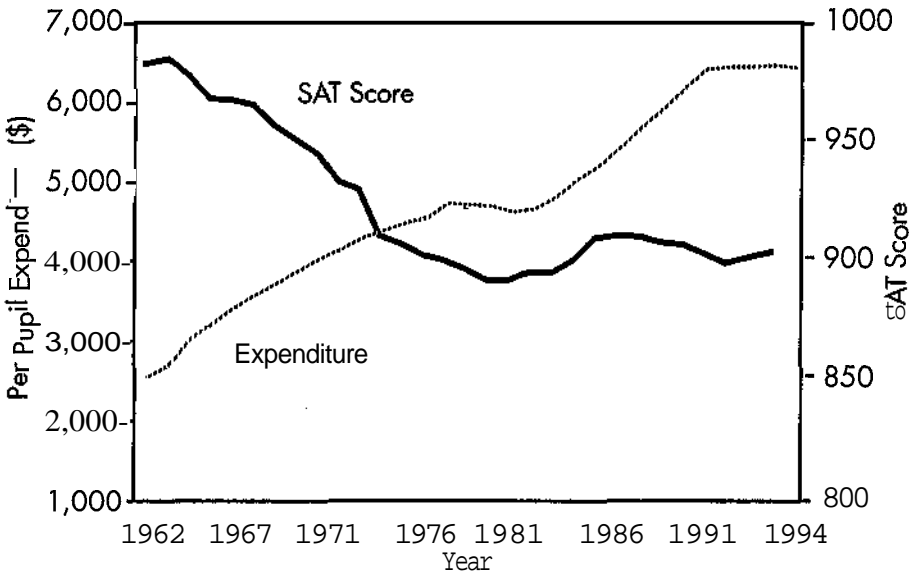


DOMESTIC POLICY

# 11. Education

There is little question that American education has declined over the past three decades. Scholastic Aptitude Test scores have dropped precipitously, even as spending has continued to soar, as shown in Figure 11.1. U.S. students consistently finish last or nearly so on international math and science tests. And their flagging performance is beginning to affect the economic well-being of the nation. David Kearns, former chairman of the Xerox Corporation, has estimated that American business spends at least \$25 billion a year to bring new employees up to the standard

**Figure 11.1**  
**Spending and Achievement in American Schools**



SOURCES: Educational Testing Service; U.S. Department of Education, *Digest of Education Statistics 1994* (Washington: National Center for Education Statistics, 1994), Tables 127 and 165.

NOTE: SAT scores for 1961-67 are means for all students; subsequent scores are averages for college-bound seniors.

of high school graduates—and a majority of those employees have finished high school. There is no evidence of improvement since the creation of the U.S. Department of Education 16 years ago. Recognizing the failure of federal education policy, Congress should

- **eliminate the \$314 billion U.S. Department of Education and return education to states and communities;**
- **pending dismantlement of the department, repeal Goals 2000;**
- **privatize the college loan program;**
- **abolish Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.**

### ***The Problems***

What's wrong with the nation's educational system? The answer to that question is complicated and controversial, but most analysts agree on at least three reasons for the current plight of our schools.

1. Some of the problems have little to do with the educational system itself—with the quality of teachers or the nature of the curriculum. The collapse of order in American society in general and the breakdown of the family in particular have created societal and behavioral problems that did not exist 30 or 35 years ago, at least not on such a grand scale. Today millions of children bring those problems to school daily, and it is little wonder that teachers and administrators find it hard to maintain discipline and promote learning. Many modern theories of education have contributed to that breakdown, and we should not underestimate the part bad schooling has played in creating poverty and family breakdown. Poor schools are a major reason that poor people remain trapped in poverty.
2. Children are not spending enough time on traditional academic subjects. According to a recent report by the National Education Commission on Time and Learning, U.S. students spend only 41 percent of their school day on academic courses such as math, geography, language, and science. French, German, and Japanese students spend more than twice as much time on such pursuits. To put it another way, our children are spending most of their instructional hours on activities like self-esteem building, gender equity, diversity training, and drivers ed.
3. Too many educators have come to believe that their chief mission is to indoctrinate their students with politically correct ideas in order

to transform society. Educational bureaucrats are using courses like sex education and counseling with psychotherapeutic techniques to promote an agenda that attacks traditional values and teaches children to reject the authority of their parents and churches, which brings us back to point 1. The monopoly nature of public schooling makes it difficult for parents to choose schools that reflect their own values.

In addition, it is time to reexamine the popular premise that the main purpose of our education system is to provide technicians for multinational corporations to compete in the global marketplace. Both Republicans and Democrats have assented too readily to this proposition, as evidenced by the wording of the bipartisan National Education Goals. To be sure, schools should be equipping children with the knowledge and skills necessary to be productive members of society, but we must not turn our educational system into a vast and soulless vocational training program for corporate employees. Schools have other intellectual and social tasks to perform. They do not need to be told daily that their chief responsibility is to prepare for the imminent arrival of the global village. Better to concentrate instead on teaching our children to read and count and explaining to them what America is all about.

## **Solutions**

What can be done to restore the academic integrity of our schools? Again, the answer is complicated, but we must begin by asking fundamental questions—questions like "Where should educational decisions be made?" and "What should be the federal role in improving education?"

The answer to the first question is that the Founding Fathers had it right. The federal government has no business running the educational system or even telling others how to run it. Education is perhaps the clearest example of a function that should be returned to the states, local communities, and private sector. The small amount of money the federal government contributes—about 7 percent of total spending on public schools—has bought Washington bureaucrats entirely too much control over educational policy. States and school districts, which bear the major financial burden, are all too eager to accept federal dollars in exchange for the right to manage their own schools. For example, any state that receives funding from the Department of Education's Goals 2000 program must submit all future plans for reform to federal authorities for approval.

The U.S. government did not give state and local school agencies tax dollars until the middle 1960s, and the U.S. Department of Education was not established until the end of the Carter administration. Since then it has become a full-fledged force with enough money to subvert sensible school policy and to intimidate good sense. In the 1980 presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan promised to abolish the department. However, the Reagan administration made little effort to do so, and the department has grown bigger every year. But Reagan's original goal was correct and even the *Washington Post* wrote in a December 1994 editorial, "There is a lot right about considering whether certain Cabinet departments deserve to be abolished. America's schools are not noticeably better because a Department of Education was created."

When the Education Department was created in 1979, many critics warned that a secretary of education would turn into a national minister of education. Rep. John Erlenborn (R-Ill.), for instance, wrote, "There would be interference in textbook choices, curricula, staffing, salaries, the make-up of student bodies, building designs, and all other irritants that the government has invented to harass the population. These decisions which are now made in the local school or school district will slowly but surely be transferred to Washington." Dissenting from the committee report that recommended establishing the department, Erlenborn and seven other Republicans wrote, "The Department of Education will end up being the Nation's super school board. That is something we can all do without."

Such concerns were not limited to Republicans. David W. Breneman and Noel Epstein wrote in the *Washington Post*, "Establishing a cabinet-level department is a back-door way of creating a national education policy." And Richard W. Lyman, president of Stanford University, testified before Congress that "the two hundred year old absence of a Department of Education is not the result of simple failure during all that time. On the contrary, it derives from the conviction that we do not want the kinds of educational systems that such arrangements produce."

The intervening years have done nothing to alleviate those concerns. Even during the Reagan-Bush years, the department's budget rose steadily, and the department began to devise national tests and a national curriculum. Those trends have accelerated in the past two years. It is time for Congress to acknowledge that the Education Department has wasted taxpayers' money, taken control of schools away from parents and communities, and done absolutely nothing to improve the quality of education. The Education Department should be abolished.

## ***Immediate Steps***

Hearings will need to be held on abolition of the Department of Education, but the new Congress can do some things immediately.

### ***Repeal Goals 2000***

This program, a Clinton administration project, established the foundations of a federal bureaucracy that could ultimately control decisionmaking in our schools. Goals 2000 created "model standards" for curriculum, despite the fact that the Department of Education is forbidden by law to interfere in curricular decisions; a new, unelected "national school board" to certify those new model standards; a mandate to report to the federal government on their programs such as health care, nutrition, and child care—the kinds of courses that are often used to impose a particular set of cultural values on school children across the country; and a new, broad-based "citizens panel" that would usurp the powers of state boards of education.

Although the Bush administration's America 2000 initiative was meant to spearhead a voluntary national movement to help states, its swift conversion into the far more statist Goals 2000 shows that there is no such thing as "good" federal intervention. And the recent draft model of American history standards—courtesy of a panel funded and assembled by the Bush administration—indicates the dangers of any federal presence in education. That panel has now produced draft "model standards" that eliminate any reference to Robert E. Lee, Thomas Edison, the Wright Brothers, or Albert Einstein yet manage to mention the Ku Klux Klan 17 times. Those standards are little more than propaganda. States have already shown that they can do a better job of drafting standards than the national "experts" have done—and parents can identify schools with high standards if they have the right and ability to choose the schools their children attend. The congressional education committees should hold hearings—what William Kristol calls "show trials"—to reexamine Goals 2000 in front of a national audience and then scrap the curriculum standards along with the rest of the Goals 2000 program.

### ***Eliminate Student Loans***

The enormously expensive and badly managed program of grants and loans to college students should be eliminated. This massive program, \$12.9 billion in fiscal year 1995, administered by the Office of Postsecondary Education, is one of the great unexposed scandals of government. It

has cost American taxpayers billions in loan defaults, hooked colleges and universities on federal dollars, corrupted the academic accreditation process, and driven the cost of education to unconscionable heights. Once our young people and our institutions of higher learning have been weaned from this program, colleges and universities will be free of federal meddling; college costs will be lowered to conform with demand; and college graduates, whose lifetime incomes are triple those of noncollege graduates, will be paying for their educations **themselves**.

As Milton Friedman said in 1980, "Everyone who has the capacity and desire to have a higher education should be able to do so provided they are willing to undertake the obligation to pay the costs of their schooling either currently or in later years out of the higher income that their education will make **possible**. . . . We must have a system under which those who are not able or do not go to college are not forced to pay (through their taxes) for those who do." The federal government should stop financing higher education and turn the function over to the private sector, which is fully capable of making loans for something with as high a return as a college education.

### *Abolish Title I*

This program, originally Chapter 1, which will cost \$7.2 billion in FY95, is not successful even according to the Education Department's own evaluation report. Title I money goes to every congressional district in the country to fund remedial help for millions of low-achieving children. But there is no evidence that the money is being spent effectively. The District of Columbia Public Schools receive \$30 million in Title I money every year. The D.C. city council **estimates**—because the records are too poor to allow accurate calculations—that the schools spend 48.5 percent of that money on administration, including a five-day "summer institute" for Board of Education members in the Solomon Islands. A separate study reports that Title I funds were spent on full-time salaries for part-time people, ghost employees who never performed their alleged duties, and two separate administrative agencies to monitor how the money was being spent. If the District of Columbia wants to spend its money like that, it should not get federal **subsidies**. If the federal government wants to continue Title I, surely more children would benefit by turning it into a direct voucher program for poor **children**. We can no longer afford to support expensive initiatives that do not work simply because they have high-sounding aims like "helping **disadvantaged** children." No one who works

with disadvantaged children could honestly say that the Title I program is the best way to spend billions to help those children. We should admit failure and try something else at the state or local level.

If instituted, most of these reforms will be greeted with anguished cries from the education establishment. For 30 years that establishment has feasted at an ever-more-lavish banquet provided by the American taxpayer, and no one is about to leave the table graciously. They will accuse Congress of being heartless trolls, indifferent to suffering and contemptuous of education.

But students will not suffer if these suggestions are followed—they will prosper. Congress should recognize that the status quo in education is not working, and things have only gotten worse since the federal Education Department was created. The U.S. Department of Education is doing little that states, local districts, private schools, and parents could not do better, and some of the federal initiatives are demonstrably hostile to the well-being of children. When the federal government releases its tightening grip, our schools will be freer, more creative, and ultimately more productive.

Of course, to institute these reforms, Congress will have to abolish programs and policies initiated by well-meaning people in both parties. The idea of creating national education standards for all schools and measuring achievement at the national level, for instance, originated with the Bush administration. But it is now apparent just how misguided that effort was. The education establishment is using the standard to perpetuate current mediocrity and promote political correctness—an entirely predictable result of centralizing educational policy in Washington.

All over the country, parents are organizing to oppose national standards and testing programs and the teaching of political correctness in our schools. Other parents, skeptical that the government schools will ever improve, are tightening their belts to send their children to independent schools or teaching their children at home. Congress should put an end to the growing federal control of education and let states, communities, and the private sector go to work on providing decent education for America's children.

### **Suggested Readings**

- Boaz, David, ed. *Liberating Schools: Education in the Inner City*. Washington: Cato Institute, 1991.
- Harmer, David. *School Choice: Why You Need It, How You Get It*. Washington: Cato Institute, 1994.
- Lieberman, Myron. *Public Education: An Autopsy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993.



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**Uzzell**, Lawrence A. "Contradictions of Centralized Education." Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 53, May 30, 1985.

—*Prepared by Michelle Easton*