

RUSH!

10/1/92 | Number 341

WHY THE EDUCATION BILL DESERVES A VETO

The education bureaucracy is poised to score another victory over school reform. House-Senate conferees have approved an education bill incorporating much of HR. 4323, the bill deceptively entitled “The Neighborhood Schools Improvement Act,” and little of the Senate education bill S.2. Senator Edward Kennedy, the Massachusetts Democrat, accurately described the conference report as “a significant expansion of the federal government’s role in education.” It is also the antithesis of reform, and richly deserves a veto.

Last year, the Bush Administration authored legislation intended to achieve fundamental education reform by “reinventing” the American School system. The *America 2000* legislation sought to restore control of education to parents and teachers by expanding parental choice, giving teachers and principals more flexibility, instituting national testing, and creating new kinds of schools.

But the reform encountered fierce opposition on Capitol Hill as first the Senate and then the House stripped the legislation of its most significant reform provisions.

The new House and Senate “compromise bill” to be sent to the White House closely resembles the House bill, HR. 4323, which U.S. Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander described as a “terrible bill” that is “even worse than worse than awful.” Even House Education and Labor Committee Chairman William Ford, the Michigan Democrat who co-sponsored the bill with Kennedy, has admitted that the bill is “all cliches and show business. It’s not going to revolutionize anything.”

Despite its title, the compromise bill does nothing at all to improve neighborhood schools. In fact, the bill’s only effect will be to increase the power of the education *status quo*, by pouring \$821 million of additional taxpayer money into the same bureaucracy that currently consumes close to 50 percent of the money spent on the education of American children.

Specifically, the compromise bill:

- ✓ **Rejects School Choice:** While both S.2 and HR.4323 ignored the President’s proposal to permit parents to choose the school for their child, including private and parochial schools, S.2 would have permitted the use of limited federal reform funds for public school choice programs. The compromise version, however, strips even the minimal public school choice language from the bill. The bill makes sure that schools are not answerable to parents.
- ✓ **Increases Bureaucracy.** The bill allocates \$821 million new federal dollars to create new layers of bureaucracy on the national, state and local levels. Little of the new money will even make it to classrooms. The bill specifies that all the money will go to these bureaucrats the first year. All authority stays with the status quo. Parents, business, and governors—the true agents of reform—are relegated to advisory roles. And the state education bureaucracy can spend the new funds on almost anything related to education, regardless of whether it improves student achievement or promotes accountability.

- ✓ **Bureaucratizes New American Schools.** The Senate bill did include watered-down provisions for creating “New American Schools,” experimental schools intended to test innovative programs and approaches. But the compromise bill ignores *America 2000*’s call for more community involvement in the creation of New American Schools, and it does not allocate any funds to help create the schools. Indeed, the bill does not even reference New American Schools as one of allowable activities that may be funded.
- ✓ **Frustrates Regulatory Flexibility.** The President’s *America 2000* legislation would have reduced the red tape now suffocating innovative teachers and principals in America’s 110,000 schools. But the bill grudgingly provides limited flexibility to a mere 750 schools nationwide by granting them federal waivers to improve academic performance. Furthermore, these 750 schools must go through a maze of extra red tape if they are to participate in the waiver program.
- ✓ **Increases Federal Control of Schools.** The compromise bill increases the power of the “National Education Goals Panel” by creating a new layer of bureaucracy within the panel to develop national “school delivery standards.” The new entity will be comprised of “civil rights group and organizations,” “representatives of federally-funded entities,” “representatives of regional accrediting associations,” and “chief state school officers,” among others. The entity will make decisions currently made at the state and local levels in areas such as curriculum, facilities, teacher quality, instructional material and teacher practices. This federal rule book for schools would dictate such things as how teachers should teach, maximum class size, and discipline policies and procedures. Congress would be able to impose these national requirements as a condition of federal funding. Communities, school boards, teachers, and principals would be stripped of much of their ability to decide how best to educate the children of their community.
- ✓ **Encourages School-Based Clinics.** While refusing to cut red tape to help teachers teach and managers manage, the compromise bill does clear away administrative hurdles to more social services and health clinics in schools. It permits federal education money to be used for the “coordination” of health, rehabilitation, and social services with education and allows funds under the act to support school-based clinics that provide birth control and abortion counseling.

Like other Americans who recognize that America’s schools need fundamental reform, President Bush asked Congress for legislation that would shake up school bureaucracy and improve American education. Ignoring his requests, Congress instead has increased federal funding to bureaucrats while completely failing to institute reform.

Lawmakers have failed America’s children and used hundreds of millions of federal dollars to strengthen the bureaucracy that is stifling the improvement of the nation’s schools. If Congress is ever to enact real reforms, George Bush has no choice but to veto this bill.

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