

# Federal Policies to Change the Odds for Children in Poverty

Susan B. Neuman

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*The experience of the last decade suggests that new directions in federal policies are needed to improve educational outcomes for children in poverty.*

In the current debates over policies to improve educational outcomes, particularly for low-income children, Susan B. Neuman occupies a rare position as both a researcher and a policy-maker. At the University of Michigan School of Education, where she is a professor of educational studies, she directs the Michigan Research Program on Ready to Learn. Previously, she directed the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement, focusing on early childhood policy, curriculum, and early reading instruction, pre-kindergarten to grade 3.

From 2001 to 2003, she was Assistant U.S. Secretary of Education for elementary and secondary education. There, she helped establish the Reading First and Early Reading First programs and the Early Childhood Professional Development Program, and she was responsible for administering No Child Left Behind in its initial stages.

Her most recent book, *Changing the Odds for Children at Risk* (Praeger Publishers, 2008), outlines seven principles for improving outcomes for low-income children.

Neuman spoke with *Voices in Urban Education* editor Robert Rothman about the federal role in improving education.

*Susan B. Neuman is a professor of educational studies at the University of Michigan School of Education.*

*Looking broadly, what would you say are the parameters for the federal role in education?*

Clearly, there's an interest in improving standards and making them more rigorous. As we've seen with the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, there's an effort to standardize those standards across states and to move to a more singular measure of achievement and proficiency. That's one key issue that the feds are very, very interested in promoting and encouraging.

A second issue is teacher quality. There's a greater effort to focus on performance pay for greater achievement, and they're going to use various mechanisms to ensure that will happen.

I think there is another emphasis on entrepreneurship. What you'll see with the "Race to the Top" dollars is an emphasis on innovation and change and school improvement and multiple models for school improvement.

Another emphasis will be on reforming and improving states' ability to gather longitudinal data and ensure that all kids are counted in graduation

rates. [There's an effort to improve] the ability to collect more data than ever before.

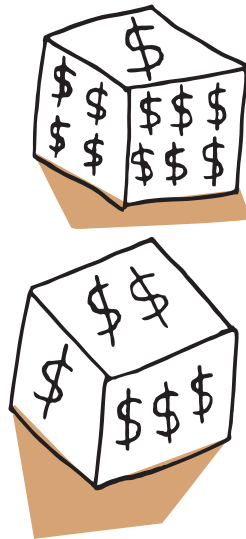
*From your experience in the federal government and your work elsewhere, do you think these are appropriate areas for the federal government to be involved in? Or is it overstretching its capacity or appropriateness?*

I think some of these things are a waste of time. I don't think that improving standards – making standards more rigorous – is going to really affect achievement or improve the quality of instruction. I don't think international benchmarking is going to do that at all. I think the federal government is missing the mark focusing on these kinds of issues where they're really not capable of following and monitoring them very well. We have examples of their limitations in trying to implement some of the law in No Child Left Behind. This is only getting more involved in local matters than ever before.

*There is a consensus that the federal role has expanded with No Child Left Behind, and now there is an interest in doing even more, as you mentioned. Do you think the genie can be put back in the bottle and the federal government could take on a humbler role, more akin to what it was doing before?*

I don't think so. What we're seeing is a consensus on both sides of the aisle, Democrats and Republicans, feeling that schools have failed our children, that we are not up to international standards, and that we have to improve significantly.

If the Republicans had their way, they would have stronger accountability systems and allow locals and the states to have greater innovation. As long as there was a strong accountability system, they would allow for greater



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entrepreneurship in many ways. I think the Democrats, however, traditionally want to create new laws and new programs to ensure that [improvement] happens.

I think that they are going to find that this is extremely difficult to implement. They'll have to fail before they realize that it cannot be done. I know that sounds pessimistic.

### ***Teacher Quality: Choosing the Right Levers***

*Let's look at one example of something you were involved with: teacher quality. No Child Left Behind, for the first time, set federal guidelines for teacher quality. You have argued that this was, if not a failure, an effort that did not achieve its goals. Why do you think that this happened?*

Number one is the definition [of teacher quality]. They had to focus on policy levers that they could control. The three policy levers were: a teacher would have to have a BA; she would have to have subject-matter expertise, which they defined as either coursework or some kind of ability to pass a

test; as well as a credential. One of the things I questioned was the theory of action: whether those three components actually defined what is a high-quality teacher.

They spent an enormous amount of money and enormous amounts of red tape on this. At the very beginning of the Bush administration, they sort of ignored this effort, preferring to work on the issue of accountability. But the Democratic Congress eventually caught up with them and said, you're not implementing this the way it was intended. And so they became more rigorous in their implementation strategy. They went to states, they tried to figure out state credentialing guidelines, and they got into the weeds of various state government strategies for credentialing what constituted knowledge.

So by the end of a great deal of effort – eight years of effort – essentially, they could say that more teachers abided by what they defined as highly qualified teaching. What I suggest is that there's no evidence that teacher quality has improved a smidgen. There's no evidence in terms of the national assessments; there's no evidence in terms of any anecdotal information that teacher quality is better now than ever before. I call this a failed effort – spending enormous amounts of dollars, enormous numbers of resources, making teachers do things that were not terribly helpful, and I don't see any benefit in the long run.

*Is there an appropriate federal role in setting guidelines for teacher quality, and what might that be?*

I questioned whether this was an appropriate theory of action. I think most of us who deal with teacher education would say that these three components do not constitute good

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teaching. So then we have to ask, what *does* constitute good teaching? We have some evidence indicating that teachers who are very effective create a climate that supports children's learning. They are interactional – involved with the school. They take their profession very seriously. I think one of the things we have to question is whether that is a lever – a possible lever – and I suggest perhaps no. It would be very difficult for a federal guideline to suggest we want this level of climate and make it happen.

I suggest that the goal of No Child Left Behind's teacher quality provision was really about ensuring that high-poverty kids got the same quality of teacher that middle-class and upper-middle-class kids get. I don't think those components that are currently in the law or what [President] Obama and [Secretary of Education] Arne Duncan are proposing actually will improve teacher quality for children who are in poverty.

There are some levers that would attract teachers to high-poverty communities. Most of us who are teachers really want to improve children's achievement. We'd love the challenge of being able to go somewhere and actually increase children's scores. The way to do that is to improve the climate for teachers to go into those high-poverty settings. That means that one of the levers could be, for example, school facilities. Many of the schools in high-poverty areas have fallen apart. Their roofs leak; teachers are teaching in the bathrooms; there's no space. So one of the strategies to attract teachers would be not to necessarily give them performance pay – I don't see how that's going to work – but to give them better facilities so that they can do their work.

A second lever could be to give them more control – to allow teachers to actually have control of their schools. So if they do their job, some of the red tape that they have to go through would be waived, recognizing that what they are doing is good – almost like what [Chancellor] Joel Klein had proposed for New York.

[A third would be to] make schools intellectually vibrant: give them professional development funds so that teachers can learn from other teachers. Support coaching and mentoring so that teachers can get the kinds of professional development that will really enable them to do their work better.

Another strategy is to make schools smaller and allow class size to diminish so that teachers can talk to children and interact more.

I see those as possible levers for teacher quality [that will] ensure that teachers will go into schools of challenge, rather than issues like performance pay or the current teacher quality initiatives.

### ***Improving Supports Outside of School***

*You've been involved in developing the Broader, Bolder Approach framework. That idea suggests that focusing on schools alone is not sufficient to ensure high levels of student learning. What should the federal government be doing to advance that agenda?*



Both the Broader, Bolder Approach and my book, *Changing the Odds for Children at Risk* (Neuman 2008), basically argue that the average day for children in our schools is only six hours. They have nine months, with lots of vacation. If we're really to change the odds for our children, we have to ensure that there are safer communities, that there's more parental involvement and family support, that we get other institutions, like early education and after-school programs, working together to ensure that these kids get a more 360[-degree] surround or intervention – an intensive intervention with a high dosage that makes this all possible.

What I'd recommend, and there is a little bit in President Obama's budget, is a community-based initiative that supports a greater connection between these services. As you know, for children who come from high-poverty circumstances, these are often very, very disconnected. You have to apply for each one individually. When I was doing my book, I found that some children had seventeen different services, all requiring different types of criteria and requirements. So I think one of the strategies could be to have a community-based initiative where all of these services begin to work together following similar standards, similar mechanisms of defining accountability, and working together to ensure kids' achievement.

It's important that we have an aligned system – that we don't think of schools as separate from communities and families separate from schools, that we work toward a horizontal and vertical alignment of programs.

*That would begin with early childhood,  
right?*

Absolutely. But I even start earlier. The early-childhood programs are obviously imperative, but one of the things I'm absolutely delighted President Obama is funding is Early Head Start. That really works with parents in utero. It helps them make sure that they get healthy services, that they go to their doctors, that they get prepared for having children, preparing them for the kinds of cognitive stimulation kids really need, as well as the social interaction that's so important.

I strongly believe that parents want to do the right thing. But so many environmental constraints occur for families in poverty, so getting them the family supports – the nurse-family practitioner program and some of those other programs – to ensure that they get off to a good start is every bit as important as early childhood education, which often kicks in at ages three through five.

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*Reference*

Neuman, S. B. 2008. *Changing the Odds for Children at Risk: Seven Essential Principles of Educational Programs that Break the Cycle of Poverty*. Westport, CT: Praeger.