



School buses, Coney Island

# Ten Priorities for Education Policy

*Less micromanaging, more flexibility*

BY FREDERICK M. HESS

As their detractors note, U.S. schools fare poorly in international rankings, while educators struggle with Kafkaesque displays of bureaucracy and managerial ineptitude. But at the same time, 70 percent of American parents give their children’s schools an A or a B, and education officials from nations whose students outperform our own avidly seek to emulate our success at cultivating independent thinkers.

The challenge is to improve what needs improvement while taking care not to undermine the strengths of our decentralized system, including its responsiveness to parents and the ample leeway it gives educators to innovate.

The answer is certainly not more money from Washington. The U.S. consistently sits at or near the top of the world rankings when it comes to per-student K–12 spending. New York City spends more than \$20,000 per student annually, and

Baltimore and Boston more than \$15,000, yet with notably mediocre results.

School reform has been hampered in recent years by two troubling developments. First, since the enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, it has revolved almost entirely around reducing racial “achievement gaps” in reading and math, making an afterthought of students, school improvements, and subjects that don’t advance that cause. Second, Washington has taken an increasingly assertive role, promoting the Common Core and attempting to micromanage teacher evaluation and school improvement.

In 2015, responding to such concerns, Congress overhauled NCLB and enacted the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). In doing so, legislators retained the annual-testing requirements NCLB places on states, but got Washington mostly out of the business of determining whether schools are failing and entirely out of the business of telling schools how to improve.

Going forward, it will be important to build on what has worked, attack bureaucratic excess, and address practical needs

for real families. Here are ten ways to help do that.

*Expand the choice continuum.* Today’s school-choice programs are a godsend for impoverished children stuck in awful schools, but they offer little to middle-class kids or those in rural communities. Most parents like their kids’ schools, but that doesn’t mean they like everything about them. Expanding the logic of choice can help. Promising policies include “course choice” programs and educational savings accounts. Course-choice plans, such as those in Louisiana and Utah, recognize that even parents who are happy with their child’s school may prefer a different math program or language offering, and they enable families to use a portion of a child’s state aid to access specialized providers. In educational-savings-account programs, such as the one that Nevada instituted last year, the state contributes to an individual student’s account and then empowers families to purchase educational services as they see fit.

*Have dollars follow students.* Weighted student funding, by which the schools receive funds for each pupil, ensures that money follows students to their schools. Dollars can be adjusted for student need to produce a system in which all schools—charter or district—are funded equitably. This would put an end to today’s school-financing models, designed for bureaucratic convenience, in which funds flow to districts where central planners make one-size-fits-all decisions on staffing and spending. Current systems do nothing to reward district schools that attract students and little to chasten those that lose students. Weighted student funding rewards schools for opening their doors to new students and facilitates school choice. In ESSA, House Republicans sought to make Title I funds for low-income students portable, but were stymied by the Obama administration and Senate Democrats. It’s a fight worth continuing in the states and in Washington.

*Make schools accountable for more than just reading and math.* ESSA requires that states test students regularly in reading and math, publicly report these scores, and design accountability regimes substantially informed by them. But it also gives states leeway to escape NCLB’s myopic focus on making

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students proficient in reading and math by devising systems with broader performance measures. Better alternatives will focus not just on whether low-performing students are becoming proficient but also on whether all students are making progress. They will incorporate subjects such as American history and metrics such as vocational education and the share of high-schoolers successfully completing Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses.

*Promote accountability for costs as well as test scores.* NCLB's one positive legacy is to have made it simpler for parents, voters, and taxpayers to gauge how schools and systems in their state are performing. In any well-run public or private enterprise, however, measuring performance involves looking at outcomes *and* costs. Inattention to costs overstates the performance of expensive high-performing schools and short-changes those that are doing well on tight budgets. As they revamp their accountability systems, states should seek to link per-pupil costs to school and system outcomes. This is all much easier to do, of course, when dollars follow the child.

*Overhaul teacher evaluation and pay, but avoid one-size-fits-all rules.* The Obama administration's attempt to dictate teacher-evaluation standards to states yielded a predictably poor result: ham-handed statewide systems that seek to tell every school system how to evaluate every teacher, replacing managerial flexibility with technocratic rigidity. Few would think it wise for state officials to tell all health-care providers or state contractors how to evaluate their staff, so why should schools be any different? Washington needs to get out of the teacher-evaluation business. Statewide evaluation mandates should be reserved for schools that have shown themselves to be unreliable actors—those that perform poorly without taking action to hold educators accountable. Meanwhile, schools that perform adequately should be given leeway to design evaluation systems that work for them. Charter schools should be wholly exempted from these systems. Outdated factory-model personnel practices must be replaced, but not with prescriptive micromanagement.

*Free schools from overgrown employee contracts.* In 2011, Governor Scott Walker and the Republican state legislature

dramatically narrowed the scope of collective bargaining in Wisconsin. Teachers remained free to negotiate wages and wage-related benefits, but not such things as work rules or school start times. Walker and the legislature rebalanced retirement and health contributions, bringing teacher benefits a little closer to private-sector norms. In the process, they set up hundreds of millions of dollars of annual savings for schools, money that will be better spent on instruction. Walker's blueprint is a powerful corrective to teacher contracts that have intruded into every facet of school life. Many more states should follow it.

*Attack bureaucratic creep.* Washington doesn't run schools; it writes rules for them to follow. More than they help students, those rules often result in paper-pushing, time spent ensuring compliance, and burdensome reporting requirements. In attempting to restrict the U.S. Department of Education's sway over testing and a variety of other aspects of education policy after the excesses of the Obama administration, ESSA offers an opportunity to revisit bureaucratic overgrowth. Congress should vigilantly monitor the Department of Education's implementation of the law. But there are many more outdated and burdensome restrictions that could be eliminated.

*Permit for-profit educators to compete on their merits.* Progressives have made their hostility to for-profit charter-school operators and education providers a point of pride. A number of states have banned them, resulting in a reliance on a small number of worthy but limited nonprofit boutiques. While for-profit providers have incentives to cut corners, they are also the best hope for rapidly expanding success and for transforming the cost assumptions of schooling. The fastest-growing of the nonprofit charter-school providers, for instance, is the accomplished and justly famous KIPP Academies. But even KIPP has taken more than two decades to open 200 schools that serve 80,000 of the nation's 50 million students. Commercial enterprises will always have incentives and sources of capital that permit them to grow much more rapidly. Policymakers should allow for-profit schools to compete on an equal footing while holding them to the same reporting and accountability standards.

*Take a hard look at the Common Core.* The Common Core has consumed much of the energy in K–12 education-policy debates during the past half decade. Yet there's been a dearth of serious attention paid to what the Common Core's prescribed "instructional shifts" in the teaching of reading and math actually mean for students. The shifts call for less teaching of fiction, emphasize the kind of "close reading" favored in contemporary literary criticism, and make heavy use of drawings to explain mathematical concepts. State and local officials should demand greater transparency about these changes. Are the new student tests measuring what they need to? Are "close reading" and "conceptual math" important for students? Proper scrutiny can help ensure that states are equipped to make informed decisions.

*Protect privacy and research.* Many parents are increasingly concerned that government is collecting reams of personal data about students. Legislators should address this concern by updating the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and improving state privacy protections. First intended to govern the handling of paper files, FERPA is now impinging on education decision-making and useful research. Now is a propitious time to strengthen privacy protections and parental rights in a way appropriate for the digital era while still supporting efforts to collect information that can help parents make informed decisions and educators improve their schools. This entails expanding the definition of student records to include data collected by online providers, codifying bans on the selling and marketing of student data, and facilitating the collection of data that allow researchers to link higher-education and labor-market outcomes to K–12 schooling.

Acting on these ten suggestions would cost approximately nothing. The kind of reform that is needed would eschew grand Washington-based schemes. It would seek to address the needs of all families—those in rural communities and the suburbs as well as those trapped in urban poverty—in a way that makes sense for them. This is the kind of school reform that's good for kids and good for the nation. **NR**

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