



## **Federal Schools or College Scholarships: Take Your Pick**

By John Linder  
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Ms. Ovid Davis wrote many years ago about the superintendent's test she had to pass to graduate from the 8th grade in a Kansas school in 1907.

In that test she had to calculate the time and place a collision would occur between two locomotives traveling toward each other on the same track from certain locations at given speeds.

She was required to write an essay on the physiological damage caused by alcohol.

She had to write an essay on the political philosophy of Thomas Jefferson. Eighth Grade! My wife and I just hoped our kids would have heard of Thomas Jefferson by the 12th grade.

I went to high school in the 1950's in Deer River, Minnesota, a town of 800 people about 90 miles south of Canada. The most important job in Deer River was that of school superintendent. The only political position worth seeking was school board. Those elected earned no salary, but they earned immense influence and respect.

Parents attended PTA meetings because what was discussed at those meetings mattered and it has always been the case that parental involvement in schools improves school outcomes.

Miss Eva Gagnon was my first grade teacher. She taught first grade for 45 years. She lived her life in a room she rented from Mr. and Mrs. Johnson. She was so revered that when she walked down the street men actually tipped their hats. People smiled and said, "Hello, Miss Gagnon." No one ever called her Eva.

Miss Gagnon, the rest of America's teachers and county school boards, labored without the direction of federal bureaucrats, but somehow they succeeded. In every decade from 1890 to 1960 student scores on standardized tests improved.

Then the federal government decided that they could do better. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 established a federal role and scores of standardized tests have not improved since.

A recent study by the CATO Institute shows that the lack of improvement is not caused by a lack of funding.

In 1990, John Chubb and Terry Moe published a study of America's schools entitled, "Politics, Markets and America's Schools." They interviewed thousands of students and thousands of teachers at hundreds of schools that had been selected at random. Chubb and Moe also concluded that funding was not the issue. Nor was classroom size or teacher pay.

The biggest predictor of success is local control. In successful schools the principal has the authority to hire and fire and lead. The schools with the most bureaucratic oversight are most likely to fail.

In an interview when the book was published Chubb said that the New York City school system had 6,000 bureaucrats running a system that graduated fewer than half of its students. The New York Catholic school system had one-fourth as many students, sent 80 percent of them to college and was overseen by 25 bureaucrats. In the public school system, a prospective school crossing guard went through seven interviews in order to be hired. In the Catholic system the principal alone made the decision.

Since 1965 virtually every state or federal candidate campaigns promising to "fix" our schools. Each "fix" has driven more decisions from the county school board to the state or federal level. As decisions are removed from the county what is discussed at PTA meetings matters less and parents stop attending. As parental involvement declines, so does achievement.

One government education initiative has been an unqualified success. It was the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, known as the G.I. Bill. Veterans who wouldn't have dreamed of a college education got college degrees and it mattered to our country. That has been expanded to include recent veterans.

Between 1948 and 1968 the number of Americans in poverty declined by half. Poverty in the Black community declined by two-thirds and we saw the biggest movement of Blacks into management jobs in our history. Education was the proximate cause.

In business you cut your losses and double down on success. Government operates exactly the opposite. We could have expanded what worked, college tuition. We chose instead to double down on our failing record in elementary and secondary education.

I have a simple proposal for our next president. Take the billions that we spend on the Department of Education and student grants and loans and use that money to provide scholarships for every student who earns a college acceptance. No more college debt. No more Department of Education.

More important, we can give kids from poor circumstances hope. Every teacher can say to every child in his or her class, "Let me help you learn and you can be anything you want to be."