

## ABRAHAM AMENDMENT WOULD GIVE HOPE TO AMERICA'S FAILING EDUCATION SYSTEM

The year-old Goals 2000 legislation, President Clinton's most important education program, has been a failure. Instead of "revolutionizing, revitalizing and reforming" America's schools, as President Clinton promised, Goals 2000 actually has slowed the process of change.<sup>1</sup> It has created suffocating new government bureaucracies, increased federal regulations, and boosted federal spending. Worse still, it threatens to undermine progress to improve American education performance by encouraging schools to ignore academic "outputs"—real results—and focus instead on obtaining federal dollars by showing Washington that more money is being spent on "inputs." The program also threatens the relationship of students and their families to the education process.

Continued taxpayer funding for Goals 2000 will only strengthen the federal government's power to control local reform efforts and so hamper grass-roots reform. It is time for Congress to terminate the program and divert the money to real reform. A proposal by Senator Spencer Abraham (R-MI) would do this through the appropriations process.

Goals 2000 has failed America's schools in two important ways:

**1) Building Bureaucracies.** Under Goals 2000, three new government bureaucracies were created: the National Education Goals Panel, the National Education Standards and Improvement Council (NESIC), and the National Skills Board. These bureaucracies continue the old, outdated traditions of "command-control" organization that continues to keep control of schools in the hands of education "producers" rather than "consumers."

**2) Federalizing Education.** While Goals 2000 pays lip service to local control, the legislation comes dangerously close to mandating a watered-down national curriculum designed in Washington. The federal government's preliminary foray into identifying national history standards met bitter criticism that the standards were diluted and politically correct. Indeed the proposed standards so clearly distorted American history that the Senate rebuffed them by a 99-1 vote on January 18.<sup>2</sup> This episode indicates one of the inherent dangers in the Goals 2000 approach. If NESIC's members were appointed, it would become a *de facto* national school board whose 19 members would approve or disapprove all state-developed plans to meet goals set by the Education Goals Panel. Continuing attempts to "federalize" state and local education discourages real innovation and inhibits the most important school reform initiative of the decade: the movement toward privatization and school choice.

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1 For a detailed description of Goals 2000, see Allyson M. Tucker, "Goals 2000: Stifling Grass Roots Education Reform," Heritage Foundation *Issue Bulletin* No. 182, July 14, 1993, and William F. Lauber, "Goals 2000: The 'Washington Knows Best' Approach to School Reform," Heritage Foundation *Issue Bulletin* No. 185, November 16, 1993.

2 The National Standards for United States History gives a distorted and politically correct view of American history. For instance, George Washington is mentioned only briefly, while the founding of the Sierra Club and the National Organization for Women is given great attention. For a critique of the history standards, see Lynne V. Cheney, "The End of History," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 20, 1994, p. A22. Also see Carol Innerst, "History Rewritten for the Classroom," *The Washington Times*, October 26, 1994, p. A1.

The states, on their own initiative, already have begun to reject federal interference in schooling. "Outcomes Based Education" (OBE), a favorite idea of the education establishment, has offended and alienated thoughtful teachers and parents across the country and has mobilized opposition to the federal role. Four states—Montana, New Hampshire, Virginia, and, most recently, Alabama—have turned down Goals 2000 funding, refusing to permit more federal intrusion.

It is clearly time to end Goals 2000. In debating the FY 1996 Labor/HHS appropriations bill, Members of Congress have an opportunity to do this. They could do so by adding Senator Abraham's proposal to Senator Dan Coats's (R-IN) amendment to the appropriations bill, the Educational Choice and Equality Act of 1995.

Senator Abraham's proposal is direct and straightforward. It eliminates Goals 2000 outright. The \$310 million appropriated in the Labor/HHS report for FY 1996 under Goals 2000 would be transferred into two innovative education approaches to school reform:

- ① A "school choice" demonstration program and
- ② Charter schools.

Under the Abraham proposal, federal funds would be available for new and innovative approaches to school reform. Moreover, the Abraham proposal puts the federal government on record as supporting students and their families rather than institutions, using the GI Bill as its precedent.

In all other aspects of American life, choice among providers is a priceless asset, putting power in the hands of consumers. Only in elementary and secondary education is choice reserved for the well-to-do. If enacted, the Abraham proposal would put school choice within the reach of countless poor youngsters who are now held hostage to a public school system in disarray. It also would stimulate the development of charter schools, a promising avenue of locally generated reform that could help revitalize faltering public school systems.

Most important to those Americans committed to the principles of federalism and school reform, under the Abraham proposal funds would go directly to reform programs already supported by a majority of the nation's governors. That means the money would bypass the institutions and agencies largely committed to the status quo and special interest groups.

Unlike President Clinton, Vice-President Gore, and many Members of Congress, who are wealthy enough to send their children to the private school of their choice, poor and middle class parents are left with the public school monopoly.<sup>3</sup> In many instances, this means that children are condemned to schools that can no longer teach simple reading and math adequately yet are expected to grapple with reform under the constraints and the restrictions imposed by Goals 2000.

Senator Abraham's proposal would end the federal government's ability to impose new mandates on schools, teachers, and parents. Instead, the proposal gives states the ability to enact school choice programs which allow every child in the American education system the opportunity to step out from under the shadow of the federal government.

Goals 2000 fails America's schools and America's school children. Reforming America's education system cannot be achieved with more federal intrusion. Existing funds must be spent more wisely and academic priorities established state by state. No one in Washington—certainly no employee of the U.S. Department of Education—knows more about education priorities than parents and teachers or the nation's governors.

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3 See Allyson M. Tucker and William F. Lauber, "How Members of Congress Exercise School Choice," Heritage Foundation *F.Y.I.* No. 9, February 1, 1994.