

Issue Brief

GOALS 2000: The Hour Has Arrived To Re-Evaluate The Federal Role In Education Reform

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By Robert Holland, Senior Fellow

Executive Summary

The Goals 2000 movement made its public debut 10 years ago when President Bush and the nation's Governors met at a National Education Summit and agreed on national goals for schools. The gathering occurred amid a burst of bipartisan optimism that desperately needed improvements in public education would ensue.

Congress codified eight Goals and in 1994 passed the Clinton Administration's proposed Goals 2000: Educate America Act.

The Year 2000 has almost arrived, but Goals 2000 has made slight impact on school achievement. Yet President Clinton proposes to spend another half-billion on Goals 2000 in Fiscal 2000, which means that in January, 2001, Americans will be looking at their National Goals retrospectively. The Administration does propose to rename them "America's Education Goals," but semantics is no substitute for substance.

The 1998 report of the National Education Goals Panel noted that reading proficiency among high-school seniors had actually declined during the Goals 2000 decade.

That's a sad commentary.

Overall, the NEGP said, the nation's report card was a mixed bag -- improvements offset by declines.

A General Accounting Office study late in 1998 noted that many school districts used Goals 2000 simply to fund reform efforts that they had already launched without Washington's help. The GAO said it did not attempt to assess the effectiveness of funded programs.

Goals 2000 ought to end in 1999. There are more promising ways for the federal government to encourage needed reform of public schools -- for example, by assisting in the formation of charter schools, which promise results in exchange for freedom from stultifying regulations.

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Goals 2000 has been a decade-long experiment in national coordination of school reform, an issue traditionally left to states and local people.

It began with a burst of good feeling that finally Americans would come together as one to fix their public schools, whose mediocrity had been identified as a threat to the Republic's continued well-being by the federal government's famous "A Nation at Risk" report of 1983.

The time was 1989. The place was the University of Virginia. The event was the first-ever National Education Summit joining the President of the United States and the Governors of the 50 states.

Unmindful of non-academic agendas that would work their way into implementation, political leaders of both major parties set aside their differences to embrace National Education Goals, a cause for the Nineties. Enthusiastically endorsed by President Bush and the nation's Governors (with Arkansas' Bill Clinton in the lead), the Goals were later codified by Congress. In 1994, the Democratic-controlled Congress adopted Goals 2000, the School-to-Work Opportunities Act, and a reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act -- a troika of legislation with elaborate linked requirements to foster common "systemic" reform across the nation. As a federal Department of Education (DoEd) paper later asserted, "all elements of education [must be] aligned so that everything is working together."¹

So what's the outcome of the experiment? Unfortunately, as is the case with many federal programs, there has not been a comprehensive evaluation of effectiveness. Supporters are hard-pressed to produce more than anecdotal evidence of G2000's good deeds.

For instance, 40 pupils from Jessamine County, Kentucky used part of a \$50,000 Goals 2000 grant to spend a year looking into how schools in that state used their Goals 2000 money. They videotaped interviews with teachers about how they were teaching technology. Cindy Cisneros, the U.S. Department of Education's group leader for Goals 2000, hailed this "feedback" on "how the funding impacts the classroom." But no matter how earnest the students are, their work could hardly be called research, even under the education world's notoriously elastic definitions.²

The Department of Education hasn't done much better than the Kentucky pupils in showing in concrete terms how Goals 2000 has affected academic achievement. DoEd's fall, 1996 "progress report" touched lightly on what activities G2000 money had stirred in various states.

Vermont had come up with a "Green Mountain Challenge" for developing "world-class academic standards." (Users of the adjective "world-class" almost never provide a definition, and DoEd didn't offer one this time either.) Vermont had adopted 20 "vital results" of learning, but the report advanced no evidence of how children were learning more as a result. And so it went: Kansas was using G2000 funds for staff development, North Dakota for a local planning panel. Delaware was designing assessments "to best meet the needs of students with disabilities and limited English proficiency." And many school systems were buying computers and software.³

Nowhere in the report, however, was there any indication how classroom achievement was being affected by the disparate activities conducted in the pursuit of National Goals. To be sure, Goals 2000 had been in effect for a relatively short time; furthermore, under the enabling legislation it was to lay a "framework" for reform, not provide the finished product.

But achievement seems less a focus than social objectives like "building partnerships" and "parent resource centers."

The General Accounting Office (GAO) did release a 45-page study late in 1998 entitled "Goals 2000: Flexible Funding Supports State and Local Education Reform." The report noted that despite general agreement among Americans that schools need higher standards and other reforms, there is substantial disagreement about the federal government's proper role in the process.⁴

What Is Goals 2000?

The preamble to the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, as signed into law on March 31, 1994, stated its purpose as follows:

"To improve learning and teaching by providing a national framework for education reform; to promote the research, consensus building, and systemic changes needed to ensure equitable educational opportunities and high levels of educational achievement for all students; to provide a framework for reauthorization of all Federal education programs; to promote the development and adoption of a voluntary national system of skill standards and certifications; and for other purposes."

In delivering a report to Congress on November 16, 1998, the General Accounting Office described the program this way:

"The Goals 2000; Educate America Act, which became law in 1994 and was amended in 1996, is intended to promote coordinated improvements in the nation's education system at the state and local levels. All states and the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Territories are currently participating in the program.

"Goals 2000 funds aim to support state efforts to develop clear standards for and comprehensive planning of school efforts to improve student achievement. Funds are

provided through Title III of the act and are to be used at the state and local levels to initiate, support, and sustain coordinated school reform activities. . . States can retain up to 10 percent of the funds received each year, and the remainder is to be distributed to districts through a subgrant program. . . .

Because of widespread concerns about federal over-reaching, the budget bill passed by the Republican-controlled Congress and signed by the President in April, 1996, amended Goals 2000 in significant ways. For instance, it abolished the National Education Standards and Improvement Council (NESIC), which critics feared would function like a national school board, and it eliminated so-called opportunity-to-learn standards, which could have set Washington up as the judge of the adequacy of local spending for schools.

Because of the 1996 changes, the GAO said, Goals 2000 became essentially a funding-stream grant program -- providing aid states and localities could weave into their own reform activities. Of the \$1.25 billion distributed between Fiscal Years 1994 and 1997, state bureaucracies retained about 9 percent for such purposes as hiring consultants, and local bureaucracies spent the rest for such projects as drafting district improvement plans, retraining teachers, developing standards and alternative assessments, and buying computers and training personnel to use them.

The GAO interviewed education officials in 10 states and found, interestingly, that "almost all" of them said the Goals 2000 money boosted state and local reform efforts that were already well underway. Thus, some of the federal aid no doubt bolstered commendable school projects, such as introducing children to the use of computers; however, that could have been accomplished more efficiently by block-granting funds to the states, as opposed to tacking on Goals 2000 compliance requirements. Predictably, though, the state officials said they wanted the money to keep flowing in the same format.

The researchers from Washington did not meet with any parents or community critics of the Goals 2000 school-reform model. Moreover, the GAO team stated near the end of its report, "We did not attempt to determine the effectiveness of the various grant-funded activities or measure the outcomes achieved by the funded projects."

Had the GAO taken into account views from the grassroots, it would have found a great deal of concern among everyday Americans about the federal linkages and agendas built into Goals 2000. For instance, the School-to-Work piece of systemic change (funded at an aggregate \$1.7 billion through FY99) seems geared to track children from early grades into specific careers designated for them by government technocrats.

Moreover, Goals 2000-funded Parent Resource Centers -- which DoEd reported in 1996 were receiving an average of \$335,000 a year in 28 states -- suggest a "government knows best" attitude toward child-rearing. Working through either the Home Instruction

Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPO) or Parents as Teachers (PAT), the centers dispatched certified "parent trainers" into some homes for bimonthly or monthly visits. While services are available to "any parent," DoEd reports that they are targeted at "areas with high concentrations of low-income, minority, and limited-English proficient parents." However, some Goals 2000-funded state groups, like Parent Plus in Wisconsin, aspire to train "all parents." It is certainly debatable whether government intervention will mold better parents or make them less responsible by implying that government representatives have all the answers.⁵

About the only hard data on achievement during this decade of federally orchestrated reform have come from the National Education Goals Panel, even though that politically appointed body owes its existence to Goals 2000, and frequently boosts it. In its 1998 report, the NEGP reported progress toward meeting the eight National Goals that was, at best, spotty.⁶

The most promising "areas of improvement" were largely social or medical, such as a decrease in the proportion of infants born with significant health risks, and a decrease in the percentage of students who said they'd been threatened or injured at school (a bit of "progress" rendered ironic by Columbine and other sites of schoolhouse carnage in 1998-99). The NEGP did claim an increase in children deemed "proficient" in math. However, the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), which was funded partially by DoEd, found that U.S. high-school seniors placed 18th out of 21 industrial countries in math and science.

On the negative side of the ledger, the NEGP found disappointing declines in national performance -- despite Goals 2000 and the money funneled through it.

Notably, the percentage of high-school seniors proficient in reading declined, as did the percentage of teachers holding a degree in their main teaching assignment. And the gap between the percentages of white and black high-school graduates who completed a college degree also grew.

Education holds the key to what kind of nation the United States will be well into the coming century: Will there continue to be a common language and culture, even amid diversity -- e pluribus unum? An appreciation of American heritage? Will there be respect for individual rights and shared responsibilities? Will the rising generation have the ability and willingness to defend the country in times of great peril?

Unfortunately, loads of good will and bundles of money could not validate national goal-setting. Nevertheless, as the Nineties draw to a close, President Clinton wants to extend Goals 2000. His Fiscal 2000 budget calls for \$491 million in Goals 2000 spending -- the same amount that's in the 1999 budget. Thus as the new century begins in January, 2001, Americans may seem to be looking backward -- as they struggle to come to terms with -- yes, still -- a "Goals 2000."

Another semantic oddity is that the Administration wants to rename the National Education Goals "America's Goals," and turn the NEGP into the "America's Education Goals Panel."⁷ Apparently the Administration hopes the new name will rub off on the federal effort some of the magic of sports teams that have claimed to be "America's Team." But there is no rational basis for believing a name change changes anything.

Looking Ahead

Goals 2000 has spawned bureaucracy but generated few quantifiable results in the classroom. It has encouraged the notion that parents and communities should look to government coordinators, instead of within, to find the strength to rear children and build better schools. Washington would do well to end the Goals 2000 experiment and move toward local autonomy and parental choice as the instruments of true school reform.

Although an avid supporter of Goals 2000, First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton gave a hint of an alternative approach in her July 5, 1999, address to the National Education Association convention in Orlando. Mrs. Clinton urged members of the nation's largest teacher union to support the charter school movement "because I believe that parents do deserve greater choice within the public school system to meet the needs of their children." She expressed her admiration for a Washington, D.C. charter school that requires its pupils to master Latin, and noted that despite its rigorous academic requirements the school has a lengthy waiting list. Why, the First Lady wondered, couldn't there be many more schools like this?⁸

Why not indeed? President Clinton's FY2000 budget calls for only \$130 million to assist in local formation of charter schools, but would pour almost four times that amount into the anachronistic Goals 2000. The spending priorities are out of whack. If given wide latitude to innovate and respond to market demand for solid education, charter schools could bring about the positive change that the bureaucratically constructed "frameworks" of the Nineties failed to generate.

The National Education Goals

1. All children will start school ready to learn.
2. The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.
3. All students will be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in a global economy.
4. Teachers will acquire knowledge and skills necessary to prepare students for the next century.
5. U.S. students will be first in the world in math and science achievement.
6. Every adult will be literate and ready for lifelong learning.
7. Every school will be free of drugs, violence, and unauthorized firearms and alcohol.
8. Every school will promote parental involvement in the social, economic, and

academic growth of children.

ENDNOTES

(1) U.S. Department of Education, "Cross-Cutting Guidance for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act," September 1996.

Via Internet at www.ed.gov/legislation/ESEA/Guidance/theme.html

(2) Candice Furlan, "Students Spend Year Documenting Goals 2000 Projects," Education Week, Washington, D. C., June 23, 1999.

(3) U.S. Department of Education, "Goals 2000: A Progress Report -- Fall 1996," Washington D.C.

Via Internet at www.ed.gov/G2K/ProgRpt96/activity.html

(4) General Accounting Office, HEHS-99-10, Nov. 16, 1998 (45 pages), "Goals 2000: Flexible Funding Supports State and Local Education Reform."

Via Internet at www.gao.gov/AIndexFY99/abstracts/he99010.htm

(5) U.S. Department of Education, "Parent Information and Resource Centers," March 1996.

Via Internet at www.ed.gov/Family/Parentctrs/intro.html

(6) National Education Goals Panel, "Building a Nation of Learners," December 1998.

Via Internet at www.negp.gov/webpg220.htm

(7) U.S. Department of Education, "America's Education Goals," The Educational Excellence for All Children Act of 1999.

Via Internet at www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/ESEA/prospectus/goals.html

(8) The Education Intelligence Agency (an online news service), July 5, 1999.

Via Internet at <http://members.aol.com/educintel/eia>