

# The Evolving Federal Role

Robert Rothman

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**F**rom a look at the calendar of events in the nation's capital, Washington appears to be a hotbed of activity on education policy. Scarcely a day goes by without some kind of forum or announcement. The numerous think tanks that have sprung up in the past few years are constantly putting out reports, and Congressional hearings are packed. And all of that was the case *before* the 2009 economic stimulus bill dramatically increased the federal education budget.

It wasn't always this way. For much of the nation's history, the federal government had very little to do with education. With the exception of a few particular programs, like vocational education and curriculum-development projects, the federal role in education was quite limited, and local control reigned. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which for the first time provided general aid to local school districts, was enacted in 1965, and the U.S. Department of Education was created as a separate cabinet-level agency in 1979. This new federal attention focused on providing supplementary resources to schools serving low-income students and students with disabilities. Until that time, few would have looked to Washington as a center of education policy.

The federal role in school reform expanded in 1983 with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the report that helped spur the national school reform movement that continues to this day. The report itself did not create a demand for greater federal involvement: it was issued by an administration that had

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pledged to abolish the Department of Education, and the report's recommendations were directed primarily at states. Yet, less than a decade later, following the momentum of this call for federal involvement, George H. W. Bush was campaigning to become the "education president," and he and his successors have put education high on their agendas. And now that President Obama has upped the ante with a large infusion of dollars, few believe the federal role is likely to recede to its previous level any time soon – indeed, many expect it to expand.

Yet precisely what the federal role ought to be and how federal funds ought to be used remains a topic of heated debate. Much of the think-tank activities and association reports that now flood the capital are aimed at responding to those questions.

In 2008, two reports, issued coincidentally on successive days, helped frame the issue. One, issued by a group known as the Education Equality Project, led by New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein and the Reverend Al Sharpton, focused on schools, urging stronger accountability and performance pay for teachers. The other, by a group called the Broader, Bolder Approach, argued that schools alone could not ensure high levels of learning for all students and called for investments in early childhood education and after-school programs, in addition to reforms in schools.<sup>1</sup>

Although much of the media attention on these two proposals attempted to draw a sharp contrast between them, there is much common ground. In fact, Arne Duncan, then-superintendent of Chicago Public Schools, signed both statements. Now, as U.S. Secretary of Education, he is in a position to implement

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<sup>1</sup> The Annenberg Institute for School Reform is a signatory to the Broader, Bolder Approach.

them. And as the think-tank reports and forums continue, he has no shortage of advice on what to do.

This issue of *Voices in Urban Education* offers some additional ideas. It examines the federal role in education from a variety of perspectives.

- Gale Sunderman provides a historical perspective by showing how the federal role shifted during the Reagan and George W. Bush administrations and what is likely under President Obama.
- Linda Darling-Hammond describes Finland's education system to show what a comprehensive national "teaching and learning system" would look like.
- Susan Neuman discusses some of the failures of federal programs and argues for investments that would change the odds for children in poverty.
- Heather Weiss, Priscilla Little, Suzanne Bouffard, Sarah Deschenes, and Helen Janc Malone recommend federal policies to support children's learning outside of school.
- Warren Simmons considers ways the federal government could support the development of "smart education systems" that engage schools in partnership with communities to support children's learning.

These articles show that federal policies focused on equity and excellence would take a comprehensive view and would address a broad range of issues to support children's learning and development. They also suggest some policies that might be ineffective and things that the federal government might do well to *stop* doing. For example, as Linda Darling-Hammond points out, the testing programs in place in the United States in the past decade have not worked, at least compared with the more innovative testing programs Finland uses.

Yet, as Warren Simmons notes, any new federal policies will only be effective if the people they are intended to serve have a role in developing them.

The fear is that a relatively small group is at the table, developing ideas that might be at odds with the aspirations and experiences of communities who will implement them. If that continues, these policies might engender opposition and will not be sustained.

The good news is that the growing federal role has attracted the interest of a much broader group of parents and community leaders who are eager to join the table. Over the next few years, we will see if the next evolution of the federal role becomes as transformative as it can be.