The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder

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IMPROVING EDUCATION: LESSONS FROM THE STATES

INTRODUCTION

As classes begin again in the nation's schools, America's students are returning to an education system deep in crisis. It still poorly prepares young Americans for adult life. Most high school graduates possess only a junior high level of reading or math comprehension.[1] And most have an embarrassingly poor knowledge of the humanities. More startling, few high school students tested on questions of basic history are aware of ideas and events that have shaped the course of the United States.

While Americans demand – and obtain – excellence in business, the arts, and other aspects of society, in the schooling of their children they are forced to accept poor standards.

Giving the Customer No Choice. The reason for this stems from the way the school system is managed. In areas where America excels, businesses and organizations providing products and services must compete vigorously with each other to satisfy a customer who can choose from a variety of sources. The customer has almost no choice when it comes to primary and secondary education. Instead, the public school system is autonomous and answerable to virtually no one. Large bureaucracies administer the school districts of most large U.S. cities, and they are too removed from the reality of the school room to address the basic problems of the schools. In the embattled Chicago school district, for example, over 3,000 employees are assigned to the central and district offices just to perform administrative tasks.[2] This is in striking contrast to the mere 36 administrators employed by the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago to serve one-third as many pupils. Moreover, between 1976 and 1986, while student enrollment in the Chicago public schools dropped 18 percent and the number of classroom teachers fell 8 percent, the number of employees assigned to

1 U.S. Department of Education, *American Education, Making It Work*, 1988.

2 Herbert J. Walberg, *et al.*, *We Can Rescue Our Children* (Chicago: URF Education Foundaiton and Green Hill Publishers, 1988).

the central and district offices rose by 47 percent.[3] Chicago typifies the failed policies of bloated bureaucracies.

Public opinion polls confirm that parents believe that having a choice in the kind of education their child receives is the key to improving standards. Yet the bureaucracies now controlling the education system resist any moves that may erode their authority even slightly. Tired of fighting unresponsive and haughty bureaucracies, parents have been forming groups to carry the battle directly to those responsible for the public schools — local and state governments. These parents have found many allies. Together, parents and state legislators have launched initiatives that are raising school standards by increasing local and parental control of education. Among them:

In Rochester, New York, public schools now are managed by teachers rather than district administrators. This "Rochester Experiment" has cut the drop-out rate dramatically.

In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, parents can now send their children to any of 147 public schools.

In Chelsea, Massachusetts, Boston University has agreed to take over management of the city's failing schools.

In Minnesota, parents can send their child to a school anywhere in the state, and high school students are permitted to take courses for high school credit at the state's colleges and universities.

These are just a few of the many examples of the new approach to education sweeping America. It is an approach based on decentralized management and increased parental choice. The parents and teachers of America's local communities are the driving force behind this reform, but states have played a key role through legislation that enables parents to send their children to schools of their choice.

It is time for the federal government to join this very promising school improvement movement. First, Washington should act as a clearinghouse so that school districts and states interested in reform ideas have a "one-stop" source of information. Second, it should review existing federal regulations, such as those attached to grants, to remove impediments to state and local innovation. And third, it should consider incentives to states and localities to encourage them to seek private sector support to boost further experimentation.

THE EDUCATION REVOLUTION

Education is the primary responsibility of the states, not the federal government. Responsibility for actually running the schools, in turn, has been the domain of local communities. Since the first "common" (public) schools were introduced in the U.S. in the 1800s, authority for controlling the schools rested with the community.

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3 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Local control means local involvement. In recent years, however, this characteristic of American education has been eroded; control over the day-to-day operation of schools has been shifting from the locality to the state, and to the federal government. The result: in the past two decades, American parents have been pushed farther from direct involvement in the operation of public schools.

"Progressive" thinkers such as John Dewey greatly influenced this shift away from local responsibility. But so did demographic changes. As the school population increased, the education bureaucracy grew larger and stronger. During the 1960s, the problems of riot-torn inner cities prompted school administrators to try to "get the system under control," pushing teachers and parents into the background. And the federal courts have intervened to impose policies upon states to equalize funding for school districts, requiring many states to wrest control from the local authorities in order to comply with complex federal requirements.

Increasing centralization has been accompanied by a rapid rise in the money spent on education. The cost of educating elementary and secondary school age children in the 1987-1988 school year cost over $184 billion. This 34.1 percent increase since 1983 compares with only a 0.3 percent increase in enrollment. Yet the nation's achievement scores have shown little or no improvement. The reason? All evidence suggests that the element missing from education today is community, or parent, involvement.

EXPERIMENTS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Cities and local school districts have been developing strategies to strengthen local control of schools and to enhance parental choice.

"Site-Based" Management of Schools

One strategy winning wide support is school - or "site-based" management. By this, school districts relinquish to local school councils the authority over budget policies, hiring and firing, and decisions over curricula. These councils consist of teachers, parents, a community or business member or two, and usually, the principal. They are usually elected from among the groups they represent. Supporters argue that this decentralized approach allows problems to be identified and cured more quickly.

Example: Chicago, Illinois. A form of site-based management was adopted in July by the Illinois State Legislature in its reforms for Chicago's public schools. Parents and community activists in the city long have sought a more direct role in the governance of their Chicago schools and were instrumental in building political support for the legislation. When it becomes effective next year, community organizations will be consulted on curriculum development, hiring policies, and budget decisions.

Example: Rochester, New York. Since the beginning of the 1987 school year, public schools in Rochester have been run by school-based management teams, in which teachers are responsible for all aspects of governing their school. Teachers are held directly

accountable for the academic progress of their students, and help decide what should be taught, how the school should operate, and who should be hired for teaching vacancies. In return, teachers receive higher salaries. This bold reform has cut unnecessary bureaucratic layers from decision-making. Seniority no longer is sacrosanct; instead, new or unsuccessful teachers are assigned to work with veteran teachers for one year. "Lead" teachers, chosen by a panel of teachers and administrators, work an additional month each year and are assigned to the most difficult schools to attempt to bring them up to par. They receive higher pay for this extra work and responsibility. Another feature of the "Rochester Experiment" is home-based guidance, in which teachers are assigned to groups of students for a period of four years. The teacher monitors each student's progress outside of the classroom as well as inside school. These children come mainly from disadvantaged homes, often headed by a single parent. The results are already noteworthy – some ten years ago, about one-third of Rochester students dropped out of high school. Today, teachers are keeping all but a handful of their students in school. Wilson Magnet High School, for instance, boasts of 85 percent of its seniors going on to college. Teachers are more caring, students are responding better, and parents today are much more satisfied with their school system.

Example: Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Milwaukee may soon introduce two reforms to strengthen local control over its schools. Discussions among the superintendents and the schools have focused on ways to decentralize administrative oversight by assigning more central office personnel to the individual schools and by dividing the central district office into smaller area offices managed by a separate superintendent. A chancellor would oversee all of these separate and distinct entities. Consonant with this proposal for greater local accountability, last year the Milwaukee Public Schools instituted a system of voluntary school-based management, involving councils comprised of teachers, parents, and the principal. Although only ten schools currently operate under this structure, the councils help create a team atmosphere to deal with such issues as content of instruction and introducing methods for greater parental involvement.

Magnet Schools

Also encouraging local and parental involvement in school policy is the magnet school. It is called this because it can attract students from outside their normal attendance area, from anywhere in the school district. For many school districts, magnet schools are a voluntary and effective alternative to mandatory busing as a means to desegregate schools in areas with a high concentration of minority students. Magnet status means a school is given the flexibility to experiment with teaching techniques and specialized courses of instruction because the money allocated has few spending requirements attached. The results achieved so far have encouraged the creation of magnet schools in several major urban areas.

Example: New Haven, Connecticut. The "High School in the Community" is a New Haven magnet school established in 1970 by a group of teachers, in response to parental concerns that children from this generally poor community were not well served by the education bureaucracy. At this high school, teachers form teams and create lessons that respond to the needs of the students. The school is seen as a model throughout the state of Connecticut. Thanks to the voluntary efforts of teachers, parents and students, the school

now sends 93 percent of its students to college. A proposal by education reformers in Connecticut would establish additional magnet schools by allowing groups of ten or more teachers to form their own schools, which would be open to students on a first-come first-serve basis. The state would pay the costs of running these schools.

Example: Prince George's County, Maryland. Today there are 41 magnet schools in this large suburb of the nation's capital. Thanks to the efforts of concerned school officials, eager parents, and willing teachers, the district's students outperform 65 percent of students tested across the country. Moreover, desegregation has been achieved without forced measures. New York City's Eastside District 4 has had similar success.

Open-Enrollment Plans

Akin to magnet schools and also growing in popularity are plans that give parents the right to choose a school for their child outside the area in which they live. Such open-enrollment plans effectively give lower income parents the same range of choices available to higher income families who can afford to move their residence. In addition, open enrollment enables parents to play a greater role in decisions regarding course content, since they have wider choice.

Wherever an open-enrollment plan or magnet school system has been started, the results are impressive. The dropout rate immediately is reduced, at-risk students perform better, and assessment test scores increase. A sense of pride grows in the school, reducing crime and violence toward the institution.

Example: Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Each January for the past twelve years, parents in the Milwaukee Public School district have received a catalogue of education opportunities for the following September. Originally this began as a method to fulfill court-ordered desegregation among a limited group of schools. It is now a city-wide public school open enrollment plan. Parents may choose among 147 schools, from Burroughs Middle School for children in grades 6-8, which specializes in foreign languages and music in addition to its regular middle school program, to Maple Tree Elementary, which offers a traditional basic skills curriculum for children in grades K-6. Some 85 percent of the parents get their first choice of schools; virtually all the rest get their second choice. Originally the program was confined to city schools, but as the program has grown more popular, a limited number of spaces have been made available to children from the Milwaukee suburbs. As a result of this enhanced parental choice, Milwaukee schools have become more diversified, offering many different challenging and specialized courses of instruction.

Milwaukee currently is the only municipal experiment with open enrollment. Its success should offer a lesson to other cities.

Partnerships with Local Businesses

Another significant development at the local level is that some communities now are looking outside for expertise to help bring about reforms. Many schools, for instance, are welcoming local businesses into the education process. One form of help is executive loan programs, where top executives teach and provide guidance as mentors, encouraging

students to excel. In other cases, local businesses "adopt" individual schools, becoming involved in the students' school progress and extracurricular activities. Nationwide, there are at least 53,000 "adopted" schools. Through financial as well as technical support, private institutions are becoming an active part of the community.

Example: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. A group of Pittsburgh-based companies has initiated the Allegheny Conference Education Fund. The fund provides grants to teachers and principals to develop innovative teaching methods. This incentive has clearly worked: in the past four years, over 3,000 students have left private schools and returned to the public school system, satisfied with the improvements sparked by this program.

Example: New York, New York. General Electric Corporation has "adopted" some of the best students at the Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics in New York's Spanish Harlem. The GE Scholars program aims to win places for its students at America's top universities. Company executives act as mentors and teach special classes designed to increase student interest in science and engineering. Today, the Center graduates 95 percent of students; in 1982, only 3 percent graduated.

Help from Local Colleges

Communities also are enlisting higher education in the battle to improve schools. Colleges and universities long have been alarmed at the quality of their incoming students. Colleges now must spend considerable resources and time teaching basic lessons that should have been learned in high school. Towns and cities looking for new ways to improve their schools are turning to higher education institutions for a few lessons. It was Yale University personnel, for example, that created the New Haven, Connecticut model for teachers to use, suggesting the direct involvement of parents in school operations and opening up the options available to parents in choosing a school. Likewise, the University of Rochester has sponsored a staff development course to train city teachers in classroom teaching techniques.

Example: Chelsea, Massachusetts. This small, blue-collar suburb of Boston is planning the first of its kind school-university partnership. The city of Chelsea has asked Boston University to "take over" its failing schools, which have a dropout rate of nearly 50 percent. The Chelsea School District serves approximately 3,300 pupils and its standing is among the lowest in the state. Under the ten-year agreement, Boston University will work with the seven-member Chelsea school committee to restructure and enhance the school curriculum, and to put the school district back on a sound financial footing.

Example: Queens, New York. In an effort to improve the classrooms and teachers, Queens College became a parent to Louis Armstrong Middle School. Since 1980, teachers have been allowed to take courses free, utilize resources and equipment from the college, and even use them back in their classrooms. Queens College provides student teachers and has been involved in outreach activities to link the school to the people of Queens. These activities include counseling and adult education. There is an average waiting list of 1,000 students each year seeking enrollment. The community is actively involved and parents clearly are pleased.

INNOVATION AT THE STATE LEVEL

An important development in recent years has been the growing interest in education issues by state governments. In particular, support has been growing in state capitals for a variety of initiatives fostering alternatives to the traditional system of assigned schools. States have removed barriers to parental choice and have provided monetary incentives to encourage experimentation. Fourteen states, for instance, have adopted or are planning programs to draw parents more into school operations. Well over half the states are considering new or expanded parent involvement programs.

States are also taking steps to improve the quality of teaching. Nine states have upgraded their recruitment efforts; thirteen have revised licensing standards and several are considering changes which would open up the teaching profession to qualified individuals who may lack formal teaching credentials. According to the 1986 Report of the National Governors' Association, *A Time for Results*, state policy makers also are examining reforms to increase choice in schools, such as reducing barriers to open enrollment and enacting programs to encourage more parental involvement in school management.

State action raises a number of issues. One is how to finance the reforms, if additional money is required. Another is how to ensure accountability when control is decentralized. Still another is how to measure the effectiveness of reforms. There are also questions regarding the proper role of states in the field of education. Such decisions are best left to cities and towns. Yet in a number of statehouses, these considerations have stalled legislative action. In others, considerable progress has been made.

Making Open Enrollment Statewide — Minnesota

Minnesota has been in the vanguard of state-sponsored plans to widen parental choice. Governor Rudy Perpich this year approved a plan to make Minnesota the first state in the nation with a state-wide open enrollment plan. Parents are allowed to apply for a place for their child at any public school in the state. If a student transfers from one school district to another, the state's portion of the cost of educating the student "follows" him or her. The statewide program is based on a pilot project that had been operating in some districts since 1985. The success of the pilot program built public support for a statewide version.

Moving Toward Open Enrollment — Colorado

Colorado seems likely to be the next state to adopt "public schools of choice." Sponsored by the Chairman of the House Education Committee, State Representative Jeanne Faatz, a measure to institute a statewide program is garnering strong support across the political spectrum. Even the state's major teacher's union, the Colorado Education Association, is backing the plan, contingent upon working out details that recognize teachers in the plan. Final action is likely this fall.

Like Minnesota's system, the allotment of state tax dollars for each pupil would follow the child to the chosen school, resulting in a revenue-neutral plan. A school could refuse a student only if it had no more room or if the child's presence would affect the school's

racial balance adversely. Supporters are confident that the plan will improve schools through competition, and will give teachers greater discretion to experiment with creative programs to improve the quality of education.

Opening College Classes to High School Students — Minnesota, Florida, and Colorado

In addition to the freedom to choose their school, high school junior and senior students in Minnesota are allowed to take courses for high school credit at Minnesota's colleges and universities. In this way, parents who are dissatisfied with some aspects of a school can turn to state colleges as a remedy. If students opt to attend college after high school, these same courses can be used for credit toward their postsecondary degree.

Florida has a similar postsecondary credit program. Since 1977, the state has operated a "dual enrollment" program, open to more than 6,000 of the state's high schools, gaining credit for classwork mainly at community colleges.

Colorado's legislature has adopted a postsecondary enrollment options plan similar to that of Minnesota. The plan allows 11th and 12th grade students to take college level courses for credit.

HOW THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT CAN HELP

While lawmakers in the nation's capital are talking about improving American education, governors, state legislators, local school districts, and parents across the country are doing something about it. The policy innovation ferment at the state and local level demonstrates the power of the American federal system. As the examples above indicate, the driving force behind the reforms is the desire of parents and progressive school authorities to introduce greater diversity, choice, and competition in the public school system. Cities and school districts have taken the lead in clearing the way for these "bottom up" approaches. States have entered the picture because only state legislators can introduce tuition tax credits, cross-district open enrollment, and similar actions to widen choice.

The role of the federal government in this process must necessarily be limited. The strength of the education reform movement is that it is local. Like states, the federal government should confine itself to policies that will give a green light to local action. Thus the federal government should focus on steps that will let the states and localities assume the responsibility they seek. The federal role, in other words, should be that of facilitator. Federal officials should spur education reforms by: 1) establishing a clearinghouse for accurate and current information on state and local initiatives; 2) limiting the scope of federal requirements on the spending of some $11 billion a year for public education; and 3) introducing incentives to encourage state and local initiatives.

1) Creating an Information Clearinghouse

One of the central roles of the U.S. Department of Education is to support sound educational practices. To help do this, Department offices provide information on

education statistics, act as a liaison among states and localities in information gathering and sharing, and provide forums for discussion on educational topics. While some Department of Education offices gather information on state and local experiments, and on reforms, no single office coordinates this information. Thus any state or local official or parents' group must negotiate a bureaucratic maze to obtain useful information about activities in other jurisdictions. To remedy this, the Department should establish a single clearinghouse for state and local initiatives. This could be done easily, without legislative action, within the Department's Office of Intergovernmental Affairs. Currently this office acts as a liaison with governors and state legislators, sometimes helping to coordinate joint state and local actions.

Such a clearinghouse for local initiatives would keep accurate and up-to-date information on education reform around the country. In addition, it should assemble information about organizations that provide services related to education reforms. For example, if a parent or school official wants to find out about the reform of the Chicago Public School System, the clearinghouse should have the ability to provide quickly a brief fact sheet giving a summary of the reforms, contacts in Chicago, and other sources of information.

Other federal departments already provide similar services. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), for instance, has a small office that coordinates information on state enterprise zones, urban areas in which state taxes and regulations are reduced in order to spur economic development. Material on state laws creating such zones and data indicating the successes and limits of the zones is published by HUD and made available to public officials. In addition, HUD holds conferences and seminars to bring together state and local officials interested in this subject. Similar services could be provided by the Department of Education.

2) Lifting Restrictions on the Use of Federal Funds

Each federal education dollar reaching a state or school district has strings attached. During the Reagan Administration, there has been a reduction in such red tape, particularly after the enactment, in 1981, of the Chapter 2 block grant, which combined over two dozen separate education programs into a general state grant with fewer restrictions. Nevertheless, complex federal regulations still limit the ability of states and localities to mount innovative new strategies. Further streamlining restrictions on the spending of federal money would allow local education agencies to experiment with new ideas.

3) Introducing Incentives for Local Improvements

Some federal education programs include incentives which require states or localities to raise matching dollars to be eligible for federal money. This spreads federal dollars further. In one federal program, for example, funds for postsecondary education are distributed to schools that help disadvantaged students. To qualify for federal money, schools must demonstrate their ability to raise "matching" private funds. For every dollar provided by the federal government, the school must raise an additional dollar.

The dollar-for-dollar matching concept currently is not used in any of the elementary and secondary education programs that support public schools. If it were, more schools could receive federal funds. Currently, 38 school districts, for example, share the $115 million in federal funds for magnet schools. Under a matching proposal, the number could double, making it possible for many new programs to be established. This, in turn, would inject more new ideas into the education process.

Such incentives could be introduced into a number of programs, such as the Dropout Prevention Demonstration Program, currently funded at $21.7 million, and the Fund for the Improvement and Reform of Schools and Teaching (FIRST), which provides about $5 million in grants to improve schools and teachers. Several new categorical programs, which have little chance of being consolidated into more efficient and effective block grants, are other candidates for private matching funds. These include the Star Schools program, currently funded at $19 million, which provides grants to improve science and foreign language instruction through the use of telecommunications, and the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students program, which will provide $10 million next year for innovative approaches in gifted and talented education.

CONCLUSION

Innovation in primary and secondary education, based on increasing choice, is sweeping the country. It is happening at the grass roots and because of grass roots pressures. It is local communities urging school officials to make changes. Some of these reforms require state legislation. Others simply require a city's stamp of approval or the willingness of parents and teachers to cooperate in reforming a school's management. Businesses and other private groups often have joined in these efforts. States also have been promoting choice experiments by such actions as introducing tax changes and smoothing the way for inter-district open enrollment.

Giving States Freedom to Experiment. The federal government can learn from these examples of creative federalism and it can help promote them. But the federal government often stands in the way of giving parents choice in education. Often federal money is encumbered with many restrictions. Congress must ease these restrictions, giving states and localities the freedom, the information, and the incentive to experiment with forms based on greater parental choice. This may be the most effective way for Washington to help arrest the decline of American education.

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