

The Increase of Federal Influence on Educational Policy in the United States: A Pathway to National Standards and Testing

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In 1791, two years after the framers ratified the highest federal document of their new nation, the Constitution of the United States, the first amendments were written into law. The tenth of these amendments sets out a clear distinction between the role of the new government and the states of its union: “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people”. These reserved powers have been applied in numerous ways and have been inspected, challenged, and contested in a number of legislative arenas. To some it may be the most abused sentence in political history, while to others it is the defining ideology of true federalism. Regardless, its application remains one of the most contested issues in federal and state relationships and this is no better evidenced than in the education of America’s children. Despite education being a reserved power of the states, the influence of federal government is well documented over the last 40 years. Political ideology from the conservative side has sought to ensure states’ rights, while liberal ideology has argued for an increased federal role in service of greater equity and access. The push and pull of these differing ideologies has manifested a pendulum of legislative action dependent upon the power and agenda of the political actors involved: states, congress and the presidential administration. While the political ideologies remain, there has been a narrowing of differences in the federal agenda over time. We show that the legislative oscillations have come to settle on a current focus of standards and accountability and argue that the established path of federal influence will lead to a probable future of nationalized education in the form of common standards and renewed national testing. Alternative perspectives will be addressed to show that they, in a more comprehensive view,

still provide evidence toward satisfying this federal agenda.

The Beginning of Federal Influence on State Educational Policy

Modern political history provides a baseline and a new beginning of federal influence on the national interests of education. One of the key milestones in education policy history is the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Signed into law in 1965 by President Johnson, the ESEA was, “... the federal government's first general foray into public K–12 education” (Hanna, 2009, ¶ 1). The ESEA also called for national testing via the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP). However, it was Nixon in the next administration that was the first to consider tying funding to achievement:

Previous administrations had not required direct evidence of a link between federal aid and student achievement. Perhaps ... NAEP in its original form had no punitive power over low-performing schools. For this reason, NAEP was not used directly to evaluate the ‘effectiveness’ of any particular federal program (Nelson & Weinbaum, 2006, p. 25).

Following Nixon, the Ford Administration continued the theme of equal access of education embedded in the ESEA and the civil rights era by furthering educational rights. In 1975 PL 94–142 passed and provided significant coverage for handicapped children to have access to educational opportunities. Despite concerns of becoming an unfunded mandate--a trend that would resurface periodically over the next 35 years--Ford warned, “these requirements will remain in effect even

though the Congress appropriates far less than the amounts contemplated in [the law]" (Nelson & Weinbaum, 2006, p. 37). Finally, under the Carter administration, the clearest establishment of federal interest in national education was demonstrated by the creation of the Department of Education with its secretary serving as a cabinet level position. In total, these administrations provided an unprecedented 16 years of policy influence on state education and served as the beginning of some of the recurring trends in federal political strategy.

The Increase of Federal Power, Influence and Control: Reagan–Obama

Over the nearly thirty-year span beginning with Ronald Reagan's first presidential term, education would take on an increasingly prominent place in federal policy. In earlier administrations, access to education had been the primary focus of the government when dealing with schools. Beginning in the 1980's, however, national standards for student learning became a major point of interest and debate. Those who followed education politics may have been surprised that even the Republican presidents, who historically had been reluctant to increase the size of the federal bureaucracy, incorporated the language of national standards into their rhetoric and proposals. Each successive presidential administration, regardless of party affiliation, pushed for greater federal influence over the country's education system. This trend shows no sign of abating.

The Paradox of the Reagan Administration

In stark contrast to the previous administrations, Reagan and his advisors advocated for a greatly diminished role for the federal government in education. To accomplish this, their methods involved reduced funding, program consolidation, administrative reform, and, in what is perhaps a hallmark of the Reagan presidency, deregulation. Additionally, Reagan felt that having a cabinet-level education department was a first step toward federalizing education (Davies, 2007). However, by the time Reagan was in office, the

federal government was firmly entrenched in education and to pull out completely would, in the pragmatic president's mind, severely hurt his ability to work on other issues in a bi-partisan fashion. So, while President Reagan did not openly advocate for the total removal of all federal government involvement in elementary and secondary education, he was philosophically opposed to the Department of Education that the Carter Administration had recently created and openly called for its abolishment (McAndrews, 2006).

In spite of Reagan's government–education ideology, the administration stood behind the landmark report, *A Nation at Risk*, when it was issued in 1983. Reagan and his administration chose to tout the report because it made the case that, unless the nation's schools were reformed and improved soon, the United States' hegemony would be jeopardized. In the midst of the ongoing Cold War, such rhetoric, they hoped, would prove inspirational whether or not real reform was effected by the federal government at the state level (Guttek, 2000).

Regardless of their personal opinions or the tenor of *A Nation at Risk*, the Reagan Administration had no designs on altering the current understanding of federalism in education. This was illustrated in a *U.S. News & World Report* interview in 1983 with Secretary of Education Terrell Bell. The Secretary stated, "Education is a foremost responsibility of state governments. Recent reports show that state governments haven't been doing a very good job of handling education over the last couple of decades. But the federal government ought not to be mandating curriculum and standards" ("Time is Running Out," 1983, p. 52).

Nevertheless, by virtue of Reagan's strong rhetoric opposing a large federal role in education and the powerful, urgent language in *A Nation at Risk*, in fact *more* federal attention was now being paid to education. Accountability and excellence in schools and discussions of such topics were occurring in arenas which, until that point, had only discussed funding and access issues with regard to

education. The Reagan administration provided a turning point in the educational tenor of the country and shifted the federal interest in national education policy. Under the next three administrative generations this diversion opened a pathway never intended by the Reagan administration.

Federal Action vs. Federal Words: President George H. W. Bush

Although a fellow Republican, George Bush, elected President in 1988, was not as adamantly opposed to federal involvement in state education as his immediate predecessor, and in fact, openly called for an increased federal role in the country's education system when he advocated that the federal government set and enforce standards in schools. President Bush's first attempt to get a new federal education policy was introduced as the Education Excellence Act of 1989. Contrary to much of the President's rhetoric, the Act did not call for national education standards or tests, although it did call for a "federal assessment of accountability" (McAndrews, 2006). The Act also never became law. It was sent to Congress in 1989 and again in 1990 and both times it failed to get through Congress, even in a negotiated form. Without sufficient Congressional support for his education plan, Bush tried a different tactic to initiate federal school reform. In the fall of 1989, the President convened the nation's governors for the Charlottesville Summit to discuss education reform and the idea of national education standards. The conference resulted in broad support from the governors for the types of reforms the President had been advocating. Building on the state-level support for reform, Bush worked with the governors to craft a set of six education goals, which he unveiled for the public in his State of the Union Address in early 1990 (Flood & Lapp, 1993). The six goals focused on assessment and standards, including language about graduation rates and vague terminology like "competence" and "literate" (McGuinn, 2006, p. 62).

Even though the language in the six goals was intentionally vague, their announcement still

marked a turning point in the relationship between the federal and state governments concerning education. Bush's announcement was the next movement—and the first since *A Nation at Risk*—in the incremental shift toward the nationally-popular idea of national standards and tests and a focus on accountability (Heise, 1994). As before, the most recent proclamation did nothing to squelch the debate over the extent to which the federal government should involve itself in pressuring the states to make progress toward meeting those goals.

Over a year after the 1990 State of the Union Address, with nothing but his own rhetoric and the increasing exasperation from the governors who had agreed to Bush's goals to show for the Charlottesville Summit, Bush introduced America 2000 as his educational reform plan. With regard to national standards and testing, America 2000 proposed the development of detailed standards in core subjects and the creation of a system of "American Achievement Tests," which governors could *voluntarily* impose on 4th, 8th, and 12th graders (McAndrews, 2006). Again, as he had done with the Educational Excellence Act of 1989, Bush relied on centrist language in America 2000 in effort to avoid inflaming the partisans of educational reform. However, he failed to satisfy enough legislators to get his plan passed into law (McGuinn, 2006).

In the end, neither Bush's plan nor any alternative plan offered by Congressional Democrats or Republicans could gain enough support for passage. Bush's presidency ended with no significant education legislation passed into law. Nevertheless, Bush had an impact on education. His proposed use of federal influence to promote school reform by addressing the outputs of education rather than just the inputs were symbolically significant and would lay the groundwork for future attempts at education reform. The debate that, for decades, had been about ensuring that all students have equal access to funds and how much money would be given to schools by the federal government had shifted, in large measure, to a debate over the federal government's role in ensuring the nation's

students and teachers were achieving at world-class levels.

Preparing for Education in the 21st Century: President Bill Clinton

Bill Clinton had participated in the Charlottesville Summit and had been an advocate, as Arkansas Governor, for standards and tests for schools. As governor, Clinton was responsible for implementing the country's first *mandatory* teacher competency test and annual school performance report card (Hamburger, 1992). His efforts as governor gave him credibility on education issues. The fact that he had reformed his state's education system against the backlash and pressure from the state teachers' union showed that Clinton would not be perceived as beholden to special education interests as the country's last Democrat President, Jimmy Carter (McCluskey, 2007).

Buoyed by his presidential election victory in 1992, Democrats' hold on both houses of Congress, and polling showing that 7 in 10 Americans supported national education standards, curriculum, and testing, Clinton was poised to push through major education reform (Elam & Brodinsky, 1989). His first step toward that reform at the national level was to borrow and build upon former-President Bush's failed America 2000 plan. Renamed Goals 2000, the Clinton plan included increased federal involvement beyond that which Bush had proposed, but still fell short of attempting to set national standards. Under Goals 2000, states still had the power to establish their own standards. Yet, states also could not get Goals 2000 funds until those states had their standards approved by the federal Department of Education (McGuinn, 2006). The proverbial *carrot* now came with more requirements, but at this point the political *stick* was not being wielded.

In response to Clinton's proposal, many in Congress fell back on their traditional ideologies. Conservative Republicans were encouraged by the push for standards and accountability. At the same time, however, conservatives objected to increased

federal involvement in local school administration and the prospect of greater federal education bureaucracy. Liberals' critiques of the plan could be found in their demands that national standards and outputs assessment be married to efforts to give all schools the necessary resources (i.e. funding) to prepare their students adequately (Superfine, 2005). This recurring dichotomy of ideology would remain an issue for the next 10 years, while the incremental debate pushed a federal educational agenda further into the political mainstream.

Goals 2000 was sent to Congress in 1994 as part of a larger package of legislation that also contained the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). In sheer scale, the new ESEA, also known as the "Improving America's Schools Act" (IASA) was a greater landmark than even Goals 2000. ESEA's budget was many times larger than Goals 2000's since the former covered most of the federal education programs and funding (DeBray, 2006). Thus, ESEA certainly had more impact on states, all of which, for decades, had been reliant on federal ESEA funds. Although the Congressional debate over the entire package of legislation was unsurprisingly contentious, it was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Clinton in October 1994. For its efforts in reauthorizing ESEA, the federal government was able to fold the Clinton Administration's standards-based reform agenda into existing programs, including Title I. From that point forward, states were *required* to determine benchmarks for the "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) that a district's Chapter 1 (low-income) students would have to make in order for the state to receive federal funds (McGuinn, 2006). Further, in order to get federal money, states were *required* to develop school improvement plans and standards (DeBray, 2006).

When the ESEA came up for renewal again in 1999, Clinton wanted to use the opportunity to try to advance the reforms begun in 1994 (McAndrews, 2006). Renamed "Educational Excellence for All Children," the plan called for increased educational spending and a concomitant

increase in school accountability (DeBray, 2006). In a move that would likely have been met with double-takes less than a decade earlier, moderate Republicans departed from the policies espoused by Gingrich and Dole and countered President Clinton's proposal with a remarkably similar plan of their own that called for *increased* education spending (asking for even more than the President wanted) while giving more control to the states to determine where and how the money was spent *in exchange for better results* (McClusky, 2007). The "Academic Achievement for All Act," also known as "Straight A's," marked a major shift toward the political center for conservatives and an acknowledgement among many of them, including interest groups, that the federal government was going to be fiscally invested in education and that the government had every reason to demand results for that investment. Also, the conservatives were likely aware of the popular support around the nation for greater accountability in schools and for increased federal involvement in setting standards.

Yet a third alternative, the "Public Education Reinvestment, Reinvention, and Responsibility Act," entered the fray for consideration in 1999. This third proposal, crafted by several centrist Democratic senators, was not vastly different from either of the other two plans. It, too, called for large education spending increases and more accountability. According to McGuinn, the "Three R's," as the third plan was known, did contain one important difference from the other two: It proposed that the Department of Education be allowed to withhold funds from underachieving schools (2006).

Ultimately, even though the three competing proposals for reauthorizing the ESEA had substantial common ground, none of them – and no compromise plan – gained enough traction to be passed by Congress. The Clinton presidency, then, ended in a similar fashion to his predecessor's with regard to education reform: with a legislative failure. But, at the same time, it is difficult to argue against the notion that Clinton did also successfully continue his predecessor's agenda of having states

be increasingly accountable to the federal government when receiving federal funds for education, although some have argued that the accountability measures pushed by Clinton were only nominally enforced (DeBray, 2006). During Clinton's presidency, certainly as a result of the leverage he and Congress put on the states, the movement toward the establishment of standards and the monitoring of progress for all students was advanced considerably. This laid the groundwork for the major reforms that were to come during the next presidential administration.

No Child Left Behind: President George W. Bush

In 2000, George W. Bush campaigned on a platform of educational reform. Upon taking office, he made good on his promises by introducing the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Bush's reform initiatives included: national standards, annual testing (although not specifically national testing), bonuses for schools that improved, the loss of some federal funds for underperforming schools, "corrective action" for chronically failing schools, and the channeling of block grants to poor school districts contingent on academic progress in those districts (DeBray, 2006). In many ways, Bush's plan was a mirror of the plans that Clinton had proposed during his second term with the additional application of more political stick, by the threat of closing or taking over schools that did not meet the mandate's requirements.

There were, however, several political factors that resulted in success for Bush where Clinton had recently failed. First, Bush was willing to let school vouchers, one of the most controversial elements of the plan, be killed off by Democrats in Congress (McCluskey, 2007). Second, the White House and both chambers of Congress were under the control of the same political party for the majority of Bush's first term, which made compromise all but unnecessary. President Clinton's relationship with the Republican-controlled Congress in the late 1990's was rife with animosity and worked against the spirit of compromise that is so often required to make laws

(Gutek, 2000). Third, a significant number of Republican legislators had come to agree, at least in their rhetoric and votes, with the large portion of the population that supported some degree of federal involvement in schools. Fourth, Bush's plan was politically centrist, which appealed to the growing number of legislators who had, over time, moved to the ideological center. There were enough votes at the center, comprised of legislators from both parties, to prevent their more partisan colleagues from derailing the plan (DeBray, 2006). DeBray also suggests that after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, many in Congress felt compelled to support the President and to show national unity.

After signing No Child Left Behind into law in early 2002, the Bush administration spent the next six years battling states over its implementation. The new testing (and associated test processing) requirements and budgetary mandates (like requiring states to spend 5% of their budgets on busing) were frequently received with disdain at the state and local levels. Some state legislatures went so far as to pass resolutions against No Child Left Behind, deeming the law an unfunded (or underfunded) mandate. Ultimately, some of the requirements were relaxed, but tensions between states and the federal government remained, mostly over funding. In retrospect, pushing for complex and extensive education reform at the same time as paying for two wars was probably too ambitious. When Barack Obama took office in 2009, many of the same challenges remained.

Post NCLB and the Obama Administration

During the presidential campaign, Barack Obama developed numerous platforms on issues that would guide his impending administration. Attempting to distance himself from the NCLB backlash, his educational platform featured a 17-point plan that addressed shared national concerns, while addressing and prioritizing them from a renewed perspective and ideology. A close reading of this platform shows support and a desire to

increase funding for NCLB implementation, teacher salaries, pre-kindergarten education, child-care support, student support programs, and college tuition assistance. In fact, 15 points of the plan are contained within these 6 categories. The remaining two points suggest a national priority on math and science and support of charter school development (Obama, 2009a). Prior to the election results of November 4th, 2008, it was clear that an Obama administration would play a supportive rather than punitive function for improving education in America. Therefore, the apparent federal educational policy would shift somewhat to a more supportive role, but not seek to overturn the federal policy of state accountability through NCLB. This point is significant with regard to the unfolding of the administration's policy on education and the tactics to further its direction.

After Obama's inauguration, the new president moved swiftly to address the immediate problems of the moment, focusing on solutions to the U.S. economic collapse. It was not until mid-way through the first 100 days of his presidency that President Obama publicly addressed the nation with his educational plan. In a speech delivered to the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and then at a meeting of the state school chiefs led by Education Secretary Duncan, President Obama outlined much that was in his campaign platform. Additionally, he made it clear that he would seek more money from Congress in addition to the billions of dollars secured from the economic stimulus package that had recently passed. He also "fleshed out how he would use federal money and programs to *influence policy at the state and local level* [italics added]" (Stout, 2009, ¶ 2). In particular, President Obama hinted at the need for improved standards. "I'm calling on our nation's governors and state education chiefs to develop standards and assessments that don't simply measure whether students can fill in a bubble on a test, but whether they possess 21st century skills like problem-solving and critical thinking and entrepreneurship and creativity" (Obama, 2009b, ¶ 21). This speech both elucidates and foreshadows the presidential administration's tactics of control

over state education policy by the continued use of funding and grants to ensure state compliance. What was left unsaid is also important and is demonstrated through current action: Secretary Duncan's collaboration with state education chiefs and state Governors reveals a renewed tactic of engaging states in mutual work towards achieving a federal agenda. This is the identical federal strategy used by President George H. W. Bush at the Charlottesville Summit 20 years earlier.

Emerging Federal Tactics to Further National Policies

The growing national animosity towards NCLB since its inception (Fowler, 2009) has required President Obama to reconsider strategies to appease state criticism, while also forwarding a national education agenda. A continuation of Bush's punitive stance would meet with more resistance, so a shift in strategy has led to a supportive and collaborative role. Yet, this supportive role belies the control that the government has via its purse strings and influence with state policy makers.

Increased Federal Support for Continued Compliance

The Obama administration is confidently supporting its rhetoric for state educational reform with federal funding and federal grants. Yet, the control of policy still remains within the bounds of what the administration and Congress allow. The recent funding proposals and the economic stimulus bring the Department of Education's budget to \$127.8 billion for 2010; nearly triple what it is for fiscal year 2009 (Colvin, 2009). While this financial windfall will be extended to states, the administration has earmarked how the money can be spent and what programs will receive funding. In short, if a state's reform initiative aligns with the federal agenda, then funding may follow. Collectively, states stand to gain approximately \$5 billion if they can demonstrate initiatives that support Obama's objective of education from "cradle to college" (Colvin, 2009).

This *quid pro quo* strategy is further evidenced by President Obama's recent call to states for:

...a cutting-edge plan to raise the quality of your early learning programs; show us how you'll work to ensure that children are better prepared for success by the time they enter kindergarten. If you do, we will support you with an Early Learning Challenge Grant that I call on Congress to enact (Obama, 2009b, ¶ 18).

Federal grants have long been a means to entice state compliance, and although the administration seems to be earnest in its attitude to provide state support, the fact remains that funding is based on meeting measures of practice and accountability set by the government. This is again demonstrated by the continuation of NCLB and the fact that there has been no amendment to this legislation or even the suggestion of altering the statute's conditional requirements for states to continue to receive federal funding.

Federal Collaboration beyond Capitol Hill

In late February, after his appointment as Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan shared one of his roles in the process towards a national education policy. "What I want to do is be the catalyst. I want to take all of the hard work and make it happen" (C-SPAN, 2009). Before the month was over, during a meeting of the National Governors Association (NGA) the group developed a policy statement "endorsing a process to develop common academic standards..." across the United States (Hoff, 2009). Education Secretary Duncan was present and supported the efforts of the NGA. The action follows previous work between the NGA and the Council of Chief State School Officers to develop academic standards based on international comparisons.

It may be difficult to infer the tactics demonstrated here by the Obama administration,

until we consider an alternative scenario. What if the state coalitions developed policy positions, plans and actions that were not viewed favorably by the federal government? Most likely the federal government's action would be quite different. In short, collaboration in this instance demonstrates approval and the blessing of the government. It is clear that there is some degree of causality in the formation of state policy by federal influence even when the political pressure is supportive in nature. Another tactic employed here is the federal government maintaining a seat at the discussion table for those policies it wishes to influence (Fowler, 2009). Lastly, the administration gains power from this perceived alignment, and therefore may be in a better position to orient and direct the states' educational agenda and policy. This is not the subversive manipulation that it may appear to be; all stakeholders are playing the same political game. The key point is that this level of collaboration has not been demonstrated by previous administrations. Federal influence on state education policy seeks compliance not only through economic means, but now also through patronage of state coalition efforts.

Alternative Perspectives of Federal vs. State Control

The most popular argument against No Child Left Behind and other previous federal education laws is that the laws violate the states' rights to exercise control over their schools. In the following section, we will elaborate on the states' grievances and look briefly at one possible alternative for federal-state cooperation.

States' Rights

States' rights advocates have found common cause with the governors and legislatures of a number of states, sometimes resulting in open defiance of NCLB or legislative and legal challenges to the law (Siegrist & Van Patten, 2007). The crux of the states' rights argument is that, through NCLB, the federal government mandates testing and reporting that the states cannot afford.

States have also taken issue with the financial penalties meted out on school districts for failing to meet NCLB's reporting and assessment requirements (2007). The attorneys general and school districts in multiple states, including solidly Republican states like Texas and Utah, have joined with the National Education Association to sue the Department of Education for inadequately funding NCLB's mandates. Essentially, the plaintiffs claim that the federal government is not only usurping control from local school districts, but it is also unfairly taxing localities by making the states pay for some part of NCLB and then withholding federal dollars if the states fail to meet NCLB's requirements (Lewis, 2005; Siegrist & Van Patten, 2007).

Certainly No Child Left Behind challenged the status quo with regard to federal-state partnerships in education. Is there a new model of cooperation that may ameliorate the states' concerns and render a workable, satisfactory education standards law?

Borrowing Strength

A relatively new model of federalism has emerged from the research of Dr. Paul Manna that may serve to bolster the hopes of the Obama Administration in its efforts to genuinely collaborate with states to pursue national education interests, such as national standards. Called "borrowing strength," Manna's model asserts that, in order to make policy, a government must have the license (statutory or constitutional justification) and capacity (institutional resources, including people and money) to do so. If the government is lacking in either asset, it must borrow what it needs from other sources of power (Manna, 2006).

In the case of NCLB, the federal government obviously cannot arbitrarily impose national standards on states. Constitutionally, the federal government is constrained by the Tenth Amendment, which reserves powers to the states unless those powers are specifically granted to the federal government. Further, due to the sheer

number of skilled local-level educational professionals, the states have far greater capacity to act on education than does the federal government (Manna, 2006). But the federal government can work with state-level actors (the National Governors Association, for example), sharing power fluidly, in an effort to achieve its goals. Without the concerted power of the states acting in support of its agenda, the federal government has only limited power to implement policy, especially a policy of such sweeping reform as NCLB.

State Coalitions vs. Federal Mandates

Educational pundits and policy watchers have suggested that the current federal stance on education is actually to step back from legislative action, suggest educational policy and allow the states and other educational stakeholders to provide the means to achieve reform. Rather than an active federal agenda and legislation, the administration may simply take a passive role and support efforts already being developed (Hoff, 2009). In recent years an "...alliance of governors, business leaders, and civil rights groups have blurred the longstanding ideological divisions over the federal role in education and represented a potent outside political force for change on Capitol Hill" (DeBray & McGuinn, 2009, p. 23). Looking at the previously discussed NGA meeting from a different angle, it has been suggested that the case for national policy may come from unified states and not the federal government. Nebraskan Governor Heineman shares the NGA's intention, stating, "we don't want to federalize education....It's got to be done through the states and local governments" (Hoff, 2009, National, Not Federal section, ¶ 2).

These alternative perspectives may be, in fact, the reasoning for the current political structure and function. These perspectives suggest that the federal agenda and states have reached a fluid and working consensus and are now working in concert. If so, the political landscape has flattened and the horizon is now viewed through a common vision. Regardless of whether this was federal strategy, a coincidental convergence of ideology or both, the

fact is that this may indeed hasten a mutual movement towards national education policies. Therefore, these alternative perspectives still move the nation toward an agenda initiated, pursued and endorsed by the federal government.

Nationalized Education: Evidence Towards a Probable Future

Responding to Obama's education speech in early 2009, Randi Weingarten (2009b), president of the second largest teachers' union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), noted "as with any public policy, the devil is in the details..." While the details will continue to emerge over the course of the next few months and years, past and current federal strategies and ideologies predict a possible future direction for educational policy. Over time, the increase of federal educational policy, legislation and influence has created a potential pathway for national standards and new national testing. While some of these are more likely than others in the current political landscape, the fact remains that the political means for achieving any one of these initiatives has been established. The public media, educational trade journals, pundits and educational think tanks have all reported the possibilities of national standards, in particular. In fact, some have gone as far as reporting that national standards are "inevitable" (Hoff, 2009, States Seen as Inconsistent section, ¶ 7). While this present analysis does not make such a claim nor suggest this as a panacea as some will maintain, it does draw attention and connects past federal practice and current federal and state ideology to consider the increased possibility of such measures.

National Standards and New Testing

"The time has come for a serious consideration of national academic standards" (Weingarten, 2009a). This was the concluding sentence of AFT president Randi Weingarten in a widely anticipated editorial in the *Washington Post* in March, 2009. This heralds the efforts and sentiments of numerous educational organizations, state education officials and the Obama

administration. It is also reminiscent of President Clinton's observation that "anybody who says that a country as big and diverse as ours can't possibly have national standards in the basics—I say from Maryland to Michigan to Montana, reading is reading and math is math" (Abramson, 2009). Clinton's common sense persuasion is now joined with an economic imperative held by many and explained by the Association for Curriculum and Development (ASCD):

National standards would allow students to compete with the rest of the world and can help strengthen the economy (smarter and skilled workers have better paying jobs). Because the world rapidly evolves due to technology, it is naive to think that the United States can continue to educate students without a set curriculum that will allow U.S. students to excel in their studies and make them competitive after completing school. (ASCD, 2009, p. 1)

The assertion made here is echoed by Michael Dannenberg, director of the New America Foundation's Education Policy Program, "I would submit that the history of the standards movement indicates that the country is on an inexorable march towards national standards. The question is not if, it's when and how do we get there" (DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009, p. 36).

New National Testing

Since the development of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 1969, national testing has become part of the American educational fabric. In the forty years since its inception, the changes in national testing have evolved significantly and include the NCLB requirement of annual student achievement tests. In an extension of this development, if national standards were established, the logical pathway would lead to the next iteration of national testing. Specifically, the NAEP and state tests may be directly linked to a potential set of national standards. It is clear that testing has been welded

solidly to the scaffolding of U.S. education, and in the present era of accountability, a national test that seeks to assess specific standards may also be inevitable.

Conclusion

Federalism is a dynamic, evolving concept. The roles and responsibilities of the federal and state governments—whether shared or borne alone—have been debated since the founding days of the nation. Since the latter half of the 20th century, no arena has exemplified the ever-changing nature of federalism better than education. In this paper, we have shown that, although most people agree that educational issues are *national* issues, there is considerable debate over the extent to which those issues ought to be *federal* issues. With regard to the specific issue of national education standards and testing we have shown that, since the Johnson Administration, the question of roles and responsibilities has been influenced by political, ideological, legal, and fiscal factors. Further, we have illustrated the complex and changing nature of power in the relationships between the players, namely the President, Congress, and governors. It is this high level of complexity and the very nature of federalism as laid out in the Constitution that precludes the federal government from simply imposing its wishes on the states. So while it seems inevitable, based on the trends observed in education policy over the last several presidential administrations, that the United States will eventually adopt national education standards and tests, success for such an occurrence will require more cooperation, collaboration, and power-sharing between the federal and state governments than has existed in the past 40 years of U.S. educational policy.

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