

Money for Math Dummies Won't Guarantee Einsteins: Caroline Baum

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By Caroline Baum

Jan. 31 (Bloomberg) -- U.S. presidents are always yammering about the need to “invest in education” to prepare our children to compete in the 21st century.

Barack Obama succumbed to the temptation last week in front of a huge, attentive audience for his State of the Union address. The president told the American people every child deserves a chance at an education. He said we have to “win the race to educate our kids.” And he reminded us that the quality of math and science education in the U.S. “lags behind many other nations.”

Whose fault is that? Last time I looked, the Department of Education was a government agency. If Obama believes in top-down policy, all he has to do is tell his bureaucrats to fix it.

The function of the Department of Education, according to its website, is to establish policy for education and to assist the president “in executing his education policies for the nation and in implementing laws enacted by Congress.”

Better education for our kids is a goal, not a policy.

The Education Department's mission is to promote student achievement and prepare our youth for global competitiveness. Inspirational, to be sure. Where's the policy to accomplish it?

Running in place. Between 1970 and 2007, inflation-adjusted spending for grades K-12 increased 190 percent without any noticeable improvement in academic achievement, according to Andrew Coulson, director the Center for Educational Freedom at the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington.

Education's Cost/Benefit

“After \$2 trillion and 45 years in the business of education, you'd think we'd have something to show for it,” Coulson said in a telephone interview last week. Instead of better student performance, all that money bought us “a lot more public school employees,” he said.

The U.S. spends more per pupil than most countries, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. In its latest report, “The Condition of Education 2010,” the NCES said the U.S. spent \$10,267 per pupil for primary and secondary education, 41 percent

more than the average for developed countries. (Data are for 2006.) That amounts to 4 percent of gross domestic product, also above the average.

As for student performance, the U.S. ranked about average in reading literacy and science, and below average in mathematics, compared with other developed nations, according to the Program for International Assessment (PISA), which is coordinated by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Constitutional Questions

It sure sounds as if education spending should undergo some of that rigorous cost-benefit analysis Obama plans to apply to federal regulations.

Most of the money for education comes from the state and from local property taxes. Historically the federal government's share has been 8 percent, doubling with the fiscal stimulus.

"Education is a state and local responsibility," said Russ Whitehurst, director of the Brown Center on Education Policy and a senior fellow at Washington's Brookings Institution.

The federal government has no constitutionally enumerated power to determine how to educate our children. (Tea Party Caucus, take note!) Ever since LBJ's Great Society and the Civil Rights Act, the federal government has taken on the responsibility for providing equality of opportunity through education, Whitehurst told me in a phone interview. No Child Left Behind (Bush) and Race to the Top (Obama) are recent examples of the federal government setting goals and standards and, in the second case, doling out rewards (money) for meeting them.

"The goal is to homogenize education," Cato's Coulson said.

Definition of Insanity

Most of us would agree that every child deserves an opportunity at an education, as Obama said in his speech. So why did the president sign a law phasing out the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, begun under George W. Bush? The OSP provided scholarships for children in very low-income districts to attend private schools.

By any metric, the program was a success. "A higher proportion went to college, parents were widely enthusiastic, it cost a lot less than public education in D.C.," Whitehurst said.

The Democratic-controlled Congress said the money could be better spent on D.C. schools.

Liberals think the answer to underperforming inner city schools is more money. Isn't that the definition of insanity, doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result?

Libertarians and conservatives say the solution for improving education is more competition and choice. Who's right?

Free to Choose

The old way hasn't worked. Why not try something different? How about tempting the education system with the incentives of the marketplace to see if that will shake it out of its torpor?

Liberals want to spend money more wisely, but the only way that's going to happen is by introducing the choice and competition teachers' unions oppose. Low-income parents should be able to make the same kind of choices affluent parents do when they decide to buy a home in an upscale suburb with a good school system, Whitehurst said.

"A surer way over the long term to spend money wisely is a system that is competitive, gives parents the opportunity to choose and has public funds following them to schools selected by parents," he said.

Forget all that stuff about "investing in education." That would be money well spent.

(Caroline Baum, author of "Just What I Said," is a Bloomberg News columnist. The opinions expressed are her own.)

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