



Geoff Caldwell: More Federal Government Not the Answer to Education Problems

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October 27, 2022

In 1980, America voted to replace the malaise and misery of the Jimmy Carter presidency with the optimism and common sense of a Ronald Reagan administration.

It was also when the federal Department of Education saw its first year as a stand-alone cabinet-level department — created not out of any national security threat or imperative need, but created as a presidential political favor to the National Education Association.

The department would quickly become a playground for left-wing social theories and a giant cash machine for Democratic politicians.

In 2001, the libertarian CATO Institute noted in its “Handbook for Congress”: “As government gained a larger, tighter grip, achievement declined” — words as true today as they were then.

While national teacher unions are at the zenith of their political power in Washington, D.C., the national scorecard for math and reading in America’s public schools is as bad as it gets.

But the crisis goes beyond just math and reading.

As Missouri state Rep. Jim Murphy noted (Globe, Oct. 22) the lack of civics education and media literacy is leaving our young people without the basic skills to “decipher what is real and what is not.”

He noted: “Civic education is rooted in the building of foundational knowledge about how our system of government works and the roles and responsibilities of every American.

“But a 21st-century civic education also includes essential skills — such as media literacy, civil discourse and even financial literacy — that truly give young people the tools they need to navigate an ever-more-complicated American society.”

These are words that I could not agree more with, yet the solution discussed in the column, the Civics Secures Democracy Act, gets a hard no from me — not for the laudable intentions, but for the underlying premise upon which it is based: That more federal money will fix the problem.

Murphy asked his readers to not take his word on the act or “support the bill carte blanche ...” but to “read the bill for yourself.”

Read it I did.

The PDF version downloaded from www.congress.gov comes in at 35 pages. Granted, that’s a Post-it note when compared to the usual hundreds of pages per bill that comes out of Washington these days, but as short as it is in page length, it’s far too long on the premise that “government is the answer.”

The bill is correct in its goals to:

“(1) improve knowledge among students traditionally underserved by comprehensive civics education and American history programs;

“(2) close gaps in civic knowledge and achievement among traditionally underserved students;

“(3) improve performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress assessments in civics and history among students in grades 4, 8, and 12;

“(4) provide cost-effective, scalable delivery of programs and services.”

However, it couldn’t be more wrong in thinking that using the federal grant process will result in anything other than increasing the bank accounts of the grant writers and D.C. bureaucrats who will determine who gets what and how much.

You don’t drop an alcoholic off at the liquor store after completing a month of rehab, and you certainly don’t let the same department that’s ruined civics education in the classroom be the giver of tax dollars to fix it, because frankly, any good fix would ultimately end the careers of the money shufflers.

As the citizenry becomes more educated on how the federal government works today, it also becomes more aware of the failures and bloat of government. And rather than voting for politicians promising more government, start voting for those who pledge to start issuing pink slips instead.

This nation is already over \$31 trillion in debt —a debt that is already sucking over \$700 billion of our tax dollars to pay just the interest alone on that debt. And with interest rates going up, it’s only going to get worse.

Instead of putting our children further in debt, how about instead a bill that simply requires all schools to administer to every student the civics test that the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services requires legal immigrants to pass before becoming a naturalized citizen.

No pass, no diploma.

No, it’s not an end-all, be-all solution, but it’s a start. And it’s also not tossing more billions into an already failed system with the false hope that “this time,” it will work, a system that for far too many of our children is slamming shut the doors of opportunity and dooming them to a life of dreams never realized.

So instead of another federal solution, how about some reflection on the last sentence in the education section of that 2001 CATO policy handbook: “What education desperately needs is less Uncle Sam and more mom and dad.”