

Strong Federal Policies Benefit Local Districts

Recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of their position can help federal policy makers make the most of their capabilities and, in the process, help states and localities make the most of theirs.

BY PAUL MANNA

Uncle Sam has expanded his reach into the nation's schools during the last five decades. Those forays frequently have been motivated by concerns over educational equity and a growing interest in promoting academic excellence. An overall working assumption has been that federal prodding and assistance could help encourage states and localities to better meet these two overarching needs.

The pending reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act, the latest amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), provides an opportunity to pause, reflect, and adjust current policies based on their track records. To help inform that reauthorization and other federal efforts, this article offers some generalizations based on a lengthy review of research on major federal programs that address disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and teacher quality. The specific federal programs considered were Title I of the ESEA; the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its predecessor law, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act; and two efforts to improve teacher quality, the Eisen-

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hower Professional Development Program and NCLB's highly qualified teacher provisions.

At least four broad observations and four recommendations seem reasonable based on the performance of those major federal programs.

OBSERVATION #1

Federal education policies have made positive contributions, but they usually fall short of reaching their ambitious goals. Through Title I and IDEA, for example, disadvantaged students and students with disabilities have received more attention. Those laws and federal teacher-quality efforts have also influenced the development of state academic standards, testing systems, and teacher preparation strategies. Still, achievement gaps remain, disadvantaged students tend to perform at very low levels, and the quality of standards, tests, and teaching are highly variable across the country. So, overall goals have not been met.

Perhaps that result says as much about the nation's politics as it does about the effectiveness of federal efforts. In order to sell their policies to one another and the public, elected officials frequently offer lofty and arguably unattainable goals, such as making the nation

the best in the world in math and science or guaranteeing that all children will be proficient in reading and math by a certain date. Those sorts of promises are likely to persist, given the incentives to which politicians respond. Few would enthusiastically endorse a platform to make the nation “sixth in the world” in math and science or a promise that “85% of children” will not be left behind. In private, though, many officials would likely agree that accomplishing those two goals would be a marked improvement over the current situation.

OBSERVATION #2

More federal involvement in K-12 education has provided students and teachers with important opportunities or guarantees while contributing to a complex and fragmented regulatory environment. Helping students with disabilities gain access to regular public schools has been a major accomplishment of IDEA. ESEA funding has provided states, districts, and schools with important supplemental dollars to support disadvantaged students and train or recruit teachers.

Those positives have been accompanied by greater complexity and often by individual program silos that aren't well integrated with each other or with state and local programs. In using federal policy to leverage state and district strengths, national policy makers haven't always fully considered how their initiatives will mesh with the complicated and, at times, conflicting web of existing requirements. Put differently, the intentions and some of the results of federal policy have been positive, but the specific instruments those policies contain have often fostered administrative frustrations.

OBSERVATION #3

Federal education policies are intended to support state and local governments in advancing their own activities. That has moved some reforms forward, but because federal, state, and local efforts work simultaneously, assessing the specific impacts of federal contributions has been more difficult. Although state and local officials complain about federal policies, they gladly continue to receive federal dollars. No state, for example, has rejected NCLB funding. Typically, though, federal assistance comes by way of many different funding streams rather than well-defined program activities. And because these streams coexist with each other and with state and local activities, identifying their direct effects on student outcomes is difficult. But this challenge of assessing specific effects is not limited to federal initiatives. State policies and systems of aid, which operate simultaneously in local school districts, also suffer from this same challenge.

The reality, then, is that it is challenging to assess how well federal policy has worked and how much better or worse conditions might have been absent any federal efforts. This fact has intensified now that

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federal policy has become increasingly interested in student academic performance, which many factors can influence, rather than just in state or local adherence to federal process requirements.

OBSERVATION #4

The success of federal education policies is intimately linked to the success of the systems and initiatives developed by state and local governments. Claims about the relative success or failure of federal education policy can gloss over this important fact. Sometimes, federal officials are to blame, as when they overpromise what their policies can deliver absent a commensurate level of effort from themselves and policy makers in other levels of government. Federal initiatives can spark needed action, especially in promoting equity concerns, or help move promising initiatives forward, such as the state standards movement. But most of the policy development, implementation decisions, financing, and teaching that will ultimately help students learn must come from state and local governments. That is the nature of education governance in the United States.

As frustrating as it may be to some federal officials, the U.S., unlike many of our economic competitors, doesn't possess a national education ministry that dictates what children will learn and how schools will teach. Decentralization means the effects of federal initiatives will vary, and results will depend on how federal designs meld with conditions on the ground in state capitals and local school districts.

In light of those four observations, how should federal officials proceed? Consider these general operating principles that federal policy makers should embrace as they adapt their initiatives for the future.

RECOMMENDATION #1

Harmonize initiatives; minimize complexity.

Federal policy makers should harmonize their many initiatives to minimize the complexity that

arises when multiple program silos operate simultaneously. Center federal efforts on the overarching goal of increasing students' academic success, especially for the most needy or disadvantaged students. Without sacrificing federal efforts to promote equality of opportunity, choices should always foster, as directly as

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possible, academic excellence in the classroom. That would require better leveraging of and alignment with promising state and local efforts. By harmonizing federal policy around student academic needs and by reaffirming the federal goal to promote equity, officials could better anticipate policy or regulatory conflicts that can overburden federal, state, and local administrators and classroom teachers.

The good news is that federal policy during the last five decades has begun, albeit imperfectly, to move in this direction. Title I's stated focus on high standards for all students, IDEA's reframing to make academic success an integral part of special education, and the shift in teacher professional development to more closely align it with state standards and with efforts to help students learn fundamental skills have all been moves in the right direction. Policy makers have taken a while to get to this point, and much work remains to iron out some of the tensions and contradictions, but those positive trends should continue.

RECOMMENDATION #2

Make data and practices transparent.

Whenever possible, federal policies should make education data and practices transparent to observers inside and outside government. That includes information and activities at the federal, state, and local levels. One great success of recent reauthorizations of ESEA is that the law has helped force into the open information on how students of different races, ethnicities, and economic backgrounds are performing academically. The expansion of NAEP to include all 50 states and the developing urban NAEP assessment, which focuses on performance in an increasing number of very large districts, are providing a consistent measure of achievement that facilitates cross-jurisdic-

tional comparisons, unlike state tests that aren't comparable yet drive NCLB's accountability scheme. Federal policy should go further and also make federal policy choices transparent, such as decisions on state and local waiver requests, so that impartial observers can better assess whether federal regulatory choices or enforcement actions are consistent with the government's stated goals.

RECOMMENDATION #3

Invest in education R&D.

The federal government should invest heavily in research and development to identify effective educational practices and interventions. For decades, federal program evaluators have argued for more research and better data in order to make wise policy choices for schools and children. The federal government has a massive comparative advantage over its state and local counterparts in this area. Federal license to sponsor such research is high, and federal capacity is strong, both internally through the Institute for Education Sciences (and such other federal agencies as the National Institutes of Health) and externally through evaluation contracts and research grants.

Certainly, state and local governments may be more attuned to conditions on the ground than are distant federal officials. But that doesn't mean teachers, school principals, or state officials know more about which interventions might be most appropriate for their students' needs. By analogy, doctors rely on medical researchers to identify proven approaches that can remedy their patients' ailments. Individual patients are different, so the combination of treatments that physicians prescribe must still be sensitive to those particular needs. Similarly, federally sponsored research and program evaluations, which are then disseminated widely to state and local agencies and institutions that prepare teachers, can help create a corpus of promising possibilities that state and local districts could employ. Conceptually, the U.S. Department of Education's fledgling What Works Clearinghouse has begun to disseminate such research findings. Whether the current clearinghouse is the right model for these activities is unclear, but, in general, that sort of federal effort to collate and distribute research findings should continue.

RECOMMENDATION #4

Use the bully pulpit.

Federal leaders should relentlessly use the bully pulpit to highlight the nation's educational progress and to troubleshoot challenges that confront govern-

ments at all levels as they try to improve America's system of elementary and secondary education. This may look like an easy recommendation to implement, but federal leaders would have to commit valuable yet scarce agenda space to education. One issue especially worthy of attention is education governance, which includes the appropriate role that federal, state, and local governments should play in educating the nation's children. Intergovernmental relationships have undergone important transitions since the 1960s. A serious national discussion coinciding with the next ESEA reauthorization could help to identify crucial tensions within the nation's federalist system that are relevant to federal policy choices.

A common theme among evaluations of federal policy, for example, is that federal law leaves states and localities with much room to define standards of quality and excellence. Definitions of student proficiency in reading and math or required teacher knowledge to be highly qualified vary greatly depending on where students happen to live or where teachers happen to teach. How much variation should the nation tolerate? Would minimizing it require a more heavy-handed federal presence? Or are other strategies possible to increase the public's confidence that quality in education means more or less the same thing across the country? In using their powerful microphones, federal officials could help push the country to search for answers to these and other challenging, and increasingly relevant, questions.

Federal policy that embraced these recommendations would help foster positive changes in the nation's elementary and secondary schools. But would working from these principles substantially reduce inequity and close achievement gaps? By themselves, probably not, given the federal government's ability to promote improvements in a system where states and localities are responsible for most of the policy production and on-the-ground work that affect schools and classrooms across the country. Still, federal policy, properly conceived and implemented, can help foster conditions that will make success possible.

Generally speaking, federal policy makers have been good at defining broad aspirational goals for education, 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 aren't as good at passing focused, coherent, and mutually re-

inforcing policies that produce substantive results instead of primarily procedural ones. Getting states and localities to do things is relatively easy: offer money, and condition its use on engaging in certain activities. But crafting national policy to cover 50 states and nearly 15,000 school districts that will improve the substantive results that everyone cares about — having high-quality teachers and students who are learning rigorous content, for example — is much harder for policy makers in Washington to achieve. That is

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primarily because federal policy, even in demanding higher quality or rigor, by and large defers to lower levels of government on the particulars of what quality and rigor should mean.

Their distance from the ground level gives federal leaders a fantastic bird's-eye view of the system, which can help them find important leverage points to promote reforms. Using that leverage effectively — for example, by opening school doors for children with disabilities or requiring that student achievement data be reported in disaggregated form — can help spur action to help students in need. It can also help to embolden state and local reformers who can play off or build on federal arguments and efforts in order to launch promising changes of their own. Simultaneously, federal distance from the ground and deference to lower levels of government on curricular and personnel matters can frustrate federal efforts, especially those that rely on particular mechanisms applied nationwide, such as NCLB's remedies for schools in improvement, to achieve otherwise desirable goals. Recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of their position can help federal policy makers make the most of their capabilities and, in the process, help states and localities make the most of theirs. **■**

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