

Issue Brief

The Clinton Education Legacy: Headed Toward a Failing Grade?

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Executive Summary

During his six plus years in office, President Clinton has given continuous attention to American education. Indeed, he has made it a top priority for his administration.

But how significantly has education policy changed, particularly for America's troubled elementary and secondary schools? Put differently: are America's school children better off than they were six years ago?

Initial indications are that President Clinton will be regarded by history as the "failed education President." Consider for example:

In February 1999 the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) the nation's only ongoing evaluation of students' performance in various subject areas found that twelfth graders' average reading scores declined from 1992 to 1999.

In 1998, a seminal report from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) found that American high-school seniors placed eighteenth out of twenty-one countries in math and science. The similarities between the DoEd budget that President Clinton has submitted for fiscal year 2000 outweigh the differences in the budget that President Bush agreed to for fiscal year 1993.

The President has failed to use the bully pulpit, perhaps the most powerful instrument he has to bring about education reform, to outline tangible, clear and necessary goals for where American education should be in the coming years.

These issues and the need for Presidential leadership in spurring changes in teachers' union contracts, dramatically expanding the number of charter schools, and other education matters are examined in the report that follows.

The Clinton Candidacy, Presidency, and Student Performance

As a candidate for President, Bill Clinton gave many indications that he would take dramatic steps to improve American education.

His 1992 campaign handbook, Putting People First: How We Can All Change America, promised "a real education-reform package" in the first 100 days of his Administration.

The President even flirted with endorsing a publicly funded low-income scholarship program in Milwaukee. In an October 1990 letter to the Democratic state legislator who

authored the program he wrote, "I am fascinated by that proposal and am having my staff analyze it. I'm concerned that the traditional Democratic Party establishment has not given you more encouragement. The visionary is rarely embraced by (the) status quo."

At one point in the movie *The War Room*, a film of behind the scenes activity at the 1992 Clinton campaign, James Carville makes a passing comment about how a Clinton Administration will provide vouchers.

Early in his Administration, the President still recognized the need for fundamental changes in American education. The President's fiscal year 1995 budget, the second one he submitted to Congress notes:

The elementary and secondary education system is in serious trouble, and has been for many years. Government at all levels, business groups, and others have documented low educational performance relative to other nations, declining college entrance test scores, weak educational preparation of teachers, substantial numbers of adults without the literacy skills to get a driver's license or read a ballot, and inefficiencies in school management. Federal, state and local spending for elementary and secondary education has soared during this period rising 33 percent in constant dollars from 1982 to 1992 without comparable nationwide improvement in student achievement.

More than six years into the Clinton Administration, however, the most important, bottom-line statistics indicate that our K-12 school system remains "in serious trouble." Last month, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that 12th graders' average reading scores declined from 1992 to 1998, with the average score falling from 292 to 291. NAEP is the country's only ongoing evaluation of students' performance in various subject areas. The test score scales range from 0-500. In addition, the study found that 23 percent of 12th grade students now read below basic, minimum grade level achievement, up from 20 percent in 1992.

This follows a disturbing report last year by the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) which found that American high school seniors placed eighteenth out of twenty-one countries in math and science. TIMSS was partially funded by the U.S. Department of Education and is the largest international comparative study of educational achievement to date.

The Clinton Education Budget: Business as Usual from the Bush Years

One of the more striking aspects of the President's proposed fiscal year 2000 Department of Education (DoEd) budget is its similarity to the DoEd budget that President Bush agreed to for fiscal year 1993.

To be sure, the President is seeking an increase in spending, with a total DoEd spending request of \$38.2 billion for fiscal year 2000. In fiscal year 1993, outlays for

DoEd programs totaled \$30.3 billion. The proposed fiscal year 2000 budget represents a spending increase of 26 percent above the fiscal year 1993 amount.

In the fiscal year 1993 budget, more than 90 percent of the expenditures went to four program areas: Title I (\$6.7 billion, a program targeted to poor, disadvantaged students), Vocational/Adult Education (\$1.4 billion), Special Education (\$5.3 billion), and Postsecondary Education (\$14.8 billion).

In the proposed fiscal year 2000 budget, these programs account for 78 percent of the proposed DoEd budget and are broken down as follows: Title I (\$8.7 billion), Vocational/Adult Education (\$1.7 billion), Special Education (\$6.4 billion), and Postsecondary Education (\$13.1 billion).

It should be noted that the President has instituted significant changes in the realm of higher education, where problems are more often of a financial (e.g., tuition) than qualitative nature. Significant increases in Pell grants as well as the creation of the Hope and Lifetime Learning tax credits have significantly reduced the cost of college for many students.

In the fiscal year 2000 budget, the President has put forward a potpourri of small priced (by Washington standards) but pleasant sounding policy proposals that have been widely touted in recent weeks. These include:

- \$1.4 billion to hire an additional 38,000 public school teachers (this marks the second year of this program);
- A \$400 million increase (to \$600 million for fiscal year 2000) to help school districts create or expand after-school programs;
- \$200 million to strengthen achievement and accountability in Title I, (the Title I program's effectiveness has been perennially questioned and doubted by education researchers);
- \$3.7 billion over five years for federal tax credits that would pay interest on \$24.8 billion of school construction and renovation bonds;
- \$10 million to encourage greater public participation in the planning and design of new schools; and
- \$18 million to help retiring military personnel and other mid-career professional become teachers in public schools.

As widely discussed as these items have been, they would cost less than \$3 billion for the upcoming fiscal year. By contrast, total local, state, and federal K-12 public education spending was estimated to be \$313.5 billion for 1996-97 school year.

Need for Presidential Leadership

It is hard to see how such small token programs like the above will fundamentally change the malaise that continues to grip K-12 public education six years into Mr.

Clinton's Presidency. There are, however, an array of bold and decisive actions that Mr. Clinton could take.

First, he could use the bully pulpit to regularly challenge the education community, parents, and students to develop the best K-12 education system in the world within the next decade. This can be gauged by having the U.S. place first in the TIMSS test, having no more than five percent of our 12th graders below their basic grade reading level, and having a 20 percent rise in the average SAT score.

President Kennedy put his reputation on the line when he challenged the U.S. to put a man on the moon within a decade. President Reagan did the same when he proclaimed that the Soviet Union would appear on the ash heap of history. Considering that America is the pioneer of the information age, President Clinton should be able to call upon the American people to work to overhaul our schools so they become the best in the world within the next decade.

Up to now, it is striking how much the President has shied away from setting such a bold and important national goal. The one near exception came in his 1997 State of the Union address. When addressing two students in the gallery, and their teacher, President Clinton said, "And they prove that when we aim high and challenge our students, they will be the best in the world. Let's give them a hand. Stand up, please." In fact, a Nexis search from January 1, 1992 to late February 1999 found only seven magazine articles and 40 major newspaper articles that contained the terms "Clinton," "education," and "best in world."

Second, the President should attack the root causes of the teacher shortage. The President, as noted above, wants to spend \$1.4 billion to hire 38,000 new teachers and has also personally touted a small program that would help former military personnel become teachers.

Systemic problems most notably oppressive, suffocating union contracts that pay teachers based on years of service instead of merit have driven hundreds of thousands of topnotch teachers from the profession while keeping many of the country's current 2.7 million teachers demoralized. Taking on teachers' unions would be much more Presidential than the timid programs the President has proposed.

Third, Mr. Clinton should follow the example of former U.S. Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander and Senator John Kerry (D-MA) and call for every school in America to become a charter school. Charter schools are public schools that are exempted from most education rules and regulations so as to permit more flexible and innovative methods of achieving educational excellence. Indeed, charter schools can facilitate the reengineering of American public education.

In a provocative June 1998 speech at Northeastern University, Senator Kerry made a strong case for this change:

"So let us now turn to a bold answer: Let's make every public school in this country essentially a charter school within the public school system. Let's give every school the chance to quickly and easily put in place the best of what works in any other school private, parochial or public with decentralized control, site-based management, parental engaged, and high levels of volunteerism."

Charter schools, by definition, must produce the results they say they will or be closed. Furthermore, parents can choose to send their children elsewhere. Because charter schools are free to pay the best and the brightest teachers what they deserve, there is no teacher shortage in these schools.

Finally, the President should fundamentally change federal education policy by block-granting elementary and secondary education dollars to the states. With states on notice that they are in competition to produce the best students in the world, there would be a flurry of innovation and improvement.

Will President Clinton adopt these measures and change course? It is doubtful, but one factor may cause him to do so.

With a new presidential campaign soon to begin, there is fair to good chance that at least one candidate will emulate the boldness of past Presidents, regularly proclaim that the U.S. deserves the best schools in the world within a decade, and that it will happen on his (or her) watch. By pre-empting such an action, and backing it up with real policy changes, President Clinton may be able to claim partial credit for turning around our education system, something which he cannot now credibly do after six years in office.

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