

The Federal Role in Education: From the Reagan to the Obama Administration

Gail L. Sunderman

The Reagan and George W. Bush administrations transformed the federal role in education, and the Obama administration is likely to maintain the current path.

The federal role in education has always been a sensitive one in American politics. Traditionally, the federal government has played a limited role and federal legislation has, normally, contained prohibitions against federal control of education. Indeed, local control of education is deeply engrained in the rhetoric and practice of American politics, where concerns about local control and liberty have far outweighed concerns about policy objectives.

Suspicion about federal power has been particularly strong among conservatives. Conservative views of federalism emphasize the prerogatives of state and local governments as the legitimate sources of policy and support the devolution of education and social programs to the states (Nathan, Gais & Fossett 2003). This view supports local decision making without interference from the federal government and assumes that states will invest funds in ways that will achieve particular policy goals.

Others have been less opposed to a federal role. Civil rights advocates and researchers supported a federal role in ending discrimination and desegregating public schools. Public education supporters have long seen the federal government as a means to improve the education of disadvantaged students and equalize funding for schools. The federal education programs enacted in the 1960s and 1970s expressed these aims by allocating federal funds for the education of previously neglected groups of students.

Federalism is deeply engrained in the U.S., where there are fifty independent state education systems with 15,700 local variations at the district level that are loosely regulated by the states (U.S. Census Bureau 2006). Even so, this role has been evolving since the Reagan administration. This article examines how the federal role in education has changed and the forces that have pressed the United States towards greater federal involvement in education.

Central to understanding this evolution are the Republican administrations of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. As Republican administrations gained an understanding of the political saliency of education, they expanded the federal role in education to meet

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political and policy goals. During the Reagan administration, the release of the report *A Nation at Risk* was instrumental in shifting the policy agenda from equity to excellence and providing the administration a platform for advancing other policy preferences favored by conservatives (Sunderman 1995). With the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), the George W. Bush administration reversed long-held conservative principles of limited government and a preference for local decision making.

The article concludes by considering the implications of these policy shifts for the direction the Barack Obama administration is likely to follow.

Policy Shifts under the Reagan Administration: From Equity to Excellence

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) marked the creation of an intergovernmental policy system where the federal government provided additional resources targeted at particular students. ESEA and other federal education policies that followed were important in expanding the federal government's provision of sustained categorical aid to elementary and secondary education and addressing national policy priorities that, for

the most part, had been neglected at the local level. These policies sought to equalize educational opportunity through integration and compensatory education and to redistribute resources to students who were deprived or who had been discriminated against under a system financed and controlled by state and local governments.

These federal education programs were based on New Deal assumptions that the great majority of the unemployed or impoverished were not personally to blame for their conditions. Instead, structural inequalities, resulting from racial discrimination, unemployment or underemployment, low wages, lack of education, and inadequate transfer payments were considered to contribute to the high unemployment and poverty of a particular group of people (Kaestle & Smith 1982; Kantor 1991; Levin 1982; Thomas 1983). Differences between the educational experiences of Black urban students and their White counterparts, for example, were seen to derive from the racial isolation of Black students in urban schools and from the unequal resources available to students in urban schools, which contributed to high dropout



rates, low achievement, and unemployment among Black students (Carson 1962; Council of Economic Advisors 1964; Harrington 1962).

Under this paradigm, the federal government was considered essential in addressing these problems. The use of federal authority to remedy social, economic, and education problems gained saliency in the 1960s as policies were adopted to address a number of national problems. Through a combination of federal grants-in-aid to assist in the financing and provision of educational programs considered to be in the national interest, national commissions, and media campaigns, the federal government sought to persuade state and local governments to address these national concerns. Major interest groups and the responsible state and local officials were actively involved in shaping federal grant programs and in determining how they were implemented (Feingold 2007; Peterson, Rabe & Wong 1986; Ripley & Franklin

1991). A rare exception to this collaborative approach was the use of federal power to advance civil rights in the 1960s (Orfield 1969).

The Reagan administration challenged both the workings of the intergovernmental system and the prevailing federal ideology. Consistent with conservative principles of a limited federal government, the administration sought to reduce the size of government through a reduction in entitlement spending and devolution of responsibility for service delivery to state and local governments. Called “new federalism,” the administration policy sought to replace categorical aid – under which the federal government determined the way funds should be spent – with block grants, which gave state and local governments more responsibility over the use of federal funds. There was an emphasis on deregulation and on weakening guidelines that restricted state and local discretion over program implementation. Decentralization was coupled with efforts to reduce federal aid, eliminate national programs, and cut the rate of growth in education and social spending (Walker 1986). Through these actions, the Reagan administration sought to decrease the federal role in education policy and establish a clear division of intergovernmental responsibility. The commitment, however, was to a shift in authority rather than a release of it and reinforced the trend toward greater state-level activity in the governance of education (Lowi 1984).

At the same time, the administration challenged the assumption that structural inequalities contributed to social and economic problems. The administration diagnosed the problem as the low overall performance of the schools rather than the needs of particular types of students. Low morale,

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bureaucratization, and centralization of the public school system and politicization of educational issues were identified as major causes of educational deficiencies. Under this orientation, structural causes of educational inequality like concentration of poverty and racial segregation were replaced with an emphasis on individual and cultural deficiencies and the failure of educational bureaucracies. Two themes – moral conduct and the intrusion of government bureaucracy in the lives of Americans – were consistent throughout the administration. For example, Reagan’s discourse on the problems plaguing the schools concerned the morality of conduct where “learning has been crowded out by alcohol, drugs, and crime” (Reagan 1985).

The Emergence of Educational Excellence

Education gained greater national visibility after the release in 1983 of the report *A Nation at Risk*, which provided momentum for shifting the education debate from equity to a focus on excellence. This report linked the nation’s economic problems to the poor performance of the schools and argued that education played a crucial role in preparing students for the workplace. It recommended a broad set of policies to improve the school system that were aimed at enhancing educational productivity and efficiency. These reforms emphasized increasing achievement testing to measure student progress, adopting rigorous standards for all students coupled with increasing the teaching of basic skills, and improving the teaching profession by requiring

higher teacher standards and competency testing. Consistent with conservative views of federalism, it identified state and local officials as having the primary responsibility for financing and governing the schools and called on local government to “incorporate the reforms we propose in their educational policies and fiscal planning” (NCEE 1983).

The public response to *A Nation at Risk* impressed on the administration the importance of education as a political issue. By invoking education as an issue of national concern, the administration helped mobilize support for reform at the state level and had a platform to advance its own policy preferences, which included support for tuition tax credits, vouchers, school prayer, and a reduced federal role in education.

Both the administration’s philosophy of local control and the recommendations of *A Nation at Risk* contributed to an educational reform movement spearheaded by the states. This was the unconventional aspect of the excellence movement – that the states would adopt federally established policy goals. This was a reform movement where, within two years of the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, most states had initiated or enacted some of the educational reform measures suggested in the report – without federal fiscal incentives attached. This

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represented a sea change in the notion of policy diffusion. Until the excellence movement, there was the assumption, held by both policy-makers and researchers alike, that states responded to local conditions with policies that conformed to these conditions. Policy diffusion across states was a slow process that could take years if there were no federal fiscal incentives or sanctions attached to new ideas.

The excellence reforms gained widespread acceptance because they provided state policy-makers with a set of solutions that were carefully attuned to the political and economic exigencies of the time. By linking the excellence reforms to economic concerns about the changing position of the U.S. in the international economy, job security, and the future economic prosperity of the country, the report provided a powerful argument that these policies could correct the perceived problems in the educational system and real problems in the economy. This argument, also taken up by the Reagan administration, appealed to a public that had long believed that education could solve social

and economic problems (Sunderman 1995; Tyack & Cuban 1995).

The widespread adoption of the excellence reforms also served to reinforce the role of federal policy-makers in defining and shaping an educational policy agenda and the central role of the states in education policy. As such, it helped set the stage for the development of a formal national education agenda under the first Bush administration. Although the Reagan administration continued to adhere to the traditional conservative position of a limited federal role and support for local control, George H. W. Bush pledged to be an education president and made education a centerpiece of his domestic agenda. In 1989, President Bush and the nation's governors met and formulated six education goals to be achieved by 2000.

While this was a nationwide effort, the strategy was local and focused on bringing local communities into a network to learn about the goals and how to meet them. Governors were instrumental in advancing the concept of educational goals. When President Clinton took office in 1993, these initiatives continued as Goals 2000, which encouraged states and school districts

to set high content and performance standards in exchange for federal school reform grants. Both these initiatives included the idea of educational standards but relied on local adoption and implementation (and included federal incentives for states to develop and adopt standards). They strengthened the state role in regulating education by creating incentives for states to introduce laws and regulations to monitor local compliance with state requirements. Nevertheless, districts had considerable discretion in implementing the standards and aligning them with instruction.

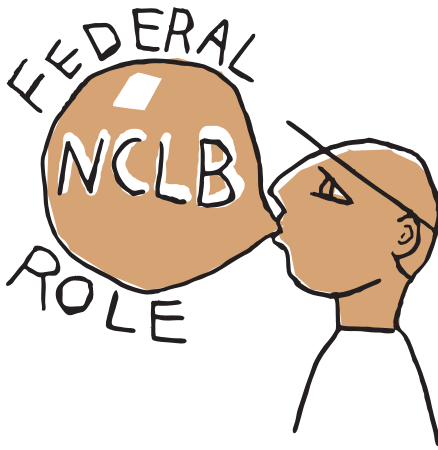
The passage of the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) in 1994, which reauthorized ESEA, provided further federal support for the standards movement by requiring states to develop and implement standards for all students, along with related assessments, in exchange for federal aid. But the law left it up to states to set their own standards and allowed states full autonomy to make instructional, governance, and fiscal policy decisions to support their academic and performance standards. Moreover, the law was weakly enforced and few states made substantial progress in meeting its requirements: as of 2001, only sixteen states were fully in compliance with IASA (Robelen 2001).

These factors prevented widespread state and local opposition to an expanded federal role in education and permitted states to mold the requirements to fit their local policy priorities and the capacity of their state agencies. As chronicled by the *Education Week* yearly report *Quality Counts*, adoption of strong standards and accountability systems and the extent of state testing varied widely across the nation (Boser 2001; Orlofsky & Olson 2001).

NCLB: An Expanded Federal Role in Education

While many of the NCLB concepts were present in a less-developed way under IASA, NCLB departs from its predecessor in significant ways: it marks an expansion of federal authority over programmatic aspects of education and raises the expectations of federal policy by emphasizing equal educational outcomes. In contrast to IASA, NCLB requires states to adhere to federally determined timelines for identifying failing schools and improving student achievement. States must establish performance standards and define adequate yearly progress goals that all schools, including Title I schools, must meet. Instead of reforms targeting special populations, states are required to bring all students up to a state-defined proficiency level by 2013–2014. By emphasizing equal educational outcomes, NCLB raises expectations for what schools must accomplish. Indeed, an important goal of NCLB is, as the statute states, to close “the achievement





gap between high- and low-performing children, especially gaps between minority and non-minority students and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers.”

With NCLB, the objectives of Republican reformers changed from limiting the federal bureaucracy and decentralizing decision making to the states toward expanding the federal role with an activist bureaucracy that assertively promoted particular political and policy goals. The Bush administration reversed long-held Republican doctrines by expanding the role of the federal bureaucracy in education but dodged the issue of local control by asserting that the law gives local school districts greater flexibility in the use of federal funds and by arguing that the new testing requirements do not dictate what is taught or how it is taught (Godwin & Sheard 2001).

Much like the Reagan administration, the Bush administration took an activist role in education policy because NCLB met the administration’s political and policy goals. Since Bush campaigned on an education agenda, the enactment of NCLB fulfilled his campaign promise. Until Medicare reform in November 2003, it was his only domestic policy accomplishment and an important issue of political symbolism. Politically, NCLB allowed the administration to say it did something to improve education, an issue that the American public cares about. And, much as the Reagan administration did during the educational excellence movement in the 1980s, by adopting an issue that traditionally was dominated by the Democrats, the administration was able to claim education as its own issue.

Several provisions in NCLB also appealed to the ideological agenda of the administration’s constituencies. Support for supplemental educational services and public school choice are the prime examples. These policies reflect a faith in market approaches that is a consistent theme in conservative politics. There was a belief within the administration, for example, that supplemental educational services are going to “bring schools out of improvement status as student achievement goes up.” The testing and accountability provisions appealed to the business community, another Bush administration constituency. The business community had been advocating stronger accountability since the Reagan administration, when it was instrumental in advancing the excellence reforms (Sunderman 1995).

Finally, NCLB reinforced the idea that social and economic causes of poverty can be discounted as causes of poor performance. The idea that

economic and racial inequities are connected to schooling inequality was replaced with a rhetoric that students of all racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds can learn. Instead of addressing structural causes of inequality, NCLB suggests that low achievement will improve if students, teachers, and schools work harder. While this rhetoric may suggest a greater focus on equal educational opportunity, it allows policy-makers to make education the sole social and economic policy (Kantor & Lowe 2006; Rothstein 2004).

Direction of Education Policy under the Obama Administration

On one level, the Obama administration has recognized that many parts of NCLB are unworkable. But other than to articulate a need for better assessments, Obama was silent on many of the tough issues related to NCLB – such as the 100 percent proficiency requirement and adequate yearly progress – during the presidential campaign and in the early days of his administration. Nonetheless, the administration has signaled its commitment to accountability, standards, and assessments and has adopted rhetoric that links economic progress and educational achievement. It has also advanced the idea that our educational system is in decline (Obama 2009; Duncan 2009). During a period of severe economic crisis, this approach inextricably ties education to solving social and economic problems.

By all indications, the Obama administration will continue expanding the federal role in education. While it is

unclear at this writing how the administration will address the issues raised by NCLB, other indicators suggest that it will expand federal power over additional areas now exclusively under the control of state or local governments. Two sources provide clues on the direction the administration plans to take – the 2010 budget proposal and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), or the federal stimulus law. The administration is using the federal stimulus law to push states and districts to adopt particular policies the administration supports. States with restrictive charter school laws, for example, have been informed that this may hurt their chances to receive stimulus money (Quaid 2009).

The Obama administration has also voiced strong support for teacher performance pay, an area typically decided locally between unions and local school districts (the 2010 budget provides incentives for districts to create pay-for-performance programs), as well as support for alternative pathways into education (Obama 2009). The administration's support for charter schools, performance pay, and alternative pathways signals a willingness to consider market approaches to education, even when there is a lack of research on their effectiveness.

Finally, while the 2010 budget reflects some changes in funding priorities – additional money for Title I for school improvement, an expanded focus on high school reform, and increased funding for educational research (Klein 2009) – it does not represent a significant change from the Bush administration and reflects a continuation of the trends begun under the Reagan administration. The shift in federal policy that began a quarter century ago is likely to continue.

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