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GOALS 2000: THE "WASHINGTON KNOWS BEST" APPROACH TO SCHOOL REFORM

INTRODUCTION

While President Bill Clinton's long-anticipated health care plan has attracted the most attention on Capitol Hill in recent weeks, a major education bill has been moving through Congress. The House quietly passed H.R. 1804, the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, on October 13, and the Senate is expected to vote on the measure (S. 846) soon. Unfortunately for America's schoolchildren, the House-passed measure is likely to slow needed reform by encouraging more "inputs," or money and new regulation, rather than rewarding "outputs," or genuine results and innovation, and by creating new bureaucracies that are likely to obstruct change. If school reform is to be fostered in America, the Senate should reject the House's call for new federal mandates, and instead make it easier for states and localities to experiment with innovative ideas like school choice.

During the 1992 presidential election campaign, candidate Clinton promised to "revolutionize, revitalize, and reform education." As President, he could accomplish much of this worthy objective by giving reform-minded states and cities greater latitude to experiment. But the House bill would shift more responsibility for American education from state and local governments to the federal government, as federal "opportunity-to-learn" standards, in effect, force state and local governments to comply with new federal regulations.¹ These standards are central to *Goals 2000*.

1 According to the U.S. Department of Education's *Digest of Education Statistics 1992*, the federal government provides only six percent of the funding for elementary and secondary education. Despite this meager amount of funding, federal regulations control how state and local resources are to be spent. For some of the problems of unfunded mandates, see Matthew Rees, "The Mandate Millstone," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 18, 1993, p. A10, and G. Tracy Mehan, III, "'The Buck's Passed Here': Unfunded Mandates for State and Local Governments," *Heritage Lecture* No. 467, September 22, 1993.

This would happen because the *Goals 2000* legislation creates a new federal bureaucracy, the National Education Standards and Improvement Council (NESIC), with powers to control many decisions that today are in the domain of state and local governments. In particular, the NESIC would be able to mandate states to institute opportunity-to-learn standards, a concept rejected last year by Congress during the debate on President George Bush's *America 2000* proposal.

"Opportunity-to-learn" standards are federal mandates that, among other things, may set:

- ✓ national standards for spending;
- ✓ uniform material requirements for schools;
- ✓ instructional practices;
- ✓ curriculum;
- ✓ professional certification for teachers and principals; and
- ✓ limits on class size.

The Clinton Administration, like the House bill, is hiding behind the vague definition of opportunity-to-learn standards to avoid specifying exactly what would comprise these federal standards. The House version of *Goals 2000* in effect gives the government a blank check to set up operational standards for all public schools in America. The sponsors of the legislation maintain that the standards will be voluntary. But attorney Jonathan Wilson, a participant on the Implementation Task Force of the National Council on Education Standards and Testing, notes,

You can say that it's voluntary, but it won't be. I'm a lawyer... all I need from you to get me in court that I don't have now is [school delivery or opportunity-to-learn standards]. Because I have got state law that constitutionally says that you have got to provide an adequate education, and the thing that keeps me from going to court is I don't have a measure for what that is. You give it to me, and I'll get things required—not voluntary.²

In addition, the Clinton Administration already has presented a plan to reauthorize the \$10 billion Elementary and Secondary Education Act in such a way as to cut off federal funding for any school system failing to abide by the *Goals 2000* legislation.

Furthermore, the House legislation permits the NESIC to require any other factors it "deems appropriate to ensure the students receive a fair opportunity to achieve the knowledge and skills described in the voluntary content and student performance standards certified by the Council."

2 See minutes from the National Council on Education Standards and Testing, Implementation Task Force, October 30, 1991, pp. 72-73.

The opportunity-to-learn standards will not spur creativity and leadership by school principals and teachers. Instead, they will engulf schools with federal red tape and frustrate the innovation and flexibility that have proven to be key components in successful local reform efforts. Moreover, the new rules, if enacted, will require schools to focus their attention on the bureaucratic process of reaching targets for spending and other specified "inputs," and not on the educational process of discovering what is needed to raise the achievement level of students—the "output."

The *Goals 2000* bill, with its opportunity-to-learn standards, thus will prescribe more bureaucracy for what ails America's schools. America's education system does not need more regulation, it needs deregulation and the removal of red tape. Instead of tying federal money to compliance with federal regulations, the Senate should promote real reform initiatives, like school choice, that encourage innovation and force schools to satisfy the expectations of parents.

ANOTHER BUREAUCRACY FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Goals 2000 will create a new independent agency, the National Education Standards and Improvement Council (NESIC), which will serve as a federal oversight body. Under the House-passed version (H.R. 1804), sponsored by Representatives William Ford and Dale Kildee, both Michigan Democrats, twenty members will serve on the NESIC. Of these, eight will be appointed by the President, four by the Speaker of the House of Representatives, four by the majority leader of the Senate, and four by the National Education Goals Panel.

In effect, the NESIC will function as a national school board. However, this unelected body is likely to be dominated by the education establishment, not by parents and grass roots reformers. The House bill requires the appointment of five professional educators, five representatives of business and industry, organized labor, and postsecondary educational institutions, five representatives of advocacy groups, and five education experts. Under the House version, there will be no requirement of bipartisanship or balance on the NESIC.

The Senate version of *Goals 2000* (S. 846), sponsored by Senator Edward M. Kennedy, the Massachusetts Democrat, authorizes nineteen NESIC members. The President would be able to select these nineteen from a list of sixty nominees prepared for him by the National Education Goals Panel. In both the House and the Senate versions of *Goals 2000*, this new federal bureaucracy will remove much of the control of neighborhood schools from individual communities. Notes John Norquist, the Democratic Mayor of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, "The further the bureaucracy is from the classroom, the less relevant it is for education."³

3 Curtis Lawrence, "Norquist Favors Cutting Education Departments," *The Milwaukee Journal*, September 20, 1993, p. B1.

The Senate would be wise to eliminate NESIC funding from its bill and instead use the money to encourage states to experiment with school choice and other innovative reform ideas.

THE FAULTY CASE FOR "INPUT" STANDARDS

After creating an intrusive federal bureaucracy, the House bill uses this new council to establish opportunity-to-learn standards that require schools to use resources in certain ways, despite the numerous studies that demonstrate that these do not lead to results in education. While the specific requirements are left to the Council, these will likely reflect the "solutions" to the education crisis that are fashionable in education establishment circles.

Among the likely requirements:

Mandating Levels of Spending Per Pupil

The push in many states for equal spending in schools continues despite the fact that studies show expenditures per pupil have little to do with student performance. The House version of *Goals 2000* requires that schools receive the "resources necessary to provide an opportunity to learn." Yet education analysts John Chubb and Terry Moe explained in their exhaustive study, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, "School resources do not have a significant, independent effect on achievement gains."⁴ In the House version of *Goals 2000*, the opportunity-to-learn standards will present plenty of opportunities for lawyers to file spending equalization suits. "I see this as the lawyer's civil relief act of 1992," said Jonathan Wilson when the idea of standards was debated in the last Congress, "Just keep coming!"⁵

Despite the lack of any evidence that there is a systematic relationship between expenditures and student performance, the underlying thesis of *Goals 2000's* opportunity-to-learn standards is that school districts with less money necessarily must be doing a worse job educating children than wealthy school districts. Thus, many in the education establishment have been pushing for raising per-pupil expenditures in lower spending districts to improve achievement levels. Spending equalization plans already have been introduced in many states, including California, Florida, Kansas,

4 John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1990), p. 125. See also Eric Hanushek, "The Impact of Differential Expenditures on School Performance," *Educational Researcher*, May 1989; Herbert Walberg and William J. Fowler, Jr., "Expenditure and Size Efficiencies of Public School Districts," *Educational Researcher*, October 1987; Richard Vedder, "Dollars and Educational Achievement: Ohio and the Nation," Contemporary History Institute, Ohio University, 1992; and John Hood, "Education: Is America Spending Too Much?" *Cato Policy Analysis* No. 126, January 18, 1990.

5 See minutes from the National Council on Education Standards and Testing, Implementation Task Force, October 30, 1991, pp. 72-73.

North Carolina, and Texas. The early evidence suggests they do not work. For instance, a recent study by the Dallas-based National Center for Policy Analysis concludes, "Texans are now paying about \$1 billion a year in additional property taxes. Yet, contrary to widespread impressions, little has been achieved by way of greater equality of spending."⁶ And as John Hood, research director of the John Locke Foundation in North Carolina, notes, "Equity reforms do everything that research says is wasteful and counterproductive: redistribute funds from rich to poor districts; increase centralized state control over curriculum and management; and focus public and governmental attention on teachers' salaries, class sizes, and per pupil spending."⁷

Despite the lack of any evidence supporting their position, proponents of spending equalization already have laid the groundwork for equalizing spending nationwide by constantly repeating the mantra that equal spending is the key to better results. Achieving nationwide equalization would be made easier through *Goals 2000's* opportunity-to-learn standards.

Building Requirements

The House version of *Goals 2000* requires that "school facilities provide a safe and secure environment for learning and instruction." This requirement may lead to national school building standards. Resource and building requirements will be costly and yet will have little relevance to improvement in educational performance. One need look no further than the delays and confusion surrounding the new school year in New York City to see the possible problems with mandating building requirements. Delays were caused by city authorities instituting asbestos standards in the city schools. Despite many similar interruptions over the past fourteen years and more than \$10 million spent on asbestos removal, the Board of Education in New York City, notes columnist George Will, still cannot tell parents which "schools have been inspected, let alone which were safe."⁸

Federally mandated building requirements, such as asbestos removal, would be likely under the opportunity-to-learn standards in *Goals 2000*. Yet despite the expense involved and the educational costs of missed schooling, the increase in safety is negligible. Observes Will, "The risk of dying prematurely from asbestosis because of exposure in schools is estimated as about one-third the risk of being struck by lightning, 1,600 times less likely than death from smoking. And of course the risk of asbestosis is much less than the risk of being shot or stabbed to death in a New York public school."⁹

6 Kathy J. Hayes and Daniel J. Slottje, "Rethinking Robin Hood," *NCPA Policy Report* No. 179, April 1993, p. 15.

7 Hood, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.

8 George Will, "Public School Shambles," *The Washington Post*, September 16, 1993, p. A29.

9 *Ibid.*

Specifying Teaching Methods

Opportunity-to-learn standards also are an invitation to the federal government to control what goes on inside classrooms. For instance, the bill requires that instructional practices, or teaching methods, be “aligned to content standards.”

Mandating instructional practices will frustrate teachers and harm students. Telling teachers how they must present their lesson will sap the initiative of entrepreneurial teachers who are willing to experiment with different ways of teaching children. And such rules treat all children alike. Children learn in different ways, and teachers must be able to use the teaching method that best fits the student.

Creating a National Curriculum

Opportunity-to-learn standards are likely to open the door for a national curriculum, as several House members remarked during the debate over *Goals 2000*. According to the House bill, “curriculum [must be]... aligned to content standards.”

The idea of a national curriculum rightly worries many local school boards and parents. The bitter dispute last year over a “politically correct” school curriculum for New York City is an indication of the divisive struggle likely over any national curriculum. And like the other possible opportunity-to-learn standards, implementing a national curriculum would be costly and create a cumbersome federal bureaucracy. As researchers at a recent American Educational Research Association forum concluded, “Instead of raising student achievement... [a national curriculum] could end up... creating a costly bureaucracy that would take away funds from instruction.”¹⁰

Standardizing Professional Certification

Another opportunity-to-learn standard in the House version of the bill aims to ensure the “capability of teachers to provide high-quality instruction.” This is another way of saying that the teacher certification system will be federalized. While this may sound like a good idea, federalizing the traditional certification system is not the answer. According to David Kirkpatrick, an educational consultant and author, the evidence does not show any great deal of difference between the “quality and effectiveness of noncertified teachers and those who are certified.”¹¹

10 Robert Rothman, “Researchers Wave Caution Flag Over National Curriculum,” *Education Week*, June 23, 1993, p. 5.

11 David W. Kirkpatrick, “Rethinking Teacher Certification,” *The Commonwealth Foundation Issue Brief*, August 1992, p. 1. For further evidence on the ineffectiveness of teacher certification see *Continuity and Discontinuity, Higher Education and the Schools* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973) and Arthur Betor, *Educational Wastelands* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

National certification standards would block a welcome trend in recent years. A number of states, such as New Jersey, have introduced "alternative" certification procedures to make it easier for individuals with considerable experience in such fields as science and mathematics to enter the teaching profession. This has helped to improve the quality of teaching and deal with shortages in certain areas of teaching. A national certification standard likely would make it much more difficult for states to attract such experienced individuals into teaching.

The push for national teacher certification is being led by the teacher unions. Albert Shanker of the American Federation of Teachers and Keith Geiger of the National Education Association both have called for "higher standards in testing teacher competence and in accrediting teachers' colleges."¹² Like all other occupational licensing, the established teachers have the most to gain from certification because, by raising the requirements for credentials to become a teacher, they narrow the prospective number of teachers. This action serves to artificially raise their wages. It is significant that while the teacher unions support certification, they oppose all other measures such as merit pay and career ladders that attempt to reward good teachers.

Reducing Class Size

Reducing class size is another favorite remedy for opportunity-to-learn supporters. The education establishment insists that large classes are a major reason why schools are failing. This notion that smaller class size will lead to better performance continues despite research showing little connection, including a 1988 study by the U.S. Department of Education that concluded, "The relationship between standardized test scores and class size is erratic at best and typically inconsistent with the thesis that smaller class sizes lead to higher achievement."¹³ The District of Columbia has the lowest pupil/teacher ratio in the nation, yet is ranked 49th in SAT scores. Meanwhile, Utah has the highest pupil/teacher ratio in the nation yet has the fourth highest SAT scores. Significantly, while the average pupil/teacher ratio has declined steadily for the past thirty years, the performance of American students has declined drastically during the same period.

International comparisons also show little evidence that smaller class size leads to higher performance. For instance, Japan has the highest average mathematics class size in the industrialized world, yet leads the world in math achievement; the United States has a relatively small class size and ranks near the bottom in most international assessments.¹⁴

12 Carl F. Horowitz, "The Right Solution for Schools: More Money, Higher Standards, or Greater Choice?" *Investor's Business Daily*, June 4, 1993, p. 2.

13 Tommy M. Tomlinson, *Class Size and Public Policy: Politics and Panaceas* (U.S. Department of Education: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1988), p. 1.

Reducing class size is unlikely to improve student achievement. The one thing that reducing class size *will* lead to is a costlier education system.

Discouraging Innovation

Thomas Payzant, Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education at the Education Department, claims that opportunity-to-learn standards will “pick up states where they are and provide support and encouragement for them to keep moving in that direction.”¹⁵ More likely they will simply mean a federal obstacle to such reform efforts such as school choice and site-based management that are beginning to revitalize the education system. As Senator Orrin Hatch, the Utah Republican, notes in the case of his own state, “The standards-driven approach... could conceivably hurt our efforts at improving education in our state by forcing the state to adopt federal priorities and to redirect resources away from ongoing state efforts... to meet national content and delivery standards.”¹⁶

By mandating procedures in this way the federal government will intrude into an area that historically has been the domain of state and local government. South Carolina’s Republican Governor Carroll Campbell, who was co-chairman of a panel that helped develop the original framework of the Clinton plan, has warned that opportunity-to-learn standards mean “the federal government will be taking over education. They say they won’t, but they’re riding down a slippery slope.”¹⁷

Even American Federation of Teachers president Shanker believes it is wrong to assume that better alternatives will follow directly from resource requirements. According to Shanker, any new council that does this “will be paralyzed [and] unlikely...to achieve its mission of certifying world-class [achievement] standards for students.”¹⁸ As Jeanne Allen, President of the National Center for Education Reform, has observed, “The role of the federal government in...[the reform] 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.”¹⁹

Removing stifling federal regulations and giving states and localities the freedom to experiment with innovative ideas is the best thing the federal government can do for American schools and children. Opportunity-to-

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 28-30.

15 Jill Zuckerman, "School Aid to be Tied to States' Standards," *The Washington Times*, September 14, 1993, p. A4.

16 "GOP Criticizes Reform Bill For Being Too Top Heavy," *Education Daily*, May 5, 1993, p. 1.

17 Dan Hoover, "Riley Unveils Education Plan; National Standards At Core," *The News* (Greenville, S.C.), April 22, 1993, p. 6C.

18 Bruno V. Manno, "Deliver Us From Clinton's Schools Bill," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 22, 1993, p. A14.

19 Jeanne Allen, "Improving Education: Lessons from the States," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders* No. 670, September 9, 1988, p. 9.

learn standards will instead do just the opposite. As Roy Romer, Colorado's Democratic Governor, and former chairman of the National Governors' Association, has told Administration officials, "You don't want to get into the business of defining how many textbooks we have, and we don't want to be in the business of filling out forms."²⁰

CONCLUSION

President Clinton has promised "to revolutionize, revitalize, and reform education." But his plan will accomplish none of these goals. In fact, the *Goals 2000* bill's opportunity-to-learn standards, as passed by the House, will tend only to stifle successful local initiatives, such as school choice, that are beginning to sweep the nation. These federal mandates will lead to more paperwork, meetings, and bureaucracy, not reform. While not specifying the standards, *Goals 2000* will give a new federal council enormous power to micromanage how schools are run.

If real reform is to be encouraged, and measurable student achievement rather than spending is to be the benchmark for success, the Senate must save America's schools from opportunity-to-learn standards. To the extent that federal funds are used to promote change, money should be provided to states to experiment with such reforms as school choice, charter schools, and site-based management. These encourage innovation and give parents greater powers to demand genuine results. Most important, the Senate not only should avoid putting further regulations on state and local schools, it should give school districts more latitude to innovate by granting waivers of federal red tape.

Reforming America's failing education system will not be achieved by pouring more money into districts. It requires existing money to be spent differently. Nor will it be achieved by the federal government creating new councils and imposing new rules on school districts and principals, as *Goals 2000* would do. Reform instead will come instead from the grass roots—and that requires Washington to curb its instinct to run America's schools.

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20 Robert Rothman, "N.G.A. Hears Range of Views on 'Opportunity' Standards," *Education Week*, May 26, 1993, p. 16.