

ACHIEVING OUR NATIONAL EDUCATION GOALS: OVERARCHING STRATEGIES

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I. INTRODUCTION

The President and the Governors of the fifty States together have developed six national education goals for the year 2000: ensuring the preparation of all children for school; reducing the dropout rate; improving achievement for all students; improving science and mathematics education; supporting life-long learning; and providing safe, disciplined, and drug-free schools. These goals are vital to our nation's future. We must achieve these goals, but we can do so only if every American makes a commitment to the work involved in making these goals a reality. According to the 1990 Gallup Poll on education, more than seventy-five percent of people interviewed attach a high priority to all six of the national goals.¹ What now must be done is to convert that priority into commitment.

Despite the importance placed on the national education goals, few Americans believe that we can reach them by the year 2000.² Such pessimism is unwarranted from a public that has seen the Iron Curtain raised, watched the Berlin Wall tumble, put a man on the moon less than a decade after announcing the intention to do so, and rescued the world from the threats of Nazism in the dark days of the early 1940s. We will not substantially improve American education or achieve our goals if we are convinced that there is no point in trying. It is time for America to change its attitude about the national education goals, and it is time to begin making a serious effort to accomplish them. We must begin by developing a plan of action, a plan that incorporates the most promising strategies for achieving our goals.

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1. See Elam, *22nd Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward Public Schools*, PHI DELTA KAPPAN, Sept. 1990, at 41, 42.

2. See *id.*

II. PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND ACADEMIC CHOICE

Parents are the first and most influential teachers of their children. As such, they have a responsibility to nurture creativity, curiosity, and confidence in their children and to encourage good work habits. Parents must participate actively in their children's education by monitoring homework and academic progress and by demanding the best from their children's schools.³ Furthermore, parents have an obligation to awaken their children in the morning, give them breakfast, dress them in clean clothes, and send them to school with the attitude that what they are about to do is important—important both to the parent and to the child's future.

Along with the responsibility that parents have for the well-being of their children should come the right to decide where their children will attend school. Parental choice of schools is an important aspect of parental involvement. Families have diverse values and needs, just as children have diverse interests and ways of learning. A school choice program allows parents to enroll their children in the school or program that is most appropriate for them, be it a neighborhood school close to home or a specialized magnet school across town. Nationwide polls of the American public have found overwhelming support for this idea. For example, a 1987 Gallup Poll found that seventy-one percent of the people surveyed thought that parents should have the right to choose the schools their children attend.⁴

Wealthier families have long had the opportunity to choose their children's schools by purchasing a home within the desired school district or by paying for private education. Parental choice programs and magnet schools will extend school choice to low-income families. This will enable low-income families to reject inferior neighborhood schools and enroll their children in excellent schools outside of their neighborhoods. All children will benefit from the opportunity to obtain a better education.

3. Schools likewise have a responsibility to parents, to help them get more involved in the education of their children. This involvement may take many forms, including newsletters, parent volunteer programs, parent training programs, and parent-school contracts outlining the responsibilities of parents and schools vis-à-vis children's education.

4. See *Poll Finds Support for Tougher Back-to-Basics Approach in Schools*, N.Y. Times, Aug. 31, 1987, at A17, col. 1.

Academic choice also fosters competition among schools and encourages schools to develop distinctive programs and approaches to instruction, thus improving the quality of education available to all students. A flexible market system ensures that schools provide the kinds of services needed and wanted by their clients: parents and students.⁵ Those schools that cannot or will not respond to these incentives will find it difficult to attract students and parents, and will simply have to cede ground to better schools.⁶

III. SCHOOL-BASED MANAGEMENT

School-based management is a concept that complements academic choice. Choice plans allow parents and students to select schools; school-based management helps to ensure there are well-defined, desirable options from which to choose. School-based management is based on the belief that parents, principals, and teachers—those most closely involved in the task of education—should make as many decisions as possible regarding teaching, budgeting, and learning.⁷ The conventional structure of schools places responsibility for most decisionmaking with local school boards and state departments of education. These agencies have responsibility for the planning and design of the educational program, including curriculum, resource allocation, personnel, and school organization. Individual schools, lacking any real role in determining policies, are left to implement the procedures handed down from above.

This top-down hierarchical structure is ineffective and inefficient. State and district administrators have limited contact with individual schools and virtually no association with students and teachers. Yet they often prescribe textbooks, curricula, and tests to be used district-wide, necessarily minimizing teacher discretion in these areas. The special needs of individual students and the characteristics of individual schools cannot be met by standardized procedures determined at the state or district level. School-based management is essential.

The conventional hierarchical structure also produces nega-

5. For a discussion of the salutary effects of a flexible market system, see generally R. EKEKUND & R. TOLLISON, *ECONOMICS* 216-41 (3d ed. 1991).

6. See J. ARONSON & J. HILLEY, *FINANCING STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS* 218 (4th ed. 1986).

7. See D. KEARNS & D. DOYLE, *WINNING THE BRAIN RACE* 15-34 (1988); Nathan, *Choosing Our Future*, in *PUBLIC SCHOOLS BY CHOICE* 253, 255-56 (J. Nathan ed. 1989).

tive externalities. By excluding parents, teachers, and principals from the decisionmaking process, this structure alienates them and creates a feeling of lack of responsibility for educational outcomes. Moreover, a centralized system does not take advantage of teachers' talents and creative ideas. Rather than fostering inventiveness and welcoming teachers' opinions on educational matters, the conventional structure prevents the voices of teachers from being heard, inhibiting their potential. This hurts not only teachers, but also students.

To enable schools to meet their students' individual needs, the organizational structure of a school must be flexible and must accommodate school-based decisions. School-based management allows school-level control over a broad range of issues regarding the curriculum, school organization, personnel, accountability, and budgeting. Either the school principal or a team of school personnel presides over a variety of duties, which may include the determination of subject matter taught in each grade, the organization of classes, the assignment of students, the role of each staff category, and more formal matters such as school budgeting, teacher hiring and firing, and assessment procedures. Individual needs are met by professionals who are personally involved in and responsible for educational outcomes.

IV. INCENTIVES FOR HIGHER ACHIEVEMENT

To motivate students and school personnel to work harder and achieve more, many schools, districts, and states are establishing incentive programs that provide meaningful goals and encourage students, teachers, and principals to improve. Such programs are essential, especially in view of incentives now in place that encourage students to spend little time on classwork. It appears that students in the United States do not have the same incentives to excel as do students in many other nations.

American students seem somewhat disengaged from their schoolwork. Although many students are academically capable and come from families that value education, many students are not motivated to exert effort toward their education. Indeed, the proverbial concern of American students when presented with new material in class is not whether it is interesting, useful, or important, but whether the material will be on the next test. Except for those few high school students who

want to attend prestigious colleges, most students believe they have no reason to strive to achieve. In fact, in the contest between after-school jobs and academic work, burger-flipping too often wins hands-down over English, history, and science. Unless students have to work to help support the family, they should focus most of their time on school work instead of after-school employment.

The major reason for this diminished emphasis on academic work is that too many American adolescents put forth the bare minimum of effort to get what they want. Not surprisingly, because many know that to obtain a job after graduation, all they need is a high school diploma—regardless of the classes they take or the grades they receive—the effort they put into their education is correspondingly minimal. Research performed by John H. Bishop, Professor of Economics at Cornell University, indicates that these students are right—most employers demonstrate little interest in achievement in high school, despite widespread complaints that graduates lack necessary skills.⁸ Although employers consider grades when hiring college graduates, they generally do not do so for high school graduates. In fact, most employers never obtain high school transcripts, and some do not even request them. Those who do often have difficulty obtaining them.⁹ Therefore, grades received in high school have minimal, if any, effect on the early jobs obtained by high school graduates who do not go on to college. Students thus learn that there is no connection between educational achievement and employment opportunities, and incentives to do well are substantially diminished.

To motivate students to strive for higher achievement, we need to show them a connection between their present endeavors and a meaningful goal. More and more, educators and business leaders are recognizing the importance of providing incentives for student achievement. Schools throughout the country are beginning to create just such incentives. One example is the tuition-guarantee program established by philan-

8. See Bishop, *Why the Apathy in American High Schools?*, EDUC. RESEARCHER, Jan.-Feb. 1989, at 6, 7-8. See also J. BISHOP, INCENTIVES FOR LEARNING: WHY AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS COMPARE SO POORLY TO THEIR COUNTERPARTS OVERSEAS (Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies, School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University Working Paper No. 89-09, 1990).

9. See Bishop, *supra* note 8, at 8.

thropist Eugene Lang.¹⁰ During a graduation speech in 1981 at New York City's Public School 121, Lang promised sixty-one sixth-grade students that he would pay the college costs of every member of the class who finished high school and pursued a college education. The "I Have a Dream" foundation was thereby founded. Lang's efforts have inspired many similar efforts around the country.

Recently, the Cleveland public schools expanded on Lang's idea and began the Scholarship-in-Escrow Program.¹¹ Every student in grades seven through twelve in the Cleveland public schools can earn forty dollars for every A, twenty dollars for every B, and ten dollars for every C. Students enrolled in Major Work/Honors classes earn a ten-dollar bonus per grade. The money is held in escrow for use in post-secondary education after the student graduates from the Cleveland public schools. Building on this program and increasing incentives for these students, two dozen colleges and other postsecondary institutions have matched or exceeded the scholarship funds earned by the students.¹²

The programs cited above, and many others throughout the nation, provide students with meaningful rewards that are directly related to academic achievement, and thus create the necessary incentive to work hard. Perhaps most importantly, such programs restore the competitive environment that is absolutely essential to educational progress.

V. REWARDING PROFESSIONALS

Students are not the only ones who need encouragement to excel. Incentive programs also motivate teachers. The teaching profession must be strengthened by recruiting more highly qualified college graduates and by retaining good teachers. States and communities are experimenting with rewards for professional accomplishment to induce persons of above average ability to enter into and remain in the teaching profession.

It is particularly important to increase the number of minority teachers. The proportion of minority students in our school systems is now about thirty percent of total enrollment and is

10. See Fiske, *Lessons*, N.Y. Times, Aug. 10, 1988, at B6, col. 1.

11. See *War on Dropouts Making the Grade*, Chicago Tribune, June 5, 1988, § 1, at 3, col. 5.

12. See *id.*

rising, but the proportion of minority teachers remains steady at about ten percent.¹³ To increase the pool from which to draw minority teachers, we must improve the quality of elementary and secondary education for all minority students and must increase minority college enrollment and graduation rates.

Alternative certification programs are one important source of incentives to attract qualified persons, especially minorities, to become teachers and principals. Alternative routes to teacher certification are being established by many states. The New Jersey Provisional Teacher Program, for example, allows administrators to hire college graduates who did not complete a traditional teacher certification program.¹⁴ This alternative certification program focuses on professional training and mentoring for qualified candidates. Upon completion of a one- or two-year program, the candidate is eligible for a standard certificate. New Jersey's alternative certification program has been particularly successful in attracting highly qualified individuals, including a high proportion of minorities, into teaching.¹⁵

VI. REWARDING SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL DISTRICTS

While incentive programs have been established for students and for teachers, some states and the federal government have adopted programs to reward schools and school districts that improve the educational performance of their students. As described below, rewards to successful schools take many forms. Some state programs reward successful schools with formal recognition and publicity, often awarding a special "flag" or rating to selected schools. Other states reward staff members of successful schools with bonuses or provide additional funding to the schools.

The School Recognition Program in California assesses schools' performance on achievement test scores, graduation rates, and enrollment rates in certain courses to select schools

13. See *Report Recommends Policies for Recruitment of Minorities*, 28 Gov't Empl. Rel. Rep. (BNA) No. 1368, at 741 (June 11, 1990).

14. See *State Hails Alternative Teacher Route*, N.Y. Times, Dec. 14, 1986, § 11NJ, at 1, col. 4.

15. See *id.* New Jersey is also developing an alternative certification program for principals. See *id.*

for recognition.¹⁶ Schools rated as "distinguished" receive a flag, a plaque, and a party to celebrate their selection. Florida's District Quality Instruction Incentives Program, based on a plan negotiated between the district and the state educational agency (SEA), provides for the SEA to divide a pool of \$10 million among the districts that meet their educational goals.¹⁷ The Minnesota Academic Excellence Foundation is a nonprofit public-private partnership established to grant awards, including scholarships, to schools, students, and teams of students.¹⁸ Selection criteria include measures of school leadership, curriculum, instructional method, school climate, and testing practices. Each selected school receives pins for its students and staff and a certificate for the school.

Since 1982, the Elementary and Secondary School Recognition Programs of the United States Department of Education have recognized more than 2,000 schools nationwide. These programs recognize outstanding public and private schools identified on the basis of their effectiveness in meeting local, state, and national goals and other quality standards. In seeking successful schools, the programs also welcome schools that have overcome serious obstacles and are making significant improvements.

Incentive programs at all levels—for students, teachers, principals, and schools—work to bring clearer purpose and direction to education. When the work itself is worthwhile, and superior achievement is valued, everyone in our education system will be motivated to excel.

VII. ACCOUNTABILITY

Many Americans assume that if we just keep spending more and more on the system, eventually our educational problems will be solved. The facts indicate otherwise. During the 1990-91 school year, the United States will spend an estimated \$231 billion on grades kindergarten through twelve, an increase of seven percent over the 1989-90 amount of \$216 billion.¹⁹ Even

16. See CAL. EDUC. CODE § 54650 (West 1989) (description of intent of Education Improvement Incentive Program); *Tiny Catalina School is Honored with Top State Award*, L.A. Times, Apr. 19, 1990, at J1, col. 2.

17. See FLA. STAT. ANN. § 231.532 (West 1989).

18. See MINN. STAT. ANN. § 121.612 (West 1990).

19. See NAT'L CENTER OF EDUC. STATISTICS, U.S. DEP'T OF EDUC., DIGEST OF EDUCATION STATISTICS 2 (1990).

after adjusting for inflation, this is a thirty-four percent increase above the 1980-81 level.²⁰ During the same period, the average verbal score on the Scholastic Aptitude Test has risen above but fallen back to the all-time low of 424 (out of a possible 800) recorded in 1980-81. The average math score has risen only ten points since 1980-81, from 466 to 476, at which level it has remained for the last three years.²¹ Reading scores for ages nine and thirteen on the National Assessment of Educational Progress have essentially remained the same during this period.²² The low achievement of American students in mathematics and science, in comparison to students from other countries, is well-publicized.²³ In short, while we have been spending considerable sums of money on education in America, the results from our substantial investment have been unimpressive at best.

Traditionally, accountability in education has focused on inputs—reporting dollars spent and the resources that the dollars buy. Even though school systems generate volumes of reports with excruciatingly detailed information, our schools often say little about the quality of their educational product. Parents, students, and communities who ask the question, “What are our schools accomplishing?” often are not even able to obtain an answer. Indeed, it was not until 1984, when the Department of Education released the first State Education Performance Chart, or “Wall Chart,” that comparative student performance data were available state-by-state.²⁴ Since then, states and districts have increasingly undertaken initiatives to strengthen accountability by providing measures of elementary, secondary, and vocational-technical education performance.

Better information on school performance is clearly needed to improve our education system. But what measures of success are meaningful? If test scores are used, the tests must measure

20. *See id.* at 33.

21. *See, e.g.*, U.S. DEP'T OF EDUC., STATE EDUCATION PERFORMANCE CHART (1989).

22. *See* OFFICE OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND IMPROVEMENT, U.S. DEP'T OF EDUC., AMERICA'S CHALLENGE: ACCELERATING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT 31-32 (1990).

23. *See, e.g.*, Becker, *So You Thought the Tokyo Stock Market Was Rigged?*, BUS. WK., May 14, 1990, at 26; Knight & Wattenberg, *Is Education as Bad as Ever?*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP., Mar. 20, 1989, at 50; *New Approach to Math Lesson*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 1, 1989, at B6, col. 3; *U.S. Pupils Fare Poorly in Math, Science Tests*, BOSTON GLOBE, Feb. 1, 1989, at 1, col. 1.

24. *See* T.H. BELL, THE THIRTEENTH MAN 137-38 (1988).

the types of learning that we want to encourage in our students—not just the ability to memorize random facts, but an understanding of important concepts and a grasp of necessary skills. Furthermore, too much testing is counter-productive if valuable class time is used to test students before we know exactly what we hope to discover from the test. Records of courses taken can be used to evaluate student performance if both the content of the courses as well as the grades achieved are examined. There are also many other indicators that measure achievement: graduation rates, college attendance rates, and job placement rates. We need to examine critically whatever tools we use and work to develop measures that are reliable and that recognize and reward excellence.

Identifying and reporting educational performance, however, will not help to improve education unless the information is used to change behavior. If schools repeatedly fail to measure up to standards, they should be held accountable for their academic failure and required to improve.

In response to President George Bush's call for increased accountability at the federal level, the Department of Education has begun to implement measures to ensure that federal funding generates results. Specifically, the Department of Education is exploring ways to link positive results to increased flexibility in the use of federal funds. In other words, grantees of a program will be given more freedom in using those funds if they achieve better results with their students. Conversely, those who do not achieve positive results will be allowed less flexibility with the use of federal funds. This is a fair approach and is the way government should work—giving those at the local level the freedom to solve their own problems so long as they assume final responsibility for the results achieved from the use of federal funds. This enhanced accountability will produce more responsible and efficient uses of federal funds and accordingly improved educational outcomes.

VIII. CONCLUSION

These overarching strategies show real promise in helping us achieve our national goals for American education. The one thing we must avoid is remaining complacent, satisfied with the way our education system now stands. As a nation, we must acknowledge our education deficit. We must raise expectations

of students that they can succeed in school and have them understand that we care about them. We must understand that *our* schools are in trouble, and that they must be improved. The strategies outlined above are only a first step in the decade of educational improvement upon which we have embarked. It is the responsibility of all of us as citizens to make that first step and the steps to follow. It is up to us to make a commitment to education restructuring and to begin the work of achieving the national education goals. If the quality of life in the United States is to improve, we must educate every citizen to his or her fullest potential, and we must reach our nation education goals by the year 2000.

