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COMMENTARY

Redefining the Federal Role in Education

Advice for the winner of next week's election

By Paul Manna and Keenan Kelley

Since at least the late 1980s, it has been difficult to determine whether candidates for the White House have been running to be president or the country's superintendent of schools. Efforts to claim the "education president" mantle have been legion in campaigns during the past two decades or so, and the 2012 election season has been no exception.

President Barack Obama has touted his administration's Race to the Top program and its related menu of competitive-grant programs, while promising in the next decade to help the nation produce 100,000 more science and math teachers. Across the aisle, former Gov. Mitt Romney of Massachusetts has included, as part of his economic plan, a promise to use federal funds to expand school choice and unleash competitive pressures, which he says will improve academic performance.

Despite both candidates' promises, this year's campaign unfortunately has failed to grapple with a more fundamental set of questions. How well positioned are federal leaders to improve the quality of the nation's schools? What can the federal government do better than states and localities in K-12 education? What is Washington's comparative advantage in this crucial policy area?

It is not hard to understand why aspiring cheesemakers search for business opportunities in Wisconsin and Vermont rather than in Florida and Texas. Similarly, oyster farmers are hard to find in the Great Plains, but are plentiful along the Chesapeake Bay. The reason? Some parts of the country are well suited to certain economic pursuits and not others. Seeing the federal government's role in education through a similar lens by seriously considering the relative strengths of federal, state, and local action would be a productive way for the next president to begin mapping out his agenda.

Clearly, the federal government's track record in education illustrates how it lacks comparative advantages in several areas. Witness the confusion and poor set of incentives set off by the No Child Left Behind Act's system of adequate yearly progress, or AYP, which graded schools using a blunt instrument that deemed them as being on track or in need of improvement, with no gray area in between. Similarly, detailed regulations established in Washington about how to spend federal

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education dollars can produce local accounting gymnastics that obfuscate, rather than illuminate, where federal dollars are spent and, in the process, neuter their educational benefits. In classrooms, special education teachers following federal rules can find themselves so swamped with paperwork that they lose valuable time to prepare their lessons.

Importantly, officials in Washington too often forget that federal education policies live only on paper. In practice, these federal policies exist in numerous forms as state and local officials interpret and reshape them for on-the-ground use. Some state education agencies allow their districts to be quite creative when they spend Title I dollars. In contrast, others are more risk-averse, as when state agency officials essentially read out of federal law specific provisions that were designed to enhance local flexibility, such as schoolwide Title I programs. The fact that the federal government relies so heavily on other units of government to carry out its initiatives should give pause to any reformer with too grandiose a vision of what presidents or members of Congress can accomplish by passing federal education laws.

Raising such concerns about the federal track record and its obvious limits does not mean that the federal government cannot help the nation pursue its educational goals. Rather, these realizations should prompt an effort to identify valuable leverage points where Washington can do the most good.

We see four areas, in particular, as having such promise.

First, presidents, especially, have the unique ability to call the nation's attention to pressing educational needs and opportunities. Federal leaders have open microphones that they can wield to jump-start important national conversations and highlight concerns. State legislators, local superintendents, and other subnational leaders should be part of these conversations, yet they likely will struggle to command the attention their federal counterparts receive on the national media stage.

Second, the federal government is uniquely positioned to redistribute resources to help remedy inequities that limit educational opportunities in the nation's poorest states and communities. Although federal funds operate on the margins of district and state budgets, they are valuable assets that, when used well, can create potential flexibility and learning opportunities.

Third, the ability to gather and synthesize information—through the federal government's own data collection and research it funds and in related requirements that force recipients of federal aid to disseminate information about school performance and teacher credentials—is another powerful federal lever. Although NCLB is rightfully criticized for many reasons, its requirement that academic progress be reported by student subgroups has sent important shock waves across communities that for too long considered their K-12 systems to be quite good. What overall measures of success often concealed were mountains of inequity that saw some students performing quite well while others, typically members of racial or language minorities and the economically disadvantaged, were doing much worse. The authors of No Child Left Behind overreached in requiring states to use those data in certain ways—the AYP problem again—but the requirement to make data transparent was unquestionably good.

Fourth, federal leaders are well positioned to advance educational opportunities by forcing open doors that many students either struggle to enter or are disallowed from entering. In the 1960s, requiring that states eliminate racial segregation as a condition of receiving federal education aid and, in the 1970s, enshrining into law that students with disabilities could not be sent home for being "uneducable" were two federal initiatives that created new opportunities for some of the nation's most vulnerable students.

A presidential administration that crafted its education agenda around these four comparative

advantages would enable the country to more effectively pursue its myriad educational goals. It also would recognize that trying to engineer particular conceptions of educational quality, teacher evaluation, school turnarounds, or accountability from the nation's capital is a fool's errand, more likely to prompt bureaucratic busyness and efforts by states and localities to game the system, rather than encouraging them to use their own detailed knowledge of neighborhood conditions to improve how schools operate.

A true education president would energize discussions to help the country identify its broad educational goals, ensure that federal aid attenuates resource inequities without creating incentives for local accounting gamesmanship that produces legally defensible but substantively vacuous expenditures of federal funds, push information out into the open about promising practices and performance track records, and unflinchingly refuse to tolerate discrimination in any form. Pursuing that set of priorities would help whoever wins next week's presidential election offer a modest yet muscular role for federal officials, which would focus federal resources and brainpower like laser beams in areas where Washington can best assist the nation's schools and students in reaching their full potential.

Paul Manna is an associate professor of government and public policy at the College of William & Mary, in Williamsburg, Va., and the author of Collision Course: Federal Education Policy Meets State and Local Realities (CQ Press, 2011). Keenan Kelley is Mr. Manna's research assistant and an undergraduate government and economics major.