

October 10, 2004

CAMPAIGN 2004: THE BIG ISSUES

How to Rescue Education Reform

Americans are generally stunned to learn that their schools perform poorly and have been losing ground when compared to those of industrialized nations abroad. This country once led the world in high school graduation rates, but it has dropped to 14th, well behind nations like France, Germany and Japan. We have tumbled even further when it comes to student achievement in reading, math and science. At a time when a college degree is the price of admission to the new economy, the college-going rate has flattened over all and appears to be dropping among the poor.

Most of the nations that are passing us by educationally have a national commitment to strong curriculums and intensive oversight of teacher training and educational progress. The United States employs a radically decentralized system under which the states do as they choose. The result is a wildly uneven system littered with educational dead zones.

Congress responded over the last 10 years with a series of laws that required the states to raise standards and student performance in exchange for the more than \$50 billion in annual federal education money. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1994 set the reform in motion, but the states have largely ignored these laws, abetted by waivers from the Department of Education. Desperate for change, Congress responded to President Bush's call and passed the No Child Left Behind Act, which required the states to provide regular testing and highly qualified teachers. The goal is to wipe out the achievement gap between rich and poor children by the school year of 2013.

The states have adopted regular testing and have, to some degree, been pressured to focus on poor, minority and disabled children who were once shunted aside and even excluded from testing regimes. Test scores have begun to rise and the achievement gap has narrowed noticeably in several states. The administration deserves considerable credit for pushing the law through Congress.

But it undermined the measure when it saddled the states with new responsibilities and shortchanged them by \$6 billion - or about 30 percent of what Congress approved. And the Department of Education has focused on divisive, politicized issues like school prayer while failing to provide state and local authorities with the oversight and technical help they need to get their accountability systems up and running and to comply fully with the law.

Parents and community leaders who had wanted the presidential candidates to steer a course out of this mess have been gravely disappointed. President Bush brags about No Child Left Behind, but characteristically refuses to acknowledge any problems. Senator John Kerry is critical about the way the law has been implemented - a crowd pleaser with the many teachers who take part in his town hall meetings. He promises better funding but could be more emphatic about compliance.

Meanwhile, the debate has burned on without them. The emerging consensus is that the Department of Education, the most politicized department in recent memory under Secretary Rod Paige, may be structurally incapable of providing the oversight and technical assistance needed for the most important school reform in a century to actually succeed.

Part of the problem is the lingering presumption that public schooling is largely "a local matter" - even when states contravene the national interest by doing a horrendous job. Beyond that, however, the department lacks the resources to help the states create the complicated, data-driven systems they need to achieve true accountability. At bottom, the department seems unable or unwilling to point out shoddy education plans and plainly tainted data when it sees them.

This is borne out in a new report from the Government Accountability Office, excoriating the department's handling of the No Child Left Behind compliance process. The G.A.O. said the department had approved some state plans even when they were piecemeal and lacked such basic things as a method for calculating graduation rates. It said that as of last July, 23 states and the District of Columbia had not received full approval for their plans. The department's performance did not satisfy the requirements laid out in the law, despite administration claims that all was proceeding well.

As incredible as it sounds, the G.A.O. found that the Department of Education had failed to provide written, state-specific instructions that made it clear how states could win full approval of their plans. This laissez-faire approach has characterized Mr. Paige's operation from the start of the effort. The department has blithely accepted bogus graduation rates and unrealistic progress schedules, and simply rolled over for plans that depict teacher preparation as just fine - when the whole country knows that the teacher corps, especially in poor areas, is riddled with unqualified and inexperienced people. This is enough to sink the reform by itself.

Despite its difficulties, the No Child Left Behind Act is potentially the most important education reform since the nation embraced mandatory schooling. The Bush administration nearly capsized the law when it gave the cash-short states new educational burdens without providing the money it had promised. But the recent revelations about the Department of Education offered by the G.A.O. and other, nongovernment critics reveal an equally serious problem: The government agency in charge of the most important education reform in 100 years lacks the capacity, courage and leadership to do its job.

Congress can stand idly by and wait for the reform effort to collapse, or it can provide the states with the money it promised and build the capacity and authority that the Education Department needs to further reform. The clock is ticking and time is short.

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