



All Education Is Local

Jocelyn Grecko, February 16, 2012

Conservatism and education: two things you don't often see mixed together – except when the federal government gets caught extending its hand into the classroom.

“The founders feared a government with a central power and they didn't think education was something you had to do on a national level.” Neal McCluskey of Cato Institute said at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) this year. McCluskey explained that after the birth of the nation, most of the education that took place in the country originated in homes and churches.

While McCluskey pointed out that over the years, education found its way into the public sector, for the most part there was little reliance on the government for educational programs. During the 1860s the passage of the Morrill Act allowed specific public colleges to receive funding, but McCluskey explained that it wasn't until 1957 that a centralization of education came to existence. This occurred when major federal initiatives for education were tied to national defense programs.

“That's a long period of time when we were managing education without government involvement,” McCluskey said.

Of course in the 1970s, President Carter developed the Department of Education in an effort to keep good on a promise he made to teacher's unions and return a favor to those who helped get him elected.

Ever since the ED's inception, the government has played a more prominent role in education. McCluskey explains that there wasn't a giant overreach until 2002 with the passage of NCLB. “It happened, largely, through Republicans,” McCluskey said. “For the first time the Federal Government dictated to individual states, every district, and every school... No Child Left Behind is extremely concerning.”

And now, according to McCluskey, President Obama's Race to the Top initiative, things just got a little more alarming. “\$4.35 billion of the so-called stimulus is being used for the program,” McCluskey said. “The government is telling the states, if you want to compete, you have to meet the standard.”

While many would acknowledge that setting a standard, especially for a country like the United States is a valuable asset to our performance as a country, there is a line that is drawn in trying to create “one size fits all” program. McCluskey pointed out that to try and create a standard for every single child, is unreasonable as each child is different – they learn differently, perform differently, and are skilled in different areas. “We are at the point where a single person can dictate,” he said it’s as if the Obama administration has said “to heck with separation of powers.”

What good have these recent education initiatives actually accomplished? “There’s no evidence that this has done any good,” he said. In looking at higher education, for example, McCluskey noted that there is a 57 percent graduation rate for four-year programs.

He also said that recent studies have shown a dropping literacy rate in the country. “Too many people are in school because you, the taxpayer, is paying to fund them,” he said. “Every time the government fails, we try and give it more money to fix things.” It’s what he likes to call, “money going out the door.”

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