



Education, Policies & Promises

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced on March 7 that “\$44 billion in stimulus funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) will be available to states in the next 30 to 45 days.” That was just the “first round” of education stimulus spending, and it didn’t count tens of billions in regular education spending.



“These funds will be distributed as quickly as possible to save and create jobs and improve education, and will be invested as transparently as possible so we can measure the impact in the classroom,” said Duncan. “Strict reporting requirements will ensure that Americans know exactly how their money is being spent and how their schools are being improved.”

What jobs will they save? None, other than government school jobs. Duncan said the funds would “help avert hundreds of thousands of estimated teacher layoffs in schools and school districts.” But even the education secretary was forced to admit in that same press release that the jobs “saved” are only saved temporarily: “These are one-time funds, and state and school officials need to find the best way to stretch every dollar and spend the money in ways that protect and support children without carrying continuing costs,” Duncan said. In other words, the layoffs would only be postponed by a few months.

In the end, the “stimulus” funds will have as little to do with education as they do with long-term job preservation. The Obama education “plan” thus far is nothing more than a money hose and a few vague, leftover campaign platitudes promising to get the federal government more involved in funding education.

Obama has already made spending more money on education at the federal level one of the hallmarks of his presidency. In his February 26 address to a joint session of Congress, Obama said:

We must address ... the urgent need to expand the promise of education in America. In a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity — it is a pre-requisite.... And yet, just over half of our citizens have that level of education. We have one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrialized nation. And half of the students who begin college never finish. This is a prescription for economic decline, because we know the countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow. That is why it will be the goal of this administration to ensure that every child has access to a complete and competitive education — from the day they are born to the day they begin a career.

But America is on an economic decline despite an 80-percent increase in federal education spending under the Bush administration. Those spending increases did nothing to create more jobs, nor did they



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improve national test scores. And that's not just a knock against the Bush administration. The same could be said for the education policies of every previous president and Congress since the federal government has interjected itself into education.

There's no empirical evidence that federal education spending has ever increased learning in schools by the slightest measure. Mean scores on the SAT, the one standardized test that's been roughly a constant for well over 50 years, remain at or below 1960s levels, even though the College Board organization that oversees the SAT "re-centered" the exam in 1995 to make low-scoring results appear to be closer to average.

That's hardly surprising, considering the federal government has taken on a greater role in the education of children nationwide. According to a Cato Institute study, the schools under direct federal control in the District of Columbia cost \$26,555 per pupil while generating some of the highest drop-out rates and lowest standardized test scores in the nation. The increases in federal government spending and control of education has simply extended the costs and results of the D.C. municipal schools to the rest of the nation.

Meanwhile, private schools are often excelling in Washington, D.C., usually for a fraction of the cost. This is a fact recognized by even the leftist *Washington Post*, which on April 20, 2009, fretted the possible loss of some private Catholic schools in the district:

Most urban Catholic schools were originally built to educate the children of European immigrants; today, they mostly serve poor African American and Latino students. With their long track record of successfully educating ill-served populations, these schools can play a central role in the nation's effort to expand educational opportunity and reduce the achievement gap.

Of course, the *Post* witch doctors' prescription for the ailment is to simply make the Catholic schools dependent upon the federal government: "If America is to preserve inner-city Catholic education, help is needed from the other side of the aisle. We hope the Obama administration will step forward." This would simply duplicate the federal regulations, expenses, and results at the Catholic schools.

Proponents of government-run schools occasionally argue that it's unfair to compare Catholic or other private education to government-run schools because private-school students succeed more often as a result of having parents more involved in their children's education. It's having parents who care and are doting on their children's academics, the argument goes, that's the reason Catholic and private-school students are succeeding better than government-run school students. It's not the schools, they essentially argue, it's the way Catholic and private schools get a choice selection of the best students with interested parents. And it's certainly true that parents who care are the chief difference maker, more even than the school. Even President Obama acknowledged this truism in his address to a joint session of Congress February 27:

In the end, there is no program or policy that can substitute for a mother or father who will attend those parent/teacher conferences, or help with homework after dinner, or turn off the TV, put away the video games, and read to their child. I speak to you not just as a president, but as a father when I say that responsibility for our children's education must begin at home.

But if there were no differences between the learning environments of public and private schools, private schools would not be the overwhelming choice of parents who are more involved. Washington, D.C., schools are still the federal model. The argument falls apart more when one considers that those in D.C. public schools who are measured against private-school students through the SATs and other



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standardized tests are “select” because of enormous drop-out rates in D.C. public schools. While the significance of drop-out rates alone on education policy is debatable, many of the worst D.C. students have already dropped out by the time the standardized tests are taken. Yet D.C. students still fail compared with the “select” Catholic schools.

Obama’s remarks about parents’ involvement are merely a sop to traditionalists. His cure-all for schools centers on bringing the wisdom and competency of the same federal government that oversees Washington, D.C., schools to every municipal school in the nation. It amounts to throwing money at the problem. And despite claims to the contrary, the Obama administration has no tangible plan to make sure the money isn’t wasted.

The Bush administration, which also threw money at education, at least had a “Strategic Plan,” along with measurable goals (which weren’t met). The Bush policies often led to an overhaul of curricula in city and town schools in order to maximize federal educational dollars, especially with “No Child Left Behind.” Obama has yet to outline any measurable goals.

But Obama has *promised* more regulations. In his address to Congress, he pledged: “We know that our schools don’t just need more resources. They need more reform. That is why this budget creates new incentives for teacher performance; pathways for advancement, and rewards for success. We’ll invest in innovative programs that are already helping schools meet high standards and close achievement gaps. And we will expand our commitment to charter schools.” But those plans have yet to see daylight from the administration that pledges to be the most “transparent” presidency in history.

No Child Left Behind

A big part of President Obama’s stated education program is a “reform” of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), a Bush administration policy that increased options for charter schools and imposed conditions on continued funding based upon standardized test scores. The Bush administration pushed for and received from Congress massive increases in federal education spending. But even with this massive increase in funds, the burdensome mandates of NCLB were only partly funded. “Obama and Biden will reform NCLB,” the White House website promises, “which starts by funding the law.”

Obama will increase funding for NCLB, even though the U.S. Department of Education has essentially conceded No Child Left Behind was a failure. In assessing the effectiveness of the NCLB reading program, a November 2008 *Reading First Impact Study Final Report* concluded:

- There was no consistent pattern of effects over time in the impact estimates for reading instruction in grade one or in reading comprehension in any grade. There appeared to be a systematic decline in reading instruction impacts in grade two over time.
- There was no relationship between reading comprehension and the number of years a student was exposed to RF [Reading First, a part of NCLB].
- There is no statistically significant site-to-site variation in impacts, either by grade or overall, for classroom reading instruction or student reading comprehension.

This happened despite the fact that school districts across the nation came under tremendous pressure to meet “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP) goals under NCLB using standardized testing.

NCLB is a prime example of the increased federal controls over local schools that will only accelerate under Obama. The federal government began pouring billions of dollars into NCLB programs, and as a result many districts abandoned traditional teaching methods in order to teach toward performance on



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standardized tests. Yet test scores did not measurably increase.

In other words, the money spent on NCLB and the corresponding lack of educational progress mirrored all the other federal education spending programs over the past 40 years: they had no measurable impact on education.

How could increased federal funds have no positive impact on education? Federal grant money is often tethered to onerous regulations, and just as often requires expenditure on areas that have little to do with academics. Often, federal grants are spent on items that the local school district would not purchase if it had to use its local funds alone. Therefore, federal grants are notoriously inefficient. One personal anecdote might help explain this inefficiency phenomenon. As a technology grant coordinator for a Catholic school, this author has been responsible for coordinating some federally funded technology grants through the Catholic school for which he works. Last year, about \$2,000 in grant monies were available to Catholic schools in his city for “teacher professional development” in the form of equipment and software. The equipment had to be purchased solely for teacher development — but at the same time it had to be spent on “supplies” or software instead of classes or seminars. So under such limitations, the Catholic schools eligible for the grant purchased nearly \$2,000 worth of flash drives for the teachers. Had the Catholic schools been given the \$2,000 outright, there’s no possibility the flash drives would have been purchased. They were handy for the teachers who received them, but far from high priorities in the Catholic schools’ technology budgets. And the flash drives didn’t have any noticeable impact on the quality of education or teacher quality. Federal grants inevitably become “free money” that must be spent — or lost — by local schools. This anecdote is repeated hundreds of times every year in every municipal school district across America, and all of the districts inevitably must employ dozens of highly paid grant writers and grant administrators in order to ensure that “free” federal grant dollars keep coming their way.

The Obama solution is to throw more money at NCLB, and to keep throwing money at schools — even where no progress is being made. “Obama and Biden will also improve NCLB’s accountability system,” the White House website pledges, “so that we are supporting schools that need improvement, rather than punishing them.” The federal government cut off funds for districts that failed to make progress (AYP) under the Bush NCLB, because the Bush Department of Education deemed it a waste of money to keep funding programs in districts where it didn’t work. If schools keep failing, Obama seems to be saying that he’s going to just keep shoveling money their way.

The “Zero to Five Plan”

What Obama has laid out for education, though vague, could end up being Orwellian. One of the keystones of Obama’s educational wish list is what he calls his “Zero to Five Plan.” The Zero to Five Plan aims to “provide critical support to young children and their parents. Unlike other early childhood education plans, the Obama-Biden plan places key emphasis at early care and education for infants, which is essential for children to be ready to enter kindergarten. Obama and Biden will create Early Learning Challenge Grants to promote state Zero to Five efforts and help states move toward voluntary, universal pre-school.”

“Education for infants”? Government schools are having trouble teaching high-school students, but Obama thinks they can do a better job teaching infants, most of whom have yet to learn to speak in complete sentences. What practical knowledge could the federal government teach an infant who can only say “Da-da”? Whatever it is, Obama apparently deems it “essential.”



Colleges “Tuition Harvesting”

President Obama also includes more federal spending for higher education, including an expansion of Pell Grants and student loans and the creation of a new program to curtail college dropouts. “It is not enough for the nation to enroll more students in college,” Obama’s budget states, “we also need to graduate more students from college. A few states and institutions have begun to experiment with [drop-out curtailment] approaches, but there is much more they can do.” He’ll spend (he calls it “invest”) \$2.5 billion on this new, untested program.

The increased federal aid for college students will only enhance colleges’ massive endowments and sprawling land holdings. It won’t make college more affordable, since tuition rates have risen in direct proportion to federal grants, loans, and other handouts. As *Boston Globe* columnist Jeff Jacoby explained back in 2005:

Every dollar that Washington generates in student aid is another dollar that colleges and universities have an incentive to harvest, either by raising their sticker price or reducing the financial aid they offer from their own funds. Higher Education Act funds “are seen by colleges and universities as money that is there for the taking,” observes Peter Wood, a professor at Boston University. “Tuition is set high enough to capture those funds and whatever else we think can be extracted from parents. Perhaps there are college administrators who don’t see federal student aid in quite this way, but I haven’t met them.” In 10 years of attending committee meetings on the university’s annual tuition adjustment, says Wood, “the only real question was, ‘How much can we get away with?’”

Obama’s going to let them get away with a lot more. And it’s no surprise that tax-exempt colleges (they’re “non-profits” in the tax code, remember) have racked up billion-dollar endowments while at the same time becoming the largest real estate holders in many major cities. For example, Harvard University is the largest single landowner in both its home city of Cambridge, Massachusetts, as well as nearby Boston. Tuition harvesting of federal aid dollars is a phenomenon that runs across the spectrum, including both public and state schools. Many “public” colleges and universities have raised their tuition rates as federal aid has risen, with some states openly increasing tuition and fees because they could still remain “affordable” to poor students with federal aid.

A Fundamental Problem

Aside from lacking constitutionality, a fundamental problem with a federal role in education is that it imposes a one-size-fits-all, top-down approach to the education of individual children. And each child is an individual. Children learn in many different ways, which makes top-down approaches fail many students. Government officials apparently realize this fact. Most states have instituted programs called “Individual Education Plans” (IEPs) for troubled students to try to make the top-down approach cater to individuals. But all IEPs have done is to add to the bureaucracy and paperwork requirements. Each teacher could be called upon several hours each week to work on IEPs. Washington cannot dictate or even guide millions of IEPs and expect to make noticeable changes in educational progress.

Another part of the problem with the federal money-hose approach to education is that Washington has the idea that one can “give” our children an education. The whole concept behind federal slogans such as “No Child Left Behind” is mistaken; it leaves the impression that every child has a right to be handed something called a “quality education” without work on his/her part. An education is not a physical thing that you can wrap up and hand to someone. One can no more give an education to someone than one can give a virtue, or a love. Behind all three must be found a desire of the heart. While it may be



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possible to find that desire of heart for a life of learning in every child, there's little evidence the federal government would ever be able to find it.



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