

Rethinking  
the Federal Role  
in Elementary  
and Secondary  
Education

# Summaries of Commissioned Papers

CENTER ON  
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POLICY **CEP**

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# Rethinking the Federal Role in Elementary and Secondary Education

In 2008 and 2009, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) commissioned a series of major papers to assist in rethinking the federal role in elementary and secondary education. Authors were asked to review areas of activity in which the federal government has been involved over the past half century, determine the purposes of the federal programs, examine the evidence of their effect on education, and make recommendations for the future role of the federal government in public education. CEP also convened a series of public forums to discuss many of the papers.

Later in 2009, the Center on Education Policy will issue a set of recommendations for President Obama and the Congress for shaping the federal role in elementary and secondary education. These recommendations will draw upon the evidence-based analysis presented in these papers.

Following are summaries of the papers arranged by order of commission.

Full papers can be found on CEP's Web site ([www.cep-dc.org](http://www.cep-dc.org)) under "Rethinking the Federal Role" tab on the left side of CEP's home page.

## Summaries of Commissioned Papers

### Federal Aid to Elementary and Secondary Education: Premises, Effects, and Major Lessons Learned

**Paul Manna**

*College of William and Mary*

This paper examines Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and two federal efforts to improve teacher quality—the Eisenhower Professional Development Program and the highly qualified teacher provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act. Three research questions drive the analysis: (1) What are the major premises and intended effects of these programs? (2) What have been the actual effects of these programs? (3) What can one conclude about the ability of the federal government to effectively provide aid for elementary and secondary education?

Based on the track record of these initiatives, the evidence shows that when federal policymakers act in education they are effective in defining broad goals, forcing or redirecting activity at lower levels of government, redistributing resources, and gathering or forcing into the open information about pressing needs, important trends, and promising educational practices. Given the political incentives to which federal leaders respond and their lack of power over curriculum and teaching practices, they are less effective at passing focused, coherent, and mutually reinforcing policies that produce educationally substantive results than they are in primarily procedural ones. Recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of their positions can help federal policymakers make the most of their capabilities and, in the process, help states and localities make the most of theirs.

### Standards-Based Reform in the United States: History, Research, and Future Directions

**Laura S. Hamilton, Brian M. Stecher, and Kun Yuan**

*RAND Corporation*

Standards-based reforms (SBR) have become widespread across the United States, and although they take many forms, most include some or all of the following features: clear academic expectations for students, alignment of the key elements of the educational system to promote attainment of these expectations, the use of achievement tests to monitor performance, decentralization of responsibility for decisions relating to curriculum and instruction to schools, support and technical assistance to foster improve-

ment, and accountability provisions that reward or sanction. Research on SBR suggests that these systems have led to both desirable and undesirable changes in school curricula and instructional practices. Whether or not these changes have resulted in improved student learning is an unresolved question, in part because high stakes often lead to inflated test scores that provide inaccurate indications of students' achievement.

This paper offers several recommendations for federal efforts to improve SBR: (1) Develop and fund mechanisms to help states improve standards and assessments; (2) Develop accountability indices that create more effective incentives (e.g., by measuring growth); (3) Experiment with alternative SBR approaches such as varying the strength of the incentives or the level of prescriptiveness of the standards; (4) Continue to use and broaden the National Assessment of Educational Progress to compare performance across states and monitor achievement on subjects not typically included in state accountability systems; and (5) Support more rigorous evaluation of SBR. The paper also argues for a widespread rethinking of SBR to create a broader view of accountability and address the multiple outcomes that schools are expected to produce. This would include the implementation of a broad-based indicator system that incorporates information other than student test scores.

## The Role of Assessment in Federal Education Programs

**W. James Popham**

*University of California, Los Angeles*

This paper reviews the federal government's past influence on educational assessments and recognizes the potential of accountability tests to alter classroom instruction. During the past 50 years, the function of federally engendered educational assessments has shifted from monitoring the use of federal funds for programs prescribed for statute-specified student populations to assuring the academic achievement of all students. Federal sway over state-level accountability testing reached its zenith recently because of key federal legislation enacted shortly after the turn of the century. Against this backdrop, the author provides a serviceable framework for rethinking an appropriate federal role in U.S. educational testing.

Two dominant questions are addressed: (1) What level of control should the federal government have over educational accountability tests? and (2) What should be the measurement mission(s) of those tests? The author presents different control options for accountability tests, ranging from zero federal control to total federal control. He then considers three design dimensions that will govern the degree to which an accountability test is apt to have a beneficial impact on instruction, accountability, or curriculum.

He concludes that especially through the various reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, not only has the federal influence on the nature of U.S. accountability tests markedly intensified during the last half-century, but the range of stu-

dents affected by these tests has also expanded dramatically. Although federal laws relating to education—the laws themselves—have definitely had an impact on both instructional practices and the curriculum, thus far the accountability tests spawned by federal laws—the tests themselves—have been designed only to support accountability functions, not instructional or curricular initiatives. Though no advocacy stance is taken regarding either an optimal control-option or appropriate design-dimensions, it is argued that these two issues should frame any serious rethinking of what should be a suitable federal role in educational assessment.

## Demographic Trends and the Federal Role in Education

**Harold Hodgkinson**

*Hodgkinson Associates, Ltd.*

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, minorities—now about a third of the U.S. population—will become the majority in 2042, and 54% by 2050. Thirty-six million Americans were born in another country. We are a nation of transients, with 40 million of us moving every year. The definition of family has changed in the last two decades. Social policy at all levels ignores these changes, as well as the most important factor: We have the highest rate of children raised in poverty of any developed nation, with no plan for lowering the rate. The top 1% of the population in the U.S. and the world controls 40% of the wealth. Job structure in the United States relates to this. Five million new high-tech jobs will be created by 2010, while 25 million low-skill, minimum-wage jobs requiring several hours of on-the-job training will be created by 2010. What sort of public school education should these workers get?

The Constitution says virtually nothing about the education of people under 18, except that the federal government will issue annually a report on the condition of education in America. Over the years, we have evolved into a system of local, state, and national/federal decision making. At all levels, autonomy is far more the rule than is reciprocity.

But there are some things that can only be done at the federal level—making sure that data are calculated the same way in every state (e.g. dropout rates); assuring that states/localities are providing special programs for students with disabilities, students who don't speak English well, and students living in poverty; making sure that federal funds (Title I, school lunch, school construction) are being spent responsively, with good accounting for costs; and disseminating promising new practices to the nation. The author argues that the one thing that would change the country for the better would be to reduce the number of poor people by half, starting with the youngest children. Reducing childhood poverty would require the participation of leaders at all levels, but there is no question that it could be done.

## The Federal Role in Education: Lessons from Australia, Germany, and Canada

**Chad R. Lykins and Stephen P. Heyneman**

*Vanderbilt University*

While it is common to look abroad for innovative approaches to federal education policy, the government structure of education reform is often underappreciated. The authors argue that the structural parallels between the United States and other federal systems in Canada, Australia, and Germany make them particularly useful places to look for federal policy innovations. In each country, authority over most matters of education resides ultimately in the state and local communities. The role of central federal authorities includes helping states and local communities perform more efficiently and more effectively.

Despite rather weak constitutional powers, federal governments are finding ways to improve student outcomes. This sometimes involves going beyond traditional roles. Federal assistance may go beyond the most recent wave of reforms that focus on accountability. The most promising federal reforms create a policy environment which not only demands but enables student achievement. The report highlights four areas in which increased federal involvement can allow state and local agencies to better provide equitable and excellent education: early childhood education, teacher recruitment, retention and ease of transfer, and tracking transfer students.

## Advancing ECE<sup>2</sup> Policy: Early Childhood Education (ECE) and its Quest for Excellence, Coherence, and Equity (ECE)

**Sharon L. Kagan, Ed.D. and Jeanne L. Reid, M.P.A.**

*Teachers College, Columbia University*

The history of American early education is one of changing roles and goals. As federal engagement in early childhood has responded to shifting social, political, and economic needs, comparatively few policy efforts have focused on long-term planning or coordination. Such inattention has yielded a set of unresolved polemics, reflecting an enduring ambivalence about whether and which children should be served outside their homes, by whom, and with what purpose. These polemics have helped to shape a fractured landscape of programs, dispersed across federal agencies and legislative committees, which beg for greater excellence, coherence, and equity.

This paper reviews the historical context for contemporary early care and education, spanning 19<sup>th</sup>-century social welfare programs for the poor, major federal policy innovations of the 1960s, and current research and policy. The authors highlight four salient les-

sons that should guide federal policy going forward: (1) Gaps in data hinder efforts to create effective early education policy and programs; (2) States vary widely in the quality and extent of early education programs that their families can afford; (3) The connection between infrastructure and quality is unavoidable; and (4) Federal and state governments must work together in partnership to create effective policies and programs that serve American families. Drawing lessons from this background, the authors offer recommendations and strategies for enhancing services to young children. In framing next-generation early education efforts, the authors advance the purpose, “ECE for ECE,” or ECE<sup>2</sup>, with the former ECE referring to Excellence, Coherence, and Equity, and the latter ECE referring to Early Childhood Education. To this end, they recommend a blend of market-driven and federal policy approaches to creating a comprehensive, research-based early childhood education system.

## The Federal Role in Out-of-School Learning: After-School, Summer Learning, and Family Involvement as Critical Learning Supports

**Heather B. Weiss, Priscilla M.D. Little, Suzanne M. Bouffard,**

**Sarah N. Deschenes, and Helen Janc Malone**

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What, in conjunction with good schools, is necessary to increase the chances that all children, especially disadvantaged ones, will enter and leave school with the skills they need for 21<sup>st</sup>-century success? Forty years of research make it clear that out-of-school learning—family involvement in children’s education, after-school programs, summer learning opportunities—all contribute to in-school success for children and youth. This report makes a research-based case for federal provision of such out-of-school learning supports, or “complementary learning,” from birth through high school, particularly for poor children, so that all students gain the skills that educators, employers, and economists agree are necessary for success as citizens, parents, and workers. Federal strategies are offered for building state and local capacity for complementary learning supports that measurably contribute to children’s academic and personal development; also described are legislative and policy tools and examples of public–private partnerships that enable innovation, accountability, and evaluation for complementary learning pathways. If the country is to achieve its national goal of all children achieving at higher levels, it is necessary to redefine learning—both where and when it takes place—and to follow up with innovations that enable communities to move to complementary learning.

## From PLATO to Podcasts: Fifty years of Federal Involvement in Educational Technology

**Mathew Cherian**

*Graduate Student, Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

This paper examines the federal government's role in educational technology over the past 50 years by analyzing five programs that had significant federal involvement: Sesame Street, PLATO, Computer-assisted instruction (CAI) at Stanford, Star Schools, and E-Rate.

Several key questions are explored in this paper: What effect has the use of technology had on student achievement? What effect has educational technology had on the achievement gap and the issue of equity in general? What were the intended and actual effects of the programs?

A review of the literature on these programs highlights five observations: (1) The five programs succeeded in achieving their goals; (2) The most successful programs had an extensive federal role in the design and implementation stages; (3) Legislative language that has promoted the use of particular technologies has often led to the introduction of outdated equipment and methods due to the rapid evolution of technology; (4) Without the involvement of the federal government, educational technology would not have reached disadvantaged students and communities, including rural areas and inner cities, to the extent it has; and (5) Although educational technology has been shown to produce learning gains, it has done so only in a supplementary role and in certain subject areas.

In light of these observations, the following recommendations are offered to policymakers to guide the future federal role in this area: (1) More funds should be made available in the form of grants, which would allow the flexibility and innovation researchers need to develop new technologies; (2) The federal government must ensure that enough resources are available for developing new technologies as well as implementation and other services associated with the products; and (3) Supplementary funding should be provided to underprivileged areas that lack adequate resources.

## National Efforts to Bring Reform to Scale in America's High-Poverty Elementary and Secondary Schools: Outcomes and Implications

**Geoffrey D. Borman**

*University of Wisconsin-Madison*

Since the 1960s, there have been continuing federal efforts to bring reform to scale in high-poverty elementary and secondary schools across the U.S. This paper traces the evolution of these efforts and discusses their impacts on achievement outcomes. Drawing on

evidence from meta-analyses of the Title I evaluation literature and the Comprehensive School Reform research base, four general themes emerge.

First, there has been a clear developmental trajectory of these efforts from 1965 to the present that has resulted in historical improvements in disadvantaged students' outcomes. Second, although the achievement effects have been somewhat modest, the evidence suggests that these national efforts are capable of contributing to large-scale improvements in high-poverty schools. Third, there is great variability across schools and time in the outcomes of these reform efforts that can be explained by both the level of implementation of reforms and by differences in the methods researchers have used to estimate their effects. Fourth, high schools have historically been underserved by federal policies to reform high-poverty schools, but growing interest among policymakers and accumulating evidence related to "relevance," "rigor," and "relationships" might help direct future investments toward improving America's high schools.

A number of promising models for reforming the nation's high-poverty schools exist, such as the federal government's increased funding and accountability efforts directed toward high schools and investing in more formative and summative evaluation to determine which programs work. A protocol for evaluating program efficacy comparable to the series of studies required in the FDA's premarketing drug approval process may be the best method. In general, higher quality studies and better standards of evidence are needed to help advance the scale-up of scientifically based interventions.

## Fifty Years of Federal Teacher Policy: An Appraisal

**Gary Sykes and Kenne Dibner**

*Michigan State University*

The federal government has been involved in policymaking directed toward teachers for over fifty years with developments accelerating over the past decade and at all levels of our federal system of governance. Although a firm knowledge base for "what works" has not been well-established, the federal government has an important role to play in leading human capital investment in education.

The authors recommend that the federal mission is to enhance student access to teachers of high quality and coordinate initiatives. Four goals are recommended: (1) Attract and retain qualified teachers in high-need districts and schools; (2) Attract and retain qualified teachers in critical shortage fields, including math, science, special education, and foreign languages; (3) Attract high-priority candidates to teaching, including those of high academic ability and teachers from the spectrum of minority groups; and (4) Improve teacher and teaching effectiveness, including the development of better measures and evaluation procedures.

A broad strategic plan for investment in the teacher workforce should include these elements: (1) Targeted and strengthened teacher recruitment; (2) Capacity building for teacher preparation and development; (3) Increased innovation around measures and procedures for accountability in education, beyond NCLB's current approach; (4) Expanded uses and kinds of incentives to distribute teachers equitably across schools and to motivate their work; (5) Launch of new studies of teaching effectiveness and its relation to qualifications of various kinds; (6) Improvement of human capital management at all levels; and (7) Development of state and local information systems to track and link teachers, students, and dollars.

## What the Federal Government Can Do to Improve High School Performance

**Russell W. Rumberger**

*University of California, Santa Barbara*

This paper reviews past federal, state, and foundation efforts to reform high schools, examines why those efforts have largely been unsuccessful, and suggests what the federal government can do to improve high school performance.

The report highlights three major findings. First, high school performance should be assessed with a broader set of indicators that measure non-academic as well as academic outcomes. Second, while a number of strategies have been developed for improving high schools—from targeted approaches that focus on specific facets of the school (instruction, student support, school restructuring) to comprehensive approaches that redesign all aspects of the school or create new schools—the research evidence, while limited, finds that no one strategy is inherently more effective than the others. Third, past large-scale initiatives to improve the performance of high schools have generally been unsuccessful in large part because of a lack of will and capacity of both individual educators and institutions to engage in sustained improvement efforts. One implication is that strategies for improving high schools will not be successful until critical aspects of capacity and context are improved.

The federal government can play an important role in improving U.S. high schools by shifting its focus from short-term accountability to long-term capacity building. Specifically, the federal government should: (1) Support the development of broader indicators of student progress and outcomes, and include these indicators in the National Assessment of Educational Progress; (2) Help build the capacity of state governments and technical-assistance providers to support improvement efforts and capacity building in districts and schools; (3) Develop guidelines to insure that states do a better job of matching reform strategies to the capacity of schools and districts in need of improvement; (4) Improve coherence among federal policy initiatives, between federal and state initiatives, and between government and foundation initiatives; and (5) Support the development of more comprehensive state and local data systems that not only measure educational inputs and outputs, but also district and school readiness and capacity to initiate reform as well as progress toward improving student outcomes.

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Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in January 1995 by Jack Jennings, the Center on Education Policy is a national independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of schools. We do not represent any special interests. Instead, we help citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create the conditions that will lead to better public schools.

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