



The Real School Scandal

Georgia, noted the paper, is one of “several winners of the federal Race to the Top grant.” This is “one of the cornerstones of President Barack Obama’s education policy and has been a catalyst for reform across the nation. Central to the policy is the insistence on tying educator evaluations to student test scores to provide more substantial evidence of good teaching.”

Item: *A release from the U.S. Department of Education, dated July 29, said: “America should radically transform the way that teachers are recruited, assigned, evaluated and compensated in order to recognize and reward its great veteran teachers, attract top students into the field, and make America more competitive, said U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan. In a speech to the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, Duncan urged teachers to rebuild their profession to give teachers more autonomy in exchange for performance-based accountability. Duncan also called for higher salaries to make teaching more competitive with other professions like medicine, law and engineering.”*



The Education Secretary “suggested ... starting salaries of around \$60,000 and top salaries approaching \$150,000.”

Correction: One of the greatest gifts one can offer children is a good example. Yet, those who have been caught in cheating scandals in Atlanta and elsewhere are offering excuses. And the federal educrats, as always, are offering more of (our) money as a panacea.

The fact that education is not among the enumerated federal powers in the Constitution is widely disregarded.

Are top-down-driven tests that bribe schools to show continued improvement in their cumulative scores — among student populations already performing at a low level — the best measurement of the quality of education? In our view, no. Is it either professional or helpful for administrators to humiliate a teacher whose students scored poorly by forcing that teacher to crawl under a table? Assuredly not. Yet, that did happen in Atlanta. Has there been added pressure in some school districts, even intimidation, because of requirements to meet certain standardized criteria? Undoubtedly.



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However, this does not mean that trying to make people responsible for their work performance is wrong. It is a rare job that does not demand accountability of some sort. The fact that proficiency tests were misused doesn't mean that the goal of competence should be discarded. Principals and teachers cheated, not the data.

The scandal that is being largely ignored is not the erasing of mistakes or the pointing to correct answers or the other deceits that have been ongoing for years, as recent investigations have shown. The crime is what is being done to the students. Where is the outrage over the betrayal that takes place by repeatedly promoting children who do not even have the most elementary of reading and arithmetic know-how? As *Reason* magazine's Katherine Mangu-Ward writes:

Is it reasonable or unreasonable to ask that a majority of the kids in Atlanta be able to read and do math at grade level? In many cases, individual teachers were undoubtedly correct to feel they were being asked to work miracles. This is especially true given that the long legacy of cheating teachers meant they were annually hoisting themselves on their collective petards. Each year's standards were based on the previous year's results. A 2 percent improvement in math performance for fourth graders each year is already a tall order, but it's tougher still if the skills of last years' fourth graders were mostly fictional, the product of a decade of ever-inflating false scores.

But what is more unreasonable: putting intense pressure on teachers to get kids' scores up, or continuing to allow Atlanta's kids to slide by year after year as test scores show that they aren't learning even basic skills?

The principals caught up in the cheating were clearly at fault, but not enough attention has been paid to certain neglected principles. Such principles include federalism — which used to be the bedrock of education in this country. Since Washington began its foray into the traditionally local matter of education during the Great Society, with the Elementary and Secondary School Act (since renamed the No Child Left Behind Act), matters have gone downhill. In the more than four decades since, federal spending per pupil on education has virtually tripled annually, even when adjusted for inflation. However, student achievement, by many measurements, has either stagnated or declined.

Predictably, the allure of supposedly free money from Washington has proven to be corrupting, with the states and local governments and the distant federal bureaucracies developing an unhealthy parasitic bond. Making the feds into the local class masters is not only wrong-headed, it is wildly inefficient — with one estimate finding that only 65-70 cents of a dollar spent winds up in the classroom. As has been noted by education analyst Lindsey Burke in the *Washington Times*:

To keep federal funds flowing, state education systems and local school districts must satisfy Washington's compliance demands first. The needs of students, parents and taxpayers come a distant second.

What started in 1965 as a front in President Johnson's "War on Poverty" has metastasized into a \$50-billion-a-year Cabinet level operation that reaches into virtually all school districts, rich and poor alike.... With nearly every reauthorization, Congress has added new "niche" grant programs, each aimed at addressing a particular problem in education.

And, of course, each new program has its own set of rules and regulations to assure fair play in the grant-making process and accountability on the part of grant recipients.

The result: Today, the U.S. Department of Education operates more than 100 separate grant programs.



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Under NCLB alone, federal bureaucrats this year will dole out nearly \$25 billion on more than 60 competitive grant programs and another 20 formula grant programs.

Completing grant applications, monitoring the federal program notices and complying with reporting requirements siphons away huge amounts of educators' time and money — resources that would be much better devoted to the classroom.

While Washington supplies but 9-10 percent of total education funding, it gets a lot of bang for those bucks. Regulatory bang, that is: Federal regulations account for at least half of the red tape that must be dealt with by local schools.

As has been noted by Representative Duncan Hunter (R-Calif.), Chairman of the Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education Subcommittee: "Currently, the paperwork burden imposed by the Department of Education is larger than that of the Department of Defense, the Department of Energy, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of the Interior, and the Department of Justice. From 2002 to 2009, the Department of Education's paperwork burden increased by an estimated 65 percent — an astounding number that continues to grow."

Misleadingly, Education Secretary Duncan warns against "under-investing" in education. This, at a time when the average per-pupil annual expenditure in the public schools has reached \$13,000 — a huge advantage over its private competition.

Duncan calls for public-school teachers to have a *starting* salary of \$60,000, rising to \$150,000, which is awfully generous of him, especially since it isn't his money being spent for a 180-day work year. As it is, public-school teachers average about \$53,230 annually in salary, according to the latest DoEd statistics (compared to \$39,690 for teachers in private schools). This doesn't include the considerable benefits for the public employees, which are appreciably higher than among private-school teachers. The total average compensation of public-school teachers is about 42-percent higher than their colleagues in the private sector. That may not make a public-school teacher rich, but it is above the median *household* income in the country.

Would Secretary Duncan like teachers treated, across the board, as though they were lawyers and doctors? Well, consider that, according to a recent educational documentary, one of every 57 American doctors loses his license to practice medicine; one of every 97 lawyers loses his license to practice law. Public-school teachers, with hard-nosed, well-financed unions as their bodyguards, have much more job security, abysmal job performance or not. The Washington, D.C.-based Center for Union Facts points out that in "many major cities, only one out of 1,000 teachers is fired for performance-related reasons.... In 10 years, only about 47 out of 100,000 teachers were actually terminated from New Jersey's schools."

Well, those teachers are handling so many more students than they used to do, right? No. During the latest year of available statistics, the number of students in public schools actually fell by 157,114; meanwhile, there were 81,426 teachers added. The student-teacher ratio in 1960 was 25.8:1 in public schools in this country; that figure is now at its all-time low, 15:1.

The number of education personnel who are not teachers is also booming, which drives up costs. As a percentage of school staffs, teachers have dropped from 70 percent in 1950 to 51 percent in 2006, according to DoEd statistics cited by the Heritage Foundation.

Employment in the U.S. public schools has grown a remarkable 10 times faster than student enrollment over the past four decades, points out education expert Andrew Coulson.



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The Education Secretary's impractical yearnings notwithstanding, there are marked distinctions between those in the private sector and those paid with tax dollars. The disparity in union representation is one such difference. Unions of public-school employees, Coulson explained in a piece for the *American Spectator* earlier this year, are in an industry in which "one producer is able to give its product away for 'free,' draws its revenues from compulsory taxation, is able to hide full cost of its operations from the public," and is "legally required to remain in business."

These unions, which have become even more powerful as federal interventionism has grown and local control has diminished, know how the game the system. They hire the paymasters. During the last two decades, public-school employee unions have spent about the same on political contributions as the combined amounts of Chevron, Exxon Mobil, the National Rifle Association, and Lockheed Martin. The National Education Association, since 1990, has handed out \$36 million to various federal campaigns; over the same period the American Federation of Teachers, about \$26 million. Of those total, 93 percent of the NEA's contributions went to Democrats, as did 99 percent of the total from the AFT.

While the rest of the country was aghast at the Atlanta cheating scandal, the NEA paid it no heed at its summer convention in Chicago, as was noted by columnist Phyllis Schlafly. Schlafly observed that group members were otherwise occupied with passing "their usual list of anti-parent, pro-homosexual, pro-feminist and left-wing resolutions." That is hardly an exaggeration. As she summarized:

The NEA voted to publish articles "to celebrate the contributions of GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender) teachers and GLBT friends of education."

Feminist resolutions passed by the NEA include endorsement of the Equal Rights Amendment, abortion, family planning clinics in public schools, hiring on the basis of "comparable worth" instead of "market value" and the use of so-called non-sexist language....

Among the other political resolutions adopted by the NEA Convention were endorsements of single-payer (government) health care, reparations for descendants of slaves, statehood for the District of Columbia, compliance with unratified United Nations treaties, opposition to English as our official language, opposition to a moment of silence in schools and strict regulation of guns. NEA Resolution H-1 urges members "to become politically involved" in the NEA's political action committees, and we all know that means electing Democratic candidates.

The NEA did pass a few resolutions about education, but none about doing a better job of teaching children to read. The NEA supports public school courses in multiculturalism, global education, environmental education, bilingual education, AIDS education and self-esteem, but opposes voucher plans, tuition tax credits, parental-option plans and homeschooling.

Such positions are no doubt anathema to many, if not most, of the teachers in this country — not that such opposition matters to the labor bosses, who will commandeer the dues and do what they want. And most teachers are also likely dismayed at the cheating that has tarred their profession, which has tended to leave an impression that such schools of shame are commonplace.

If you like all this, just keep supporting those who will pour more money into Washington's coffers. The feds will continue twisting the arms of the states to adopt national standards. And most states will acquiesce in whatever it takes to get a piece of the action filtered through Washington — monies that were taken from the state and local taxpayers in the first place. That, however, is a pretty miserable lesson plan.

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