices, such as forbidding Title I-funded teachers from working on any school activity in which non-Title I students were present.

In order to create a clear fiscal paper trail, uncontaminated by ineligible pupils, many schools chose to use a “pull-out” approach, whereby Title I children were removed from their regular classrooms (and trained teachers) and placed in drill-and-practice sessions (often with poorly trained aides). The pull-out approach was never required by federal law,

but was a rational school-level response to an irrational system.

1988 and 1994: Steps in the Right Direction

By the mid 1980s, policymakers started to question the usefulness of pulling disadvantaged children out of regular classrooms and away from qualified teachers, especially in extremely high-poverty schools. Accordingly, the 1988 reauthorization allowed schools with 75% or more of their students in poverty to use federal dollars for “schoolwide” improvement, thus ending (for these schools) the need to track Title I funds to the intended beneficiaries—and the incentive to separate Title I children from their peers.

The year 1988 also brought the beginning of results-based accountability. States were required to identify schools for “program improvement” if their students were not making adequate yearly progress on standardized tests. “Adequate yearly progress,” however, was left to the states to define. They typically set the bar very low and “program improvement” status carried little tangible consequence, except perhaps some added embarrassment for bad schools. Many schools tried to game the system by focusing their efforts—and federal funding—on artificially pumping up test scores instead of addressing core education issues. But the regulatory burden had been lightened by a few ounces and accountability for results had finally shown its face in the statute.

A larger change came to Title I in 1994, when Congress pushed this program aboard the standards train by requiring states to hold their Title I schools accountable for boosting the performance of poor children. Unlike years past, states now were supposed to use the same standards and tests for Title I accountability as they did for the rest of their students. This was meant to focus schools on genuine academic achievement, rather than manipulating norm-referenced standardized tests.

The 1994 reauthorization also lowered the threshold for schoolwide programs, allowing schools with just half of their students in poverty to use this approach. These changes inched in the right direction, but the federal regulatory noose remained tight around

thousands of schools, and there were still no real consequences for failure to educate poor kids. As recently as 1997, evaluations of Title I found no significant gains in student achievement. (The move toward schoolwide programs has actually made it much more difficult to determine this, due to the commingling of eligible and ineligible pupils. By 1997-98, schoolwide programs were operating in 45% of Title I schools—and receiving 60% of Title I dollars.)

Current Program Issues

Though it fills hundreds of statutory pages, Title I has three key elements: its fund-distribution formula, its regulations, and its accountability mechanisms. We now review the program's main shortcomings under those three headings.

The Formula

This contentious equation, fully understood by only a tiny handful of people, has the following properties:

- 1) It still favors high-spending (and usually wealthy) states over low-spending (and usually poor) ones. It sends federal funds through the states to local school districts based on the number of school-age children living in poverty and each state's average per-pupil spending for elementary and secondary education. Thus the average Title I student in New York still receives more federal aid than the average Title I student in Mississippi (though Title I represents a larger share of Mississippi's K-12 budget than it does of New York's).
- 2) It spreads Title I funds to almost every school district. "Basic Grants" (90% of Title I funds) are awarded to all school districts with at least two percent of their children living in poverty. "Concentration grants" (the rest) go to districts serving at least 6,500 disadvantaged children or those with at least 15% of their total enrollment living in poverty.
- 3) It mandates that, within school districts, high-poverty schools must be served first.

Districts are required to serve all schools with 75% or more of their students living in poverty before they serve any other schools. Moreover, schools must be served in descending order of poverty. Schools with poverty rates below the district-wide average are ineligible to receive funds, unless the school's and district's poverty rate exceeds 35%. The upshot of these various rules is that, in many cities, schools with as many as 60% of their pupils in poverty receive no Title I dollars at all, while schools in lower-poverty districts may need just 10 or 20% of their students to be poor in order to qualify.

- 4) Though high-poverty schools enjoy a priority for funding, they receive less money per pupil. Today, low-poverty schools (rates of 35% or lower) tend to receive substantially larger Title I allocations per low-income student than do schools with poverty rates above 75 percent. The current averages are \$771 per low-income pupil in low-poverty schools vs. \$475 per low-income pupil in high-poverty schools. That's not much money to solve deep-set problems.
- 5) It leaves millions of poor children out of the program altogether. Nearly half of the low-income children in America receive no assistance at all from Title I. Many of these are secondary students (most Title I dollars go to the elementary level); others attend school in high-poverty districts but are enrolled in relatively less poor schools—schools, for example, where "only" half the children are poor.
- 6) It ignores the spread of innumerable school-choice options. The Title I formula is based on residential census data on poverty; it does not account for the possibility that students may attend school outside their census tract.

The Regulations. Much red tape remains:

- 1) Most schools must still track Title I funds to intended students. Changes in the 1994 reauthorization allowed schools with 50% or more of their students in poverty to use a "schoolwide" approach. But a majority of schools fall below this threshold and must be able to demonstrate that the federal money is paying to help "at-risk" students.
- 2) Schoolwide programs must meet federal specifications. Current law identifies eight components that schoolwide programs must include (needs assessment, professional development, parental involvement, etc.).
- 3) Personnel hired with Title I dollars must meet federal specifications. In an effort to discourage the hiring of poorly educated teaching aides, federal law bars such aides from directly instructing students.
- 4) Local schools and districts must submit Title I plans, which must be approved by the Federal Education Department. These plans must be tied to the state standards and assessments.
- 5) Maintenance of effort, comparability, and the "supplement, not supplant" provisions still apply. These regulations force states and districts to employ many staffers to perform the complex financial calculations required to ensure compliance.

A majority of schools still must be able to demonstrate that the federal money is paying to help "at-risk" students.

- 2) States must test children regularly. States must assess Title I students in reading and math at least three times—during grades 3-5, in grades 6-9, and in grades 10-12.
- 3) States must hold schools and districts accountable. States must hold local districts and schools accountable for making "adequate yearly progress" towards the state's performance standards in reading and math. In theory, schools must show that they are lifting test scores in math and reading for their disadvantaged students.
- 4) States and districts must publish data. Local districts must publish school profiles with assessment results disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, race, LEP and migrant status, poverty and disability. States must publish data on their districts' progress towards state standards.
- 5) States must help schools improve. States must create a statewide system of "school support teams" to help low-performing schools improve.
- 6) States must follow federal procedure for intervening in failing schools. Title I schools have two years to make "adequate yearly progress" (often vaguely defined). If they do not, they must revise their Title I plans. Local districts must help these schools, and, if that doesn't work, are to take "corrective action." This can include replacing a school's principal, reconstituting its whole staff, taking over its management, etc. (To our knowledge, no Title I school has yet been reconstituted or closed as a result of this process.)

Accountability for Results. Still not enough:

- 1) States must publish academic standards. Each state must submit a comprehensive plan, subject to peer review and approval by the Secretary, demonstrating that it has developed or adopted standards and assessments for Title I, at least in language arts and math.

The Six Big Problems of Title I Today

What's wrong with the current formula, regulations, and accountability mechanisms? Plenty.

- 1) The formula is unfair. Many disadvantaged children—especially in high-poverty urban districts—receive no funding whatsoever. Others receive little money (and fewer services) because they reside in states with low per-pupil spending.
- 2) There's not enough money. One reason that many disadvantaged children receive no Title I services is that Congress has never allocated enough funding to adequately serve all poor students at a reasonable level. The complications and unfairness in the system arise in part from a need to ration the available dollars.
- 3) The system concentrates poverty. As Robert Reich has recently argued, one of the most promising "school reforms" would be to send poor children to school with wealthier peers. Yet Title I creates incentives to herd poor children together, since only schools with high concentrations of poverty receive funds.
- 4) Parents remain largely powerless. While districts and states must publish lots of data, little of this is accessible or easy-to-use. More important, even when parents have information about the performance of their children's schools, they have little power to do anything. They cannot transfer their children to another public school or charter school (much less a private school) and expect the federal dollars to follow. They certainly cannot use the Title I funds to seek extra tutoring outside the school context. The money flows to the system, not necessarily to the schools where poor children enroll.
- 5) There's still too much red tape. The funding stream requirements for "targeted assistance" schools maintain incentives to use pull-out programs. Regulations about

teacher qualifications erode schools' staffing flexibility. The demands for school plans, district plans, and state plans create a mountain of paperwork at all levels.

- 6) Despite everything, there's still no real accountability. Title I contains no sure consequences for school failure. While districts are supposed to intervene, few have done so effectively. Failing schools continue to receive millions of dollars of federal funding.

Recommendations

- 1) **Make Title I an entitlement for poor kids.** Every single disadvantaged child should receive Title I assistance, just as essentially all low-income college students receive Pell Grants.
- 2) **Double the appropriation.** The Title I appropriation should be dramatically increased so that these "K-12 Pell Grants" are worth at least \$1,500 each.
- 3) **Make Title I portable.** Like Pell Grant recipients, Title I students should be able to attend the school or education provider of their choice, with *states* setting the limits on those choices. All public schools (including charter schools) must be included; the states may choose to include private schools, tutoring programs, etc. (NB: Once the Title I dollars reach a provider, they comprise fungible revenue for that provider to use as it thinks best. But if parents feel their child is ill-served, they can move those revenues elsewhere.)
- 4) **Stop funding failure.** The accountability mechanisms currently required by Title I should be strengthened. All providers licensed by the state to receive Title I funds must agree to participate in state tests and to be held accountable for the academic value that they add to their Title I students. (NAEP should "audit" overall state performance as well.) Schools

whose poor students do not make enough progress for two years in a row should be de-certified so that they may no longer receive Title I funds.

- 5) **Empower schools to make decisions.** With clear consequences for failure, schools will have both incentives and resources to improve the performance of their disadvantaged students. Schools should be allowed to spend federal funds on any "capacity-building" activity. They can spend these dollars on schoolwide reform or targeted assistance programs. Perhaps they will decide to place disadvantaged students with the school's best teachers. Maybe they will use the funds to lower class size. They might choose an intensive after-school reading program. It's up to them.
- 6) **Hold states accountable for closing the achievement gap.** States should be held accountable for boosting the performance of their disadvantaged students and narrowing the rich-poor achievement gap. The primary instrument for measuring this progress should be the states' own assessment systems.

Washington should require that results from those assessments be disaggregated by poverty. If a state's poor students are not making enough progress, the state's administrative funds should be docked (but not the money meant for actual services to low-income students). If a state's low-income students make significant progress, on the other hand, a state should be rewarded with extra funds. (These added dollars may be used to reward successful Title I schools, though they're probably better used for needed interventions in failing schools or other essential program improvements.) This gives states the incentive to make good decisions related to their Title I program and to focus their own resources on closing the achievement gap. Though care must be taken not to turn the National Assessment of Educational Progress into a "high-stakes" testing system or a source of pressure for a national curriculum, NAEP results can be used as an "external" audit of states' success in narrowing the achievement gap—and the federal government should cover the full costs of state participation in NAEP.

Research, Statistics, Assessment and Evaluation

Among the unfinished business of the 106th Congress is reauthorization of the federal government's work in education R & D, statistics and assessment. The main Education Department units that are affected are the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB), and the R & D work of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI). (Also addressed here is the future of program evaluation.)

These activities comprise the irreducible core of the federal role in education. Indeed, when the first federal education department was formed during the Civil War, it was purely and simply an information agency. In those days, Uncle Sam didn't administer complex, formula-based funding programs, competitive grants, sprawling student aid programs and innumerable school improvement schemes. But Congress determined in 1867 that it was a legitimate federal responsibility to "collect...such statistics and facts as shall show the condition and progress of education in the several States and territories." The original Department of Education was also tasked by Congress with "diffusing such information respecting the organization and management of schools and school systems and methods of teaching as shall aid the people of the United States in the establishment and maintenance of efficient school systems...."

Outlining the Problem

For many years, there has been bipartisan agreement that the federal education research effort is troubled. Ever since the National Institute of Education was created in 1972, this set of programs has had many failings: shoddy work on trivial topics; research bent to conform with political imperatives and policy preferences; a skimpy budget that gets consumed by seemingly permanent "labs and

centers" with little to show for these expenditures; avoidance of promising but touchy research issues; studies that seldom follow the norms established in reputable fields of social science; research that is mostly inconclusive and, when conclusive, is weakly disseminated and widely ignored; terminal confusion about where research ends and "school improvement" begins; and an ever-shifting set of priorities presided over by an ever-changing cast of directors, assistant secretaries and policy boards, most of them firmly under the political control of the Education Department.

In recent years, some important cousins of research have also slid into trouble. Vexing problems now beset education statistics, program evaluation and the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Statistics

The most important attributes of government statistics are that they be accurate and trustworthy. (It's also nice when they're complete and timely!) Data don't have much value if you can't rely on them. No matter how hotly contested an education policy or program issue may be, all factions should be able to agree on the facts. It is the federal government's solemn obligation, in gathering and disseminating statistics, to vouchsafe their integrity. In other statistical agencies (e.g. the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Census Bureau), professional integrity is a given, but at NCES it's become an issue. That small agency now suffers from a shrinking professional staff, tighter political supervision, a lot of serious data gaps, and systems that are too slow and old-fashioned to keep pace with today's appetite for timely information.

NAEP (and NAGB)

The "nation's report card," the National Assessment of Educational Progress, has also been subjected to various political agendas.

Vexing problems now beset education statistics, program evaluation and the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Though its policies are supposed to be set by an independent governing board (NAGB), numerous decisions about NAEP's actual operations, methods and data reporting are in fact made by other offices at the Education Department, and the assessment itself is run by NCES. The potential for conflict is immense, as is the threat to the continuing credibility of the country's most valued gauge of K-12 student achievement. In addition, as explained below, a number of NAEP's features that were pathbreaking in 1988 need a thorough overhaul in 2001.

Program Evaluation

Integrity has pretty much vanished from education program evaluation, even as this activity has become steadily more important. The central issue, of course, is how well federal education programs are working. Are we getting value for the money? Are kids and schools better off as a result of federal spending and regulation?

Unfortunately, the current structure contains a built-in conflict of interest, since the Education Department's main program evaluation unit is the same as the Secretary's principal policy shop. It's simply unrealistic to expect impartial program evaluations from the same office that is helping the incumbent administration strategize about how to impose its policy preferences on those programs, how to shape opinion about them, and how to persuade Congress to go along. Yet dozens of evaluations of major programs (e.g. Title I) have been entrusted to this office and to panels, experts and consultants chosen by it. As historian Maris Vinovskis has shown, on several recent occasions the evaluation office rushed out its findings to buttress the Clinton administration's proposals while dragging its feet on data that contradicted those proposals. This has become a vexing problem from the standpoint of the Congress and will also bedevil a new administration committed to a high standard of effectiveness for federal education programs.

Intensifying Appetites

The problems sketched above would be worrisome under any circumstance. But they're exacerbated today by the heavy reliance that

the incoming administration seeks to place upon accurate data, sound research, valid assessments and trustworthy program evaluations. In his September 2, 1999, education position paper, for example, Governor Bush stated that, in his administration, "The federal government will insist that every program it funds will boost student achievement, or else it will be replaced by other education programs that succeed in reducing the achievement gap." The new team's ideas about accountability for Title I and Head Start, just to mention two other important matters, also hinge upon a steady flow of up-to-date information about student achievement (at least) at the national and state levels.

The Legislative Situation

The 106th Congress failed to complete work on the (overdue) reauthorization of NAEP, NCES and education research. The Clinton administration sent up a bill that recommended a number of changes. A House subcommittee, chaired by Congressman Mike Castle (R-Del), reported out a very different sort of measure (H.R. 4875)—and did so with bipartisan support. But this bill never made it beyond the subcommittee stage.

Program evaluation is a permanent function of the Education Department, not something that must be reauthorized. But it needs attention, too (and got it in H.R. 4875). With taxpayers underwriting tens of billions of dollars per year of federal education programs and reform efforts, it's reasonable to want to know which programs are working, how well, and at what cost.

What To Do?

The key reform that's needed in this area is to erect a firewall between these key federal functions and Washington's political activists and interest groups. Included as Appendix II is a statement of principles signed (in May) by eight education policy experts with much experience in this field. H.R. 4875 did not go as far as these principles imply, but it made a solid start on firewall construction. It would effect two sweeping reforms and one worthy secondary change.

The first big improvement is structural. All functions currently contained in OERI, plus

program evaluation and a few of the Education Department's miscellaneous activities (such as its library) would be swept into a new agency. (This was given the clumsy name of National Academy for Education Research, Statistics, Evaluation, and Information, or NAERSEI.) To gain the assent of Democrats on his subcommittee, Chairman Castle amended his original proposal for a fully separate agency and agreed to keep NAERSEI nominally within the Education

Department. This is not desirable—a completely independent agency would be far better—but H.R. 4875 does say that NAERSEI's director (a presidential appointee who is supposed to possess specific qualifications and enjoy a six-year term) will have charge of "all functions for carrying out" the bill's many provisions. That sounds like it's supposed to mean autonomy.

Within NAERSEI there are to be separate centers for education research, program evaluation, and statistics, each with its own commissioner (appointed by the President with Senate confirmation). Sundry boards and committees at every level of this structure, while cumbersome, are meant to provide sage policy counsel, set durable research priorities (rather than have Congress forever insisting on its own pet topics and pork-barrel projects) and help assure the independence and integrity of the programs. Also within NAERSEI, NAGB gains full control of all aspects of NAEP, making the national assessment fully independent of political and bureaucratic control for the first time in its history.

The second big reform wrought by H.R. 4875 is substantive, not structural. The bill sets strict criteria for what constitutes sound research and program evaluation, and says that only projects satisfying those criteria may be funded. The phrase "scientifically based" recurs frequently. There's a strong push for bona fide experiments with control groups, which are normal in hard science and biomedical research but staunchly resisted by education researchers enamored of "qualitative methods." Various safeguards are put in place to ensure that

NAERSEI's constituent centers don't fund or engage in projects that fail to satisfy those norms—and existing university-based research centers are given just two years to prove themselves or lose their privileged access to the federal treasury.

The bill's other worthy change tackles the infamous regional labs, which have claimed a permanent role in the federal budget for 35 years without demonstrable success. Their lobbying success has far exceeded their

value as R & D centers, giving education research a poor reputation on Capitol Hill and among many educators and policymakers.

The subcommittee was heavily lobbied not to cut the labs off altogether. So it created a new, slightly gimmicky way to determine their future. Federal technical assistance dollars are entrusted via block grants to boards established by state governors in ten regions that consolidate several of the inconsistent geographic clusters of today's Education Department "regional" programs. Each board then decides how to spend its technical assistance dollars and where to purchase the services it desires. A regional board may choose an extant lab or opt for something different. If this works, these politically freighted decisions will at least be decentralized rather than focused entirely on appropriations committees in Washington.

The subcommittee bill isn't perfect. A few additional suggestions are made below. But it is a solid start, especially considering how difficult it is to build independent structures into the federal government, particularly if one also seeks to avoid calcification. This is a classic dilemma and rarely handled well. Yet it's not impossible. Think of the Federal Reserve System. The Smithsonian Institution. The Food and Drug Administration. The Bureau of Labor Statistics. The research protocols of the National Institutes of Health. Even the Census Bureau. They are creatures of the government but relatively free from partisan and interest group manipulation.

Think of the Federal Reserve System. The Bureau of Labor Statistics. The research protocols of the National Institutes of Health. They are creatures of the government but relatively free from partisan and interest group manipulation.

Additional Suggestions Concerning NAEP's "Third Generation"

Independent governance of NAEP is important but it's not the whole story. It's time to overhaul other key features of NAEP if the "nation's report card" is to bear today's burdens and meet today's expectations. In particular:

- 1) The frequency of national and state NAEP must be stepped up so that reading and math (and perhaps writing and science) results are produced at least every two years (with other subjects also put onto a more frequent schedule than today's).
- 2) NAEP results must be disseminated much faster than has been the pattern (one that today regards a full calendar year as speedy!).
- 3) The full costs of state participation in NAEP should be borne by the federal government.
- 4) School participation rates must be improved in order to get reliable state samples, which will mean making it "worth a school's while" to take part in NAEP.
- 5) The issue of student motivation needs to be tackled, particularly among 12th graders. While NAEP should not become a high-stakes test, youngsters probably need to get some sort of reward or useful feedback so that they will take participation in NAEP more seriously.

The changes outlined here, together with those made by H.R. 4875, amount to a third

generation for NAEP. The first generation (approximately 1970-1988) was characterized by very little useful data. The second (1988 to the present) made major changes, recommended by the Alexander-James panel, embraced by the Reagan administration and enacted (on a bipartisan basis) by Congress. They served to turn NAEP into the country's premier instrument for monitoring student achievement; provide the first-ever serious external "audit" of state academic performance (and gains); and build important standards (NAGB's "achievement levels" of basic, proficient and advanced) into the reporting of such data, standards that have become very important to America's ability to judge the success of its education reform efforts. But the 1988 changes have been outstripped by the country's growing appetite for assessment data. It's plainly time for another significant overhaul of NAEP.

A Cautionary Note

We recognize that "independent" federal agencies and programs always sound better to those out of office than to those in power. For obvious reasons, those in charge typically want to control the research, statistics, assessment, and evaluation agendas, not surrender them to unknown "independent" authorities. The new administration will naturally want to weigh the trade-offs here. Our advice is to hit the long ball and create a structure that will yield information everyone can trust for many years to come. An independent entity can always be given specific assignments via authorization and appropriation legislation—and the President or his designee would appoint most of the key players in this new structure, anyway.

Fulfilling the Promise of Head Start

Overview

Few federal programs enjoy the enduring bipartisan support of Head Start, and the reasons for its extraordinary popularity are clear: since its inception in 1965, Head Start has provided millions of young low-income children with nurturing environments as well as access to psychological, health and other social services. Today, over 800,000 low-income children participate in Head Start at a cost to the federal government of more than \$5 billion.

But does the program truly give its young participants a “head start” so that they begin school ready for future academic success? Does it actually reduce the cognitive gap between low-income children and their better-off peers? Unfortunately, the answer to both questions is no. Despite Head Start’s undisputed popularity, this program, which provides the first and arguably best opportunity to intercede in the cycle of poverty and poor academic performance, has had little or no effect on its participants’ later achievement.

Why? Because Head Start has poorly educated, ill-paid teachers and lacks a standard curriculum for school readiness and cognitive development. The latest research on Head Start, commissioned by the Department of Health and Human Services (which administers the program), acknowledges that Head Start children arrive knowing none of the alphabet letters and leave knowing “one or two letters, but no more” after a year in the program. A recent program evaluation explains:

A probable reason why Head Start children are not learning early reading skills like letter recognition and print awareness is that many Head Start teachers are not teaching them. Interviews with lead teachers revealed that most do not give children’s acquisition of these skills a particularly high priority in their curricular goals or daily activity plans.

“A probable reason why Head Start children are not learning early reading skills like letter recognition and print awareness is that many Head Start teachers are not teaching them.”

In the most recent (1998) Head Start reauthorization, Congress required the HHS Secretary to establish new education performance standards “focused on, among other purposes, ensuring school readiness.”

While these new standards give lip-service to the notion that Head Start teachers should be feeding their young charges a rich diet of cognitive skills and knowledge, in fact they set no specific requirements for what

Head Start teachers will teach or what participants will be expected to learn.

The new administration should help Head Start finally live up to its name and fulfill its promise by transforming this program from daycare to preschool through the establishment, implementation and enforcement of specific learning standards, a well-crafted curriculum, and a dramatic change in teacher recruitment and compensation. Moving the program from HHS to the Education Department will also help symbolically to convert it into a bona fide preschool education program—and to break some of the interest-group loyalties that have enmeshed the program in its current organizational home. But the transformation requires far more than reorganization. It must include strengthening the Head Start teaching force, training staff in the new standards and curriculum, and increasing teacher pay. The program also needs to be accountable for its results, and each Head Start operation must be judged by its success in imparting essential skills to the youngsters in its care. Only then will we begin to close what could be called the “pre-achievement gap.”

Background

Head Start was launched in 1965 as a vital element of the War on Poverty. Initially a six-week summer program, Head Start was designed to provide comprehensive services (educational, social, psychological, nutritional, etc.) to low-income children ages three to five,

giving them a “head start” on their schooling. It served 500,000 children in its first year and soon grew to 700,000 youngsters in both summer and year-round programs.

In 1969, however, a national evaluation revealed that the program was producing no lasting cognitive or behavioral gains for its participants. At this time, instead of pushing for improvements in the

educational component of Head Start, program advocates simply began to back away from the cognitive focus. Meanwhile,

congressional support for the program waned, but did not disappear: by 1977, enrollment in Head Start had slipped to 325,000 students (as the summer programs were replaced by year-round programs.)

The 1980s and 1990s saw reinvigorated support for expanding the program’s scope. Despite its lack of educational impact, Head Start continued to provide valuable services to low-income children; by 1993, over 700,000 youngsters were enrolled. Then, under the Clinton administration, funding for Head Start was more than doubled, growing from \$2.2 billion in 1992 to \$4.7 billion in 1999. Today, more than 800,000 children are enrolled in Head Start programs at a cost to the federal government of over \$5 billion.

The program currently serves about two-thirds of eligible 4-year-olds and one-third of eligible 3-year-olds in over 15,000 centers and nearly 50,000 classrooms around the U.S. Head Start is administered at the federal level, not through the states. Grants are awarded on a competitive basis to a diverse range of public and private providers, including community action agencies (about 32%), public and private school systems (16%), local government agencies (6%), Indian tribes (5%) and a variety of public or private, profit or non-profit organizations including churches and local childcare providers (41%).

Children have never been viewed as Head Start’s only beneficiaries. Many of the participants’ parents and neighbors have gained employment as Head Start teachers. This has, in effect, created a secondary constituency for the program—one that feels threatened by proposed changes, particularly those that call

for better-trained staff. (Current law requires that by September 30, 2003, at least 50% of Head Start teachers must have achieved at least a bachelor’s degree.)

Loss of Focus on School Readiness

Head Start’s most glaring weakness today is its lack of focus on school readiness, which

makes it possible to ignore crucial issues of teacher quality and the lack of any standards for cognitive growth. As noted above, when early evaluations indicated that Head Start was not having a

lasting positive impact on student achievement, the program’s acolytes, instead of strengthening its academic components, chose to concentrate on other objectives (social, emotional, medical, etc.). Congress made a partial step toward rectifying this situation in 1998, but the guidelines that HHS developed in response are vague and insubstantial. They include many pages of fuzzy directives to teachers such as “speak in tones that are pleasant to children,” “give children time to talk to one another,” and “engage in meaningful conversations that adults or children initiate.” These guidelines provide no specific suggestions for what children should be taught. Head Start providers and parents are left to their own devices to decide how their program will respond to the long list of fuzzy directives. Some do fine. Many do not.

Indeed, variability among individual programs is an accepted, even celebrated, credo of the Head Start program. One of its guiding principles, dating to its origins in the War on Poverty, is that its programs on the ground be community-based. According to the Advisory Committee on Head Start Research and Evaluation, “local Head Start programs are free to vary their practices and approaches, provided that at a minimum they carry out the philosophy, principles, and goals of the Head Start program, and meet the established Performance Standards.”

Unfortunately, the nebulous notions that comprise Head Start’s principles and goals today have resulted in a laissez-faire system where individual providers are not trained or expected to implement an effective preschool program for their young charges. In this new

Children have never been viewed as Head Start’s only beneficiaries.

era of strong standards-based reform, it is now even more imperative that low-income children be given the opportunity to catch up to their more fortunate peers before starting kindergarten.

Head Start as Preschool, not Daycare

Research shows, and common sense dictates, that high-quality preschool can make an enormous difference in the lives of disadvantaged children. We know that a structured, cognitively enriched preschool can have significant effects on youngsters' subsequent achievement, grade promotions, avoidance of special education, and high school graduation rates. States that have focused on early literacy are seeing significant gains in pupil achievement—especially for poor and minority youngsters. Comprehensive research by the National Research Council and the National Institutes of Health shows that few children can pick up reading on their own and that critical pre-reading skills (associating sounds with letters) are best learned between the ages of four and six. Dr. G. Reid Lyon, chief of reading research at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, explained at a Congressional hearing last year that “children who receive stimulating literacy experiences from birth onward appear to have an edge when it comes to vocabulary development, an understanding of the goals of reading and an awareness of print and literary concepts.”

In Europe, preschool has long focused on academic preparation and has relied on highly qualified and well-paid teachers. The French curriculum, for instance, is specifically designed to reduce the cognitive gaps between poor and advantaged children; it provides carefully planned experiences involving language and numbers as well as arts, crafts and games. In the U.S., the Core Knowledge Foundation has developed a set of guidelines for preschools that reflect the best American and French practices.

A standard curriculum for Head Start should ensure that participating children are equipped with the same school-readiness and learning skills their middle and upper class peers gain at home and in preschool. Despite the facts that pre-primary education attendance rates in the

U.S. are respectable and growing, and that black youngsters are more apt to be enrolled in preschool than are white (or Hispanic) children, U.S. youngsters are not achieving at levels of academic excellence, and the achievement gaps between poor and wealthy, and black and white, are widening, not closing.

Recommendations

Before adding yet more money to this immensely popular program, the new administration and Congress should re-conceptualize it to emphasize cognitive development and school readiness. The current program is good—children and families benefit from its health, psychological and other services—but it could be much, much better. After 35 years, and now at a cost of \$6,000 per participant, there is no reason why this program is not providing children with an effective preschool experience. Here are some specific recommendations; the new Administration should ensure that:

- Standards are set for what Head Start participants are expected to learn while in the program. These standards should reflect the best research on how to prepare disadvantaged preschoolers for future academic success.
- A standard curriculum for pre-literacy, numeracy and problem-solving is designed for the program. Such a curriculum would include benchmarks for improving practice, training teachers and assuring quality.
- All Head Start teachers should have at least a bachelor's degree and be proficient in teaching young children. At present, about one-third of Head Start teachers are parents of program participants; many have had an inadequate education themselves. Only 20% possess a bachelor's degree. Future Head Start staff recruitment should focus on bringing in qualified individuals. (NB: The National Research Council recently made a similar recommendation.)

- To improve program quality and recruit better-qualified staff, Head Start teachers must receive better pay. The current low salary structure for Head Start teachers keeps qualified individuals from applying or staying in the job for long. (Note, though, that the program is already spending about \$6,000 per participant, comparable to the public schools' per-pupil expenditures.)
- The program must include "school readiness" as one of its primary priorities and resist interest group pressures that are focused only on social services. Young children cannot get a "head start" in school unless they arrive ready to learn and well-prepared with age-appropriate cognitive skills and knowledge.
- The program should be transferred from HHS to the Education Department and coordinated as closely as possible with Title I. This is partly a symbolic shift but it's an important one. It also improves the odds that a smooth transition is made from Head Start into primary school and maximizes the prospects for coordinating the program's standards and accountability arrangements with those of Title I.

Appendix I: ESEA Today

Title I	Aid to Disadvantaged Children
Title II	Eisenhower Professional Development Program (to improve science and math teaching)
Title III	Technology for Education (training in computers, connection to the Internet)
Title IV	Safe and Drug-Free Schools
Title V	Promoting Equity (magnet schools, women's educational equity)
Title VI	Innovative Education Program Strategies (to support state and local reforms)
Title VII	Bilingual Education
Title VIII	Impact Aid (assistance for districts with military bases or other federal facilities; to replace lost taxes)
Title IX	Indian, Native Hawaiian, and Native Alaskan Education (to meet special educational needs)
Title X	Programs of National Significance (includes gifted-and-talented children, charter schools, arts in education, civic education)
Titles XI-XIV	Non-programmatic titles

Appendix II: Principles for Reauthorizing OERI, NAEP and NAGB

(May 10, 2000)

We have come to believe that the federal government's handling of education research, statistics, assessment and program evaluation needs a fundamental overhaul and complete reorganization. At a time when the need for scientifically rigorous and objective education research, statistics, assessment and evaluation is greater than ever, the federal government has failed to live up to that challenge despite having spent billions of dollars over the past quarter century.

At several recent House and Senate hearings, expert witnesses have almost uniformly detailed the weak and disorganized state of federal education research, program evaluation, and statistical efforts in the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) and the Planning and Evaluation Service (PES) in the U.S. Department of Education today. Among the problems identified at these hearings are:

- a) Despite an increase in funding in OERI since the mid 1980's, the funding has been spent on activities other than high quality research,
- b) Congressional mandates on how OERI must spend its research funds continue to hamper the ability of the agency to operate efficiently and effectively
- c) Federal involvement in educational research, development, statistics, and evaluation has often suffered from unstable and weak intellectual leadership
- d) The agency lacks distinguished and innovative researchers
- e) Large-scale, systematic development is largely absent at the Department of Education
- f) Neither PES nor OERI are providing a sufficient number of scientifically sound and educationally relevant program evaluations
- g) The Department of Education has not always delivered timely and objective evaluations of its major programs
- h) The overall quality of the research, development, and program evaluations needs improvement
- i) Politics continue to intrude in the operations of OERI and PES, and
- j) The National Assessment of Educational Progress also suffers from its lack of insulation and from ambiguity as to who has policy control.

It is time to reorganize the current structure and operations of OERI, PES, and NAGB in order to build upon the best parts of the current agencies while placing more emphasis on the independence, integrity, and excellence of the units that deal with educational research, statistics, assessment, and evaluation. More specifically we suggest seven principles to guide Congress as it commences the reauthorization of these agencies:

1. Education research, statistics, assessment and evaluation ought not be subordinated to political needs, program concerns, reform enthusiasms or policy preferences. One promising possibility is to separate these functions from the Education Department and lodge them in a new, independent agency, perhaps named the "Education Audit Agency."
2. The new agency should be dedicated to the acquisition and dissemination of timely, accurate information; the canons of scientific inquiry; and the pursuit of truth, without fear or favor. The Education Audit Agency should not be a program-operating agency, "improvement" enterprise or reform operation. Its sole stock in trade is trustworthy information by which the nation can appraise the performance of its children and its educational institutions, evaluate efforts to strengthen that performance, and develop knowledge by which future such efforts may be more successful.

3. Though located within the executive branch, the new agency should be structured to ensure maximum freedom from political manipulation and interest group influence. Several structures should be considered; the optimal model might resemble the Federal Reserve Board.
4. The Education Audit Agency should conduct all of the bona fide research (but not the “improvement”) functions of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), as well as those of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). It should also have the capacity to provide objective, high quality program evaluations. In conducting such evaluations, the Education Audit Agency shall serve the interests of truth, timeliness and rigor. (This does not preclude the Education Department from also having a policy analysis unit, but it is expected that Congress will ordinarily assign future program evaluations to the Audit Agency, not to the Department.)
5. Affiliated with, but independent of, the Education Audit Agency, the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) should be placed in charge of all policies pertaining to NAEP. NAGB should itself be strengthened through longer terms for its members, its own nominating capacity, and other measures designed to ensure its full independence and integrity. (The Audit Agency will administer NAEP on behalf of NAGB.)
6. In its conduct of education research, the Education Audit Agency should strive for scientific rigor, including, to the maximum degree possible, randomized field trials.
7. Congress should consider overseeing the Education Audit Agency—and ensuring the quality, integrity and independence of its work—through a special joint committee (akin to the Joint Committee on Taxation).

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