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The states and education

If we're all honest with ourselves, we have to admit that Tennessee, Georgia and the rest of the states often don't do the best job possible of educating our nation's public schoolchildren.

There are a lot of reasons for that, including some that defy any simple remedy.

For instance, many children come from broken homes without a stable male presence. Statistically, that makes them far more likely over time to abuse drugs or alcohol or engage in other activities that undermine their ability to learn and their prospects for success.

But we also bring some of our academic problems upon ourselves.

One of the main barriers to progress in recent decades has been the intrusion of the federal government in public education.

Education is a responsibility left to the states and the people under our Constitution. But testifying before Congress last year, Andrew Coulson, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the **Cato Institute**, spelled out the waste and ineffectiveness of so many federal dollars that have been showered on education.

Adjusting for inflation, Washington has spent about \$2 trillion on education since 1965.

What have schoolchildren gotten for all that federal involvement? Not much.

Coulson pointed out that despite a 375 percent increase in inflation-adjusted, federal per-pupil spending from 1970 to 2010, "Math and reading scores at the end of high school are unchanged over the past 40 years, while science scores suffered a slight decline through the year 1999"

So it is sensible to ask why we should think that continuing federal intervention in education is the path to progress for America's children. Where is the record of achievement from spending trillions of federal dollars on education?

Coulson concludes: "[I]t now costs three times as much to provide essentially the same education as we provided in 1970. ... The fact that outcomes have remained flat or declined while spending skyrocketed is a disaster unparalleled in any other field. The only thing it appears to have accomplished is to apply the brakes to the nation's economic growth, by taxing trillions of dollars out of the productive sector of the economy and spending it on ineffective programs."

Given that record, it is understandable that Tennessee, Georgia and eight other states have sought and received exemptions from the Obama administration from many of the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind law. Among other things, the states will no longer have to meet a requirement under No Child that all students must perform at grade level in math and reading by 2014.

Instead, the states will set high standards but may pursue them through more flexible means. Performance in subjects such as science and social studies -- not only reading and math -- will be used to measure student progress. States also will have to set their own standards for gauging whether teachers and administrators are doing a good job.

Many of those things may seem good in themselves, and again, we don't fault the states for seeking relief from federal dictation of educational standards.

But the waivers were granted only after the states' educational plans were reviewed and approved by the Obama administration. So Washington is still exercising enormous control over how the states educate their children. New Mexico, for instance, sought the same exemption from the No Child Left Behind law but was refused because

its plans didn't meet with the administration's approval.

It is a good thing if Washington is exercising somewhat less control over education in the states. But a far better idea would be for Congress to repeal unconstitutional federal laws on education and restore real authority to the states, where it belongs.