

STUDENT PERFORMANCE

THE NATIONAL AGENDA IN

BY DIANE RAVITCH

NATIONAL
PRIORITIES



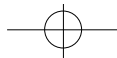
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For more than 30 years, the primary goal of U.S. federal education policy has been to ensure equality of educational opportunity. The creation of programs like Title I, Head Start, and bilingual education in the 1960s and special education for handicapped children in the 1970s directed federal resources to children who had been poorly served by the nation's state- and locally based education system.

If measured by the goals of removing legal barriers and providing equality of access, federal policy has been successful. Now federal education policies must attach the highest priority to strategies that boost student performance for all groups.

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The State of Student Performance

It comes as news to no one that U.S. student performance is lagging. The federally funded National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), the nation's only measure of academic achievement that tests representative national samples, has been tracking performance over the past few decades. From 1969 to 1996, according to NAEP, 9-year-olds made significant gains in science, but 13-year-olds showed no change, and 17-year-olds lost ground. In mathematics, from 1973 to 1996, students at ages 9 and 13 showed improvement, but the performance of 17-year-olds was unchanged. In reading, from 1971 to 1996, scores improved for children aged 9 and 13, but not for the older group. In writing, tested from 1984 to 1996, performance was flat for the two younger groups and declined for the 17-year-olds.

In addition to long-term data, NAEP reports student performance in relation to standards, or achievement levels (identified as "basic," "proficient," and "advanced"), that describe what students in grades 4, 8, and 12 *should* know. The most recent NAEP report shows far too many American students falling below even "basic" academic achievement. In reading, for example, 40 percent of fourth-grade students score below basic; in mathematics, 38 percent of eighth-graders are below basic; in science, 43 percent of twelfth graders are below basic. Shockingly, the scores of black and Hispanic students at age 17 are equivalent to those of 13-year-old white students in every academic subject.

The NAEP surveys are a reminder of one critical federal role in education—providing accurate statistics and assessments. But how, in an educational system rooted in state and local authority, can the federal government move beyond *assessing* student performance to *improving* it?

The State of Teacher Quality

Any effort to improve student achievement must begin with an appraisal of teacher qualifications. Students are unlikely to be high achievers unless their teachers are knowledgeable in the subject they are teaching. Yet many teachers, particularly in mathematics and science, are teaching "out-of-field"—that is, without either a major or a minor in their main teaching assignment. In 1994, 36 percent of the nation's public school

teachers (42.8 percent of private school teachers) were teaching out of field. In schools where more than 40 percent of the students are low-income, nearly half the teachers are out-of-field.

The source of the problem is the lax standards—in most states—for entry into teaching. Indeed, according to the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, "States pay more attention to the qualifications of veterinarians treating the nation's cats and dogs than to those of teachers educating the nation's children and youth."

What can the federal government do to see that every classroom has a well-educated teacher? It should certainly *not* pump more money into traditional teacher education programs, which pay far too little attention to mastery of subject matter. It *should* focus on helping all future teachers, even those who plan to teach in elementary school, acquire command of academic fields. For example, it should offer incentive awards to states that require subject-matter examinations of future teachers. The National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the

Humanities should also develop model examinations for states to use to assess teachers' subject matter knowledge at different levels.

Reforming the Governance of Education

In an effort to shift away from bureaucratic, top-down management of education by local school boards, many states and school districts are experimenting with alternative forms of school management—charter schools, contract management, and vouchers. Supporters hope that these new programs will help target public funds to actual instruction rather than to multiple layers of administration. None of the initiatives has been tried long enough to permit a definitive judgment about its effect on student achievement.

Charter schools are public schools that agree to meet certain performance standards in exchange for exemptions from most regulations other than those governing health, safety, and civil rights. Charter schools accept accountability for results in exchange for autonomy in how those results are produced. State legislation determines how charters are granted, what standards must be met, whether teachers must be certified, and whether existing public schools may convert to charter status.

How, in an educational system rooted in state and local authority, can the federal government move beyond assessing student performance to improving it?

If a charter school fails to meet its educational and fiscal commitments, it may lose its charter—in sharp contrast to regular public schools, which may produce poor educational results for years without any penalty. More than 1,000 charter schools are in operation today, many in Arizona, California, Colorado, Texas, and Michigan. The primary opposition to charter schools has come from local school boards, which see them as unwelcome competition, and from teachers' unions, which want to protect collective bargaining agreements.

Another form of restructuring is contract management of public schools. Paul T. Hill, Lawrence C. Pierce, and James W. Guthrie have argued that virtually all public schools should be managed by contract, with

the local school selecting managers and leaving them free to meet agreed-upon standards. In recent years, private contractors have assumed the management of some charter schools and also formed partnerships with school districts to manage one or more regular public schools. In 1997–98, the Edison Project was managing 25 public schools in 8 states and 13 cities, with most boasting achievement gains and long lists. Today Edison manages 33 schools. Some states prohibit contract management of instructional services. Public employee unions fear that outsourcing any public-sector activity threatens their jobs.

The third important local innovation is vouchers. Two programs, one in Milwaukee (since 1990) and another in Cleveland (since 1996), supply publicly funded vouchers to low-income students. The aim is to provide an option for students who are at maximum risk of educational failure. The concept of vouchers for poor kids arouses intense opposition in some quarters, particularly from public employee unions, but also because of constitutional concerns about the participation of religious schools. In Milwaukee, students in the voucher program may enroll in both nonsectarian and religious private schools; the program has been the subject of prolonged legal battles, but it was approved by the Wisconsin Supreme Court in June, and in November the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear a challenge to that ruling. In

Cleveland, students may also attend both nonsectarian and religious schools; the inclusion of religious schools was barred by an appellate court, but the program remains in effect while the case is on appeal.

The academic effect of the voucher program in Milwaukee is hotly debated (the Cleveland program is so new as to make evaluation all but impossible). The state-appointed monitor in Milwaukee has found no improvement, but independent analysts have reported marked academic gains. Definitive judgment will require more time.

On one issue there is no debate: public opinion is shifting to vouchers. The Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll reported in September 1997 that opposition to vouchers has

sharply declined over the past five years, from 74 percent to 52 percent. Public opinion was evenly divided when people were asked whether they favor or oppose "allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at government expense." Those most likely to support private choice are public funds were less (72 percent), whites (68 percent), 18-29-year-olds (70 percent), and urban residents (59 percent). These issues must be decided by the state and dis-

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the federal government, however, can help states do what they are trying to do and, at the very least, remove federal impediments. An important way to support reform without predetermining any particular result would be to change funding formulas for federal programs like Title I, special education, and bilingual education, so that the money follows the student, as it does in higher education, to any accredited institution. If a state or district prohibits charter schools, contracting, and vouchers, federal dollars would follow students to their regular public school. If a state or district establishes any of these approaches, the federal dollars would follow students to the school of their choice.

A small but substantial (\$80 million) federal program channels funds to states to encourage the start-up of new charter schools (once a school is launched, regular public funding should be adequate to its needs). This program would be improved by refusing funds to states without charter schools.

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Oregon, for example, has received millions of dollars from the charter program without even passing a charter school law.

As for vouchers, the federal government should support a 5- to 10-year demonstration program for low-income students in at least 10 hard-pressed urban school districts. The program should be limited to public school children eligible for the federal free-lunch program. The scholarship should be equal to the average per-pupil expenditure of the district plus any additional funds (Title I, special education) to which the student is entitled. Any school accredited by the state should be eligible to receive scholarship students. A large-scale federal demonstration program, carefully monitored and evaluated, would resolve debates that have been deadlocked by politics and ideology.

The Need to Reform Categorical Programs

The largest categorical federal programs—Title I, special education, bilingual education, Head Start—were created to provide equality of educational opportunity. All were established with high hopes, but none has lived up to the expectations of its sponsors. All are ripe for reform.

Title I, now budgeted at \$8 billion a year, distributes federal funds to districts with large numbers of disadvantaged students. Congress has long insisted on spreading Title I funding as widely as possible, thus assuring its political viability but reducing the money available to districts with the largest number of poor students. Backers of Title I expected it to narrow the large gap in achievement between poor children and their more advantaged peers, but evaluations in the past three decades have all concluded that Title I has failed to meet that goal. In the main, the added funds have simply not made much difference. Unfortunately, neither the program nor the evaluations were designed to identify the methods or applications that are most effective in improving the academic performance of poor children.

Title I's most striking product, the result of three decades of federal regulations, procedures, and mandates, is its unwieldy bureaucracy. The most direct way to reform Title I—and cut its bureaucracy down to size—would be to convert it to a portable entitlement, available to its intended recipient for educational services. The money should follow the eligible student to the school or tutor of his choice. The fundamental principle must be that the federal money is allocated to benefit needy children, not to sustain a host of redundant administrators.

When the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was enacted in 1975, there was a clear need to protect the right of physically and mentally disabled children to receive free public education. At the time, an estimated one

million children were excluded from public schools because of their disabilities. But while special education has grown apace, it has not lived up to its initial hopes of educating disabled children.

Today, more than five million children are enrolled in special education at a cost to the federal budget of \$4.8 billion a year—and at a national cost of some \$60 billion. Though Washington funds less than 10 percent of special education, it imposes extensive, minutely detailed mandates on states and districts.

Children described as “learning disabled”—a porous category that lacks any precise or objective definition—now make up about half of all children in special education. Concern is growing about spiraling costs, the inflexibility of

federal regulations, and the growth of an unaccountable bureaucracy. Of even greater concern is that special education ill-serves many of the children it is supposed to benefit. After spending nearly a year interviewing students, teachers, parents, and lawyers involved in special education, John Merrow found that only 44 percent of the children graduate from high school and that most children with learning disabilities in special education show “no signs of improvement.”

Congress and the administration are reluctant to overhaul special education for fear of offending advocacy groups for children who are deaf, blind, autistic, retarded, or otherwise deserving of special help. In view of the political problem, the best hope for reform is for the administration and Congress to create a special commission removed to the maximum extent possible from the political pressures of advocacy groups, much like the commission that oversaw the closing of U.S. military bases.

The Bilingual Education Act, passed in 1968 to help Hispanic children learn English, has suffered a fate similar to Title I and special education. Although its federal appropriation has grown ever larger—\$354 million in 1998—the program has not succeeded in teaching English to non-English-speaking children.

The key problem has been the preponderance of “bilingual” classes that have been offered in Spanish, not in English. Given that the purpose of bilingual education is to teach English to children who are “limited-English-proficient” and given that competency in English is a prerequisite for success in U.S. education and in the modern economy, the federal program should declare that its goal is rapid, full English proficiency, not bilingualism, and be recast as the English-Language Literacy Program. If the program remains intact, Congress should at least require that no child be assigned to a non-English-language program without explicit parental consent.

Head Start was launched in 1965 as a summer program for half a million disadvantaged preschoolers. Its proponents claimed that a year or two in Head Start would wipe out the

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cognitive gap between poor children and their middle-class peers. But evaluators reported in 1969 that cognitive gains produced by Head Start were small and temporary.

Nevertheless, Head Start became immensely popular, and its role expanded. Now it provides health, nutrition, social, and psychological services for poor children, as well as employing many of their parents as teachers and aides. In 1998, Head Start served 840,000 children and received appropriations of \$4.4 billion.

Head Start should return to its goal of cognitive development. The cumulative evidence from programs like the Perry Preschool in Ypsilanti, Michigan, suggests that a high-quality program—unlike what is ordinarily offered in Head Start—can make a long-term difference on achievement, high school graduation, and socialization.

As a federal—not state or local—program, Head Start could become a testing ground for high educational standards. Federal officials could develop a curriculum, focused on school readiness, without fear of intruding on state and local responsibility. They could set rigorous and uniform standards for what both teachers and children should know and be able to do. Such a reform would require larger appropriations, higher salaries, and a well-trained staff. But if a high-quality Head Start program could improve academic performance and graduation rates and reduce referrals to special education, it would have an even stronger political constituency and would generate enormous savings in later years.

All these federal programs have stakeholders who will fight to maintain the status quo. But if we are serious about equal educational opportunity, then public officials must be willing to make whatever changes will enable these programs to achieve the purpose for which they were created.

Standards and Assessments

Improving academic performance across the board and reducing the gaps among different groups of students require clear academic standards and good tests of student performance in relation to those standards. Through the Goals 2000 program, initiated by the Bush administration and carried on by the Clinton team, the federal government encouraged states to develop academic standards and tests based on those standards. The quality of the states' standards and tests, however, varies widely, as can be seen by comparing state performance standards in eighth-grade mathematics and those reported by NAEP. In Georgia, for example, 83 percent of seventh and eighth graders were proficient in mathematics, yet only 16 percent met NAEP's standard for proficiency; in Maryland, the

gap was 48 vs. 24; in North Carolina, it was 68 vs. 15. Only in Delaware and Kentucky were state proficiency standards as rigorous as NAEP's. The National Governors Association and business leaders are currently working to help states improve their standards and tests through Washington, D.C.-based Project Achieve.

The federal government can also help—and without interfering with the role of the states in setting education policy. In his State of the Union address in 1997, President Clinton proposed establishing voluntary national tests of fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade mathematics. Later that year, Congress directed that the tests be aligned as much as possible with NAEP and turned control of the test over to NAEP's governing board. Unfortunately, a large bloc in Congress opposes the tests, and their future is uncertain. Large majorities in every opinion poll support the idea. Parents want to know how their children are doing, and the federal government is the likeliest sponsor of a national test.

Congress should also permit school districts and schools to administer NAEP on a districtwide or schoolwide basis, if they wish to compare their performance to NAEP standards. States should be encouraged to "embed" NAEP test items into their own tests to see whether their standards are as rigorous as NAEP standards. States could thus maintain control over their own tests, but calibrate them—if they choose to do so—to the NAEP standards.

Federalism in Education

President Clinton's active interest in education has made the public aware of the crucial role of education in securing individual opportunity, economic growth, and social progress. The increased emphasis on education inevitably brings stresses and strains on our complicated federal system. What is the federal role in an education system run by state and local governments?

That there should be equality of educational opportunity—an ongoing federal priority—is not an open issue. Other questions are harder to resolve. How are we to create the conditions that allow equality of opportunity? How are we to establish programs that encourage excellence? Which level of government should do what? How should we change programs that are ineffective but that have many stakeholders?

At present, American education is mired in patterns of low productivity, uncertain standards, and lack of accountability. Federal education programs have tended to reinforce these regularities by adding additional layers of rules, mandates, and bureaucracy. The most important national priority must be to redesign policies and programs so that education funding is used to educate children, not to preserve the system. ■

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