

U.S. education policy: Federal overreach or reaching for the wrong things?

By **Valerie Strauss** January 13

Education Secretary Arne Duncan is seen as the most powerful education secretary ever, given his use of federal funding and [No Child Left Behind waivers](#) to get states to follow school reform policies that he supported. Many of his critics argue that his federal overreach is excessive and has encroached on local and state authority to run public school districts as they see fit. The author of the following posts asks whether there has been too much federal overreach, or whether the administration has used its executive power in education in the wrong ways. This was written by Arthur H. Camins, director of the Center for Innovation in Engineering and Science Education at the Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, N.J. The ideas expressed in this article are his alone and do not represent Stevens Institute. His other writing can be found at www.arthurcamins.com.

By Arthur H. Camins

Federal overreach in education is under attack from multiple quarters and will likely be diminished in any overhaul of the No Child Left Behind Act, the current law governing national education policy. As a result, the powerful influence of nationally funded assessments and the Common Core State Standards may be reduced. However, the devolution of decision-making power to local or state levels will not ensure inclusively

developed, thoughtfully crafted, age-appropriate or properly-specified standards for student learning. It will not ensure a shift away from over-testing or misuse of assessment data. It will not ensure a reasonable level of teacher professional autonomy.

A shift in who wields power and in what location does not necessarily mean better policies. It is more likely that a shift away from federal authority in education will increase the influence those with power and money, rather than enhancing democratic participation of average citizens. Recent indicators of this trend include the emergence of large contributions from external donors to candidates in local school board elections, the increasing influence of private philanthropy on policy decisions and shifts in authority from taxpayer elected school boards to private charter school boards that do not answer to the public.

In the absence of a broadly based, values-driven movement for a more just and equitable society, the diminution of a federal role in education is likely to undermine efforts to support the nation-wide, democratically governed public education system that is essential to successfully prepare all students for life, work and citizenship.

It is the unevenness of K-12 education in the United States that sets it apart from countries to which it is often unfavorably compared. This performance disparity is associated with enormous inequity in U.S. school funding within and across districts and states, vast social and economic inequality across families, underinvestment in teacher preparation and development, and low-status for the teaching profession. A wholesale turn away from a substantive federal role in education– the likely goal of the Republican congressional majority– will exacerbate rather than mediate these problems.

Great advances for economic and social justice, such as Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and civil rights laws are the result of federal legislation and Supreme Court decisions. All of these benchmarks of progress been initiated by local social and political action, but they have been achieved nationally. In effect, the emergence of national

progressive movements pushed federal authorities to impose its will on pockets of local resistance while redistributing resources. Now, however, virtually unlimited political contributions and lobbying, the growing influence of wealthy foundations and recent undermining of voting rights have all eroded progressive equity-focused federal, state and local-level policies.

The unemployment and underemployment, which undermine families' lives and their children's readiness to learn and succeed in school, cannot be addressed locally. Because state and local capacity to mediate local tax base divergence is constrained funding and resource inequity cannot be addressed locally.

The problem over the last several decades of education policy is not overreach. It is that the federal government has been reaching for the wrong things in the wrong places with the wrong policy levers. For example, the nation has largely abandoned efforts to end segregation, arguably a prime driver of education inequity. The large-scale, community-building infrastructure and WPA and CCC employment efforts of the Great Depression have given way to the limited *escape from poverty* marketing pitch of education policy following the Great Recession. Whereas the 1960s War on Poverty targeted community resource issues, current education efforts target the behavior of individual teachers and pits parents against one in other in competition for admission to selected schools.

It cannot be repeated often enough: [No country that has made significant improvement](#) in its education system has done so through test-based accountability, teacher evaluation systems, charter schools or other school choice schemes. Improvements will only come from a national commitment to the values of equity, democracy, empathy, respect and community responsibility and by providing the funding for solutions based on those values.

Community and individualist values have been in tension throughout U.S. history. The diminishment of inequality that characterized the 1930s-1970s was the result of

empathetic community responsibility values and strong unions. The growing inequality of the 1980s through the present is the result of the dominance of competitive individualist values. When inequity is the norm, policies that favor competition over collaboration turn potential allies into foes. When competition is the norm among parents for their children's schools and among teachers for professional advancement, narrow individual solutions undermine broad systemic solutions.

The rhetoric to support current education reform is that individual poor families should have choices about which schools their children attend just like rich folks. Tellingly, this does not mean that rich and poor or black and white children attend the same schools. Instead, new charter schools are located in racially and economically isolated communities so that poor families compete with one another for admission. The result has been increased segregation with no effort to ameliorate resource allocation differences between wealthy and poor communities.

We do not need the federal government to specify teacher evaluation mechanisms, rank teacher preparation programs based on the test scores of their graduates students, fund privately operated charter schools or promote education entrepreneurs. The proper role for the federal government is to be the guarantor of justice and equity.

Here are some ways that the federal government can exercise its proper authority:

- 1) Fund and incentivize integrated schools and housing.
- 2) Create well-paying jobs through infrastructure improvement projects.
- 3) Pass federal living wage legislation.
- 4) Provide financial and programmatic assistance to support family stability.
- 5) Ensure sufficient equitable funding for high-quality public education to diminish the

influence of local tax base inequality.

6) Ensure full funding to meet the needs of special education students and English language learners.

7) Provide financial assistance to school districts to enable time for teachers' professional growth and collaboration.

8) Provide tuition assistance for high-quality teacher preparation programs that include a significant period of apprenticeship.

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