

SAVING AMERICA 2000: CAN THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION RETAKE THE INITIATIVE ON EDUCATION REFORM?

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The Los Angeles riots have triggered demands for fundamental reform of many policies affecting poor, inner-city neighborhoods. One of the most pressing is education. In south-central Los Angeles, like most inner-city communities, children today are consigned to an extensive public school system which fails to educate them. That lack of a basic education in most cases holds back those children for the rest of their lives, condemning them to low-wage jobs or unemployment.

The good news for these children and their parents is that the Bush Administration authored legislation last year that was intended to achieve fundamental education reform by "reinventing" the American school system. The *America 2000* proposal centers on parental choice, national testing, and a program creating new kinds of schools.

The bad news for inner-city children, and indeed for all American children, is that one year later the reform package is facing fierce opposition on Capitol Hill. In January the Senate stripped the legislation of its most significant reform provisions, most notably school choice. The *America 2000* proposal is about to be taken up in the House, where hostility to the core provisions is, if anything, greater than in the Senate.

If poor Americans are to have the chance of a good education, the Administration must regain the ground it has lost in the debate. This requires George Bush to stand fast and fight much harder for his *America 2000* proposal, especially the key parental choice provisions. If it is to succeed, the Administration must:

- ◆ **Strongly support certain proposed floor amendments** to committee-passed legislation, most notably the amendment authored by Dick Armey, the Texas Republican, which revitalizes the school choice initiatives.
- ◆ **Threaten to veto any legislation** that omits central elements of the Administration's original reform package, such as school choice.

America 2000

President Bush's original *America 2000* proposal contained four central themes:

- 1) **Getting better and more accountable schools**, through parental choice, national testing, and alternative certification¹;
- 2) **Creating a new generation of American schools** by encouraging schools that "break the mold" by offering alternative educational programs;
- 3) **Producing a nation in which families and communities help encourage students to learn** by instilling respect for education, competence, and academic performance; and
- 4) **Creating communities in which learning can happen**, by increasing parental and community involvement in education reform.

The President's *America 2000* strategy also incorporated national education goals to make Americans more competitive in the world economy. These goals include the achievement of specific academic standards, new curricula for American schools, a system of voluntary national examinations, and more flexibility for public school teachers and principals.

Hill Action

The Administration sent its *America 2000* package to Congress last fall, after announcing the outline of the package in April. But instead of incorporating the proposal's main features in a new education bill, the House Education and Labor Committee last October reported out H.R. 3320, which largely ignored the President's strategy. Not to be outdone, the Senate this January passed S. 2, which also failed to incorporate the most significant aspects of the President's plan, and did little more than authorize \$850 million for a new block grant for school experiments effectively controlled by the education establishment.

The Senate bill is severely flawed. Because of unwise concessions by the Administration, the legislation contains only watered-down provisions for creating "New American Schools," the experimental, "break the mold" schools, intended to test innovative programs and approaches to education, and it allows little regulatory flexibility for teachers and administrators. In fact, the Senate bill is largely a triumph of bureaucratic process over substance.

Worst of all, the Senate rejected even a very modest version of the Administration's school choice proposal. The defeated amendment, designed by the Administration and Senator Orrin Hatch, the Utah Republican, would have authorized a three-year demonstration project granting \$30 million each year in education vouchers to help low-income parents send their children to quality private schools, and it would have provided a \$5 million grant to each of six low-income communities selected nationally to create pilot programs offering low-income students in the community their choice of area public or private schools.

While very small, when compared with the total federal education budget of \$32.3 billion, these choice provisions would give low-income parents the financial means to opt out of their failing public school—a choice which middle and upper income families already have—and allow their children to be educated in another school. This small demonstration program simply would give school choice supporters an opportunity, on a limited trial basis, to show that choice works. But as a result of intense pressure from the education bureaucracy, particularly the teacher and school administrator unions, the Senate refused to sanction an experiment with choice.

1 Alternative certification means allowing individuals without education degrees to become certified teachers, provided they have appropriate experience or a degree in their field.

Likewise, the committee-passed House bill contains no choice provisions. Representative William Ford, the Michigan Democrat and Chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, announced in February that he would not bring the House bill containing portions of the Bush Administration's education proposals (H.R. 3320) to the floor for a vote. Instead, the House will consider a committee-authored bill (H.R. 4323), which explicitly bans federal funding of private school choice programs. It actually scales back existing community involvement in improving local schools and gives more control to public school boards, who in the past have had little interest in serious innovation. H.R. 4323 also could hinder choice legislation at the state level by sending a signal from Washington that choice is unacceptable, and also by prohibiting the use of federal funds, which often are used to pay for state pilot programs involving private school choice. At the end of last year's legislative session 23 states had some type of choice plan, and well over half gave consideration to choice legislation.² Significantly, efforts to promote choice at the state level have been led by teachers and business leaders as well as parents.

The bill calls for a \$700 million federal block grant program which would be spent as the state and local bureaucracies saw fit as long as it did not go toward choice programs involving private schools. Vague descriptions of authorized activities would permit practically any fad the education bureaucracies want to fund, without any kind of accountability to parents. H.R. 4323 also contains provisions aimed at "addressing disparities in expenditures and the reasons for such disparities among local educational agencies in each state and among states across the nation." These latter provisions reflect the assumption that the way to improve schools in poor communities is to make sure that school spending is equal throughout the country.³ Yet numerous studies show that there is no significant correlation between spending and school quality.

The Arney Amendment

In an effort to correct the shortcomings of H.R. 4323, Representative Dick Arney, the Texas Republican, plans to offer a floor amendment to H.R. 4323. The amendment goes a long way toward restoring the original content of the President's *America 2000* proposals. The amendment:

- 1) **Limits the use of the \$700 million in new funds** to projects based on school choice, site-based management, alternative teacher certification, merit testing, and New American Schools;
- 2) **Allows the Secretary of Education to deny grants** to activities which in his view will not promote reform in education; and
- 3) **Gives state governors, not teachers and school administrators, the authority** to head the panels charged with determining the use of federal grant money.

The Arney amendment explicitly allows private, parochial, and public schools to be included in choice experiments and earmarks a minimum of 25 percent of program funds for these initiatives.

The White House Choice

America 2000 advocates the use of federal funds to stimulate state and local level reforms based on choice and other promising approaches. Congress, however, is transforming the plan into yet another education spending bill aimed at propping up a government school monopoly that is ruining American public schools and failing to educate American children. The results so far of such congressional "business as

² *School Choice Programs: What's Happening in the States*, compiled and edited by Jeanne Allen with Angela Hulsey, The Heritage Foundation, March 1992.

³ See John Chubb and Terry Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1990).

usual” education policies: Federal education spending at all levels of government has increased over 25 percent since 1989, yet test scores have fallen.

So far, the Administration has shown a desire to compromise on its original proposal while the Senate and House tears it to shreds. White House dithering merely encourages Hill opposition. As the legislative disaster in the Senate was unfolding, the President rightly threatened to veto any bill that did not contain education choice provisions. But after the Senate passed a bill explicitly rejecting choice, the Administration backpaddled and announced that it was “reevaluating” its own position. Now, with the House legislation soon facing a vote, opponents of major reform take comfort in the fact that the Administration has neither issued an explicit veto threat against H.R. 4323, although Education Secretary Lamar Alexander has recommended such a veto, nor even indicated that it will support the Arney Amendment on the House floor. The “Education President,” opponents understandably conclude, seems prepared to give up on real education reform without a fight.

Conclusion

The Bush Administration has an historic opportunity to improve American education. But the President can only do this if he takes the initiative and makes clear to friend and foe alike what he really supports and what is unacceptable. If he wishes to keep alive any prospect of the core elements of *America 2000* becoming law, he must:

- ◆ **Back strongly amendments for education choice and other key reforms when H.R. 4323 reaches the House floor, including the proposed Arney Amendment;**
- ◆ **State unequivocally that he will veto any education bill that does not contain education choice provisions.**

Only if the Administration draws a clear line, and forces Congress to choose between fundamental reform and business as usual in the schools, will inner-city children in America at last have the chance to obtain a sound basic education.

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