

PRO/CON: Should national or local agencies govern schools?

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President Barack Obama sits with 3- and 4-year-old students in a pre-kindergarten class at Powell Elementary School in Washington, D.C., March 4, 2014. Photo: REUTERS/Jonathan Ernst

PRO: Parents, local school boards can do a better job

The U.S. Department of Education opened its doors 36 years ago. Its supporters promised improved efficiency and higher student achievement. Instead, federal spending has soared, and student achievement has barely budged.

Clearly, politicians in Washington don't know best. It's time for federal authorities to butt out of America's schools and put parents and their locally elected boards back in charge.

The longest running national assessment of American student achievement is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The results are known as the Nation's Report Card.

Students across the country are tested in both math and reading, and results are reported on a scale of zero to 500. Students who score 300 or above can solve moderately complex math problems and understand relatively complicated reading materials.

Math Slightly up, Reading Levels Off

Among 17-year-olds, typically high school seniors, the long-term performance in NAEP math has increased only slightly over decades. In 1978, 52 percent of students scored 300 or above, but 60 percent scored 300 or above in 2012, the latest year for which results are available.

The reading performance of 17-year-olds has remained flat, with just 39 percent of students scoring 300 or above in both 1971 and 2012.

Over the same period, federal spending for elementary and high school education increased more than 140 percent, from \$33.2 billion in 1971 to \$80 billion in 2012. Student enrollment, meanwhile, increased only 9 percent, from 45.6 million in 1971 to 49.8 million in 2012.

The idea of a national education department was first debated in Congress in 1866. That year, Representative Samuel J. Randall of Pennsylvania predicted it would amount to “a bureau at an extravagant rate of pay, and an undue number of clerks collecting statistics ... (that) does not propose to teach a single child ... its A, B, C’s.”

History proves Randall was right.

So Much For Promises

We were promised that illiteracy would be eliminated by 1984. We were promised that high school graduation rates would reach 90 percent by the year 2000 and that American students would be global leaders in math and science. We were promised that by 2014 all students would be proficient in reading and math. None of this has happened, however.

Rather than learning from these broken promises, Congress continues to tinker with federal education programs that don't work and cost too much.

It's time to end the Department of Education and put the real experts — parents — back in charge of their children's education.

Parents are choosing their children's schools in a significant and growing majority of states. More than 1.7 million students are now home-schooled, and that figure has increased 62 percent in the past decade.

Research shows that when parents have more choices in education, both students and schools benefit. They do so much more cheaply than expensive federal programs. The competition for students and funding puts powerful pressure on schools to improve.

Let Parents Manage Funding

Little wonder that some 7 out of 10 likely voters believe that competition improves public schools. They also support greater parental choice, particularly education savings accounts (ESAs).

First passed in Arizona in 2011, and four more states since then, these savings accounts put parents in charge of the money for their children's education. ESAs allow parents to send their children to the schools that are best for them.

Any leftover funds remain in students' ESAs for future expenses, including college tuition.

Instead of funneling money through the government, we should be paying to educate American students directly through ESAs.

Until we put the real experts — parents and their locally elected representatives — back in charge of education, we can expect more education that over-promises and under-delivers from the U.S. Department of Education.

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CON: Central authority has better chance of treating everyone fairly

The federal government should not leave elementary and high school education to the whims of local school boards.

These boards simply lack the ability to address the funding, education and justice gaps that exist throughout our nation.

California, for example, is one of the wealthiest states in our nation, but you would never know it from its schools.

Many California Children Suffer

The state has the highest poverty rate for children in the country. Half of California's 6 million public school children are poor or living just barely above the poverty line.

Over half a million of these children are homeless, and 81 percent come from families in which the parents are working but still can't make ends meet.

Nearly 1 in 4 of California's students was born in a different country, and English is not the first language. One in 10 has a learning disability. Many of them show up at school just to eat a hot meal.

These kids need a lot of support, and the state simply won't foot the whole bill. Per-pupil spending in California is among the lowest in the country. Last year, the federal government contributed \$7 billion to education in California. While this is only a fraction of the state's education budget, it needs this money to keep the schools open.

Financial support is not all that federal authorities provide.

Educational Equality

The federal government has established a common vision and common standards for our schools. If we want our students to excel in college and compete with an international workforce, we must have the same educational expectations for all students.

There is no reason for one local board to decide that its students won't be taught that global warming exists, while another teaches that it does. If we want to produce informed, productive citizens, we can't allow local boards to lower the national expectations for student learning.

Even more important than a common vision is advancing justice. Through civil rights legislation and monitoring, federal authorities have consistently intervened to protect the rights of students with disabilities, young women, poor students and students of color.

But the battle is not over, and our schools today are almost as segregated as they were in the days before the civil rights movement. Almost every district in the country has a gap between the achievement of black students and white students.

Federal Officials Protect Children's Rights

It is the federal authorities, and not local school boards, who make sure that children have equal access to education regardless of whether they live in Bakersfield, California, the Appalachia mountains of West Virginia or New York City. It is the federal authorities who are now protecting the rights of transgender students to use the restroom.

Separate is not equal and has never been, but today, separate is also weak.

Research shows that countries with greater equality in education have better schools. This was the idea behind President George W. Bush's 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, which forced schools to test students in reading and math.

And his idea makes good sense: If we want to improve education, we should hold schools responsible for the success of each and every student. We need a central authority to help us maintain this focus.

Local Governments Also Must Provide Support

This is not to diminish the role of local government in public education. I am a lifelong educator and have taught in California schools for years. While federal involvement is crucial, local governments can lead the way with school improvement.

I am hopeful that California Governor Jerry Brown's local control of funding formula will better serve our students. The state program gives more money to schools for low-income students and students who are learning English because they have more needs.

Hopefully we can work together at a national and local level to build excellent schools that provide equal opportunities for all our students.

Ultimately education is about our kids, and if the federal government butts out entirely, our kids are the ones who will suffer.

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