

THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

Issue Brief

ESEA REAUTHORIZATION: THE FEDS LEVERAGE THEIR 7.5 PERCENT

BY GORDON A. MACINNES

The federal government pays 90 percent of the bill for interstate highways, and even secessionist states such as Texas and South Carolina go along with its specifications for lane width, signage, and speed limits. Now, the Obama Administration seeks to greatly extend the reach of federal policy with an ante of just 7.5 percent or so of the annual bill for public education. The vehicle for this audacious play is the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA), formerly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

The U.S. Department of Education's (USDE) "Blueprint for Reform of Education," which it released on the Ides of March, makes the case for a dramatic rewriting of national policy, including some worthwhile and needed changes to the present law.

First, it recognizes the hash that NCLB made of curricular standards and standardized testing. Essentially, most states set weak, numerous, vague, or too specific academic standards and then gamed the state tests to deceive the public about how well students were performing. USDE now proposes that states agree on a new set of clear, strong, and relatively fewer standards, followed by cooperatively developed assessments that go beyond multiple choice.

Second, the Blueprint replaces NCLB's ludicrous mandate of 100 percent proficiency by 2014 with a more complex system that emphasizes steady and significant progress by students, schools, and districts. It maintains the important attention to how specific subgroups of students perform, with consequences for those districts and schools where the achievement gap persists for poor, minority, or English-learning students.

Third, as it did last year in the stimulus legislation, USDE requires that every state develop a data system that follows each student from preschool to graduation. A few states such as Texas and Florida can now generate very useful analyses of how well free-lunch eligible, Latino fourth graders, for example, are doing on English in every classroom, school, and district in the state. All states need to get to the point of being able to track, analyze, report, and evaluate student achievement.

Fourth, USDE deserves credit for recognizing in the Blueprint the broken system for preparing, recruiting, supporting, retaining, and promoting more effective teachers and principals, even if some of its recommendations are impractical and unfair.

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Finally, the Blueprint gives special emphasis to English learners, the disabled, migrant students, and students in rural districts.

This may read like a pretty good start on rewriting the centerpiece of federal education policy. Actually, there are five very serious problems with the Blueprint that Congress needs to correct before enacting ESEA.

1. **The Blueprint ignores the widely accepted evidence of what works best to close the achievement gap: concentrating on making young students from poor families strong readers.** For almost two decades we have known that poor kids start kindergarten about eighteen months behind their middle-class peers in vocabulary, general knowledge, familiarity with stories and books, and knowing their letters. If this gap is not narrowed, then the poor students have a much-reduced chance of becoming confident readers by third grade, which is a powerful indicator of whether they will finish high school.

ESEA should be revised to concentrate more federal dollars on increasing the number of poor children who attend *high-quality* preschools and “graduate” into primary schools that emphasize intensive early literacy. No such encouragement is offered. USDE could have highlighted the dramatic gains made by the 35,000+ Title I students in the Montgomery County (Maryland) Public Schools, where federal funds have greatly expanded pre-kindergarten opportunities for poor students.

2. **The Blueprint ignores the consequences of deep poverty on instructional performance and improvement.** Again, the evidence about the disparities between poor and middle-class students is plentiful, overwhelming, and uncontested. But *concentrated* poverty is the killer of educational achievement. This fact should be central to the USDE’s focus on the bottom 10 percent of schools and its almost flippant mandate that states and districts turn these schools around.

My analysis of New Jersey’s bottom-performing schools reveals—not surprisingly—that almost all of them are in the poorest neighborhoods in the poorest cities. Camden, one of the nation’s three poorest cities, “contributed” fourteen of its nineteen elementary schools to the list of those scoring in the bottom 10 percent of the state’s third grade literacy test in 2008. Fifteen of Newark’s forty-nine schools were on the same list, almost all of them from the city’s poorest Central and South Wards. In these cities, the student mobility and free-lunch rates tend to be higher in the lowest-performing schools. In Newark, the student mobility rate in the so-called 10 percent schools averages 25 percent.

USDE displays undeserved certainty that these pedagogically challenging problems can be corrected by mandating that districts exercise one of four governance options in the bottom 10 percent schools: close them down, reconstitute the leadership and faculty, contract with an educational or charter management organization, or “transform” them by supporting teachers with lots of training, instructional materials, evidence, and classroom support. There is no convincing evidence that any of these models have been effective in enough cases to mandate their use.

3. **The Blueprint is based on an assumption that cleaning up standards and assessments is a quick, relatively smooth process that can be the anchor of a reauthorized ESEA. Wrong.**

Normally, ESEA is authorized for a five-year period. USDE must believe that with unprecedented speed, the following can be accomplished by the fractious, complex, diverse, and tradition-bound public education establishment:

- by 2011, almost all states will have adopted whatever standards emerge from the process being managed by the National Governor’s Association and Council of Chief State School Officers;
- then, within a relatively short time, schools, districts, and each state will have identified, purchased, and introduced the new textbooks, instructional materials, and software required to teach the new standards;
- furthermore, the schools and districts quickly will assess the capacity of their faculties to teach the new standards using the new materials and will be able to organize and implement supplementary training to those teachers who are under-prepared for the more rigorous content in short order; and,
- finally, by, say, the third year, there will be new assessments in place that will have been designed, field tested, corrected, re-tested, and then adopted for use as measures of accountability in math and English for at least seven grade levels.

This schedule could be abbreviated if USDE and the other forty-nine states agreed quickly that Massachusetts or, perhaps Minnesota, has reasonably clear, strong, internationally aligned academic standards in place, and that its assessments provide the accountability and instructional information required. This would short-cut the process dramatically and make the standards and assessments criteria of the Blueprint achievable. The odds of this happening are very long.

One should anticipate that the first consequence of more rigorous academic standards actually will be a *widening* of the achievement gap, as the pace of introducing new content and skills in poor schools will lag the assessment of them in new, tougher assessments.

4. **The Blueprint continues the fiction that individual schools, even those at the very bottom, can adapt to new standards and assessments without the leadership of the state and their districts.**

Let’s use Newark as an example again. Fifteen of its forty-nine elementary schools would be designated “Challenge” schools under the proposed revision, which means that they are subject to one of the four mandated governance treatments. Only seven or eight of these can be “transformed” with a district-led program of substantial teacher support and training; the balance would be closed or turned over to new leadership that would operate with autonomy. But it turns out that ten of the forty-nine would be designated “Reward” schools because they have done a superb job in closing the achievement gap. Like the Challenge schools, Reward schools are to be granted extraordinary autonomy, which, one assumes includes issues of curriculum, instructional materials, faculty training, and support.

So, as many as half of Newark's school may operate pretty much on their own in responding to a new set of academic standards and assessments. This is precisely where Newark (and twenty-nine other New Jersey districts) found itself in 1998, when the New Jersey Supreme Court ordered each of its elementary schools to select one of ten approved "comprehensive school reform" models for adoption within a three-year period. The result was chaos, as the schools selected eight different models in a district where about one in five students moves to another school annually. Moreover, the models that were adopted did not deliver on the results promised by their promoters in testimony to the court, with the result that academic performance declined in many schools and did not improve overall.

The only sensible way to adapt to sweeping changes in academic expectations is to focus the responsibility on the district central office. Otherwise, there will be no coherence in preparing teachers and students for the new curriculum. Given this mandate, central offices will normally reach out to the practitioners who are producing the best results to participate in the daunting task of determining how to teach to the new standards. That is certainly the case in districts such as Montgomery County (Maryland) and Union City (New Jersey) that have narrowed substantially the achievement gap.

5. The USDE has greatly overestimated the capacity of state departments of education to reform the systems they have created.

In the past decade or so, the number of professional employees working in state education departments has declined rather noticeably (New Jersey has lost about 40 percent of its workers in the past ten years, while its responsibilities have been enlarged). A richer percentage of professionals, therefore, are paid to implement federal programs such as Title I, special education, Safe and Drug-free Schools, and so on. Most departments are well-schooled in writing regulations and developing paperwork systems to determine compliance. These rules are dominated by the verbs "must" and "shall." These are not the verbs that are used to describe effective educational practices. Instead, "might," "try," "adjust," and "re-adjust" work better.

Under the Blueprint, there is an assumption that state education departments know how to repair broken schools. But history shows that there have been enough starts and re-starts with grand-sounding acronyms launched by states to finally, once and for all, "reform" public education. Add the Blueprint to the list. However, the notion that state department professionals are deep in the mud concerning fixing broken schools will come as a surprise to most commissioners and public educators.

From time to time, there are exceptions to this characterization of state educators and what they do. But rule-making and enforcement dominate, and these are two activities inconsistent with the practice of effective education in districts with concentrations of students from poor families.

The hope for a stronger, more effective federal policy rests in the hands of Congress, particularly in the leadership of the House and Senate committees who have pledged a bipartisan and cooperative approach to the Obama administration.

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