

The Corner

Education Reform, the Cost-Free Way

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As Andrew [notes](#), President Obama's budget includes a big increase in education spending: \$77.4 billion total, a 22 percent jump from 2010 levels. And while the Obama administration has been signaling that education reform will be a top priority in 2011, it's too bad that the operating assumption is the way to help improve public education is to, once again, increase funding.

In fact, there's no correlation between increased funding and a better education. In [testimony](#) delivered earlier this month at a hearing conducted by the House Education and [Workforce](#) Committee, the Cato Institute's Andrew Coulson pointed out it costs the taxpayer \$151,000 for each student's K-12 public education — nearly three times as much as was spent per student in the '70s, if you adjust inflation. What's the result? "Overall achievement has stagnated or declined, depending on the subject," reports Coulson.

Nor has the increased funding resulted in better educational opportunities for low-income children. While education studies don't tend to track results by familial income (very unfortunately, in my view), Coulson looked at the differences in education scores between children of high-school dropouts and college graduates and found that the reading and science test-score gaps between the two groups haven't budged at all in 40 years. In math, the difference is narrower by a mere 1 percent.

If Obama wanted to be serious about educational reform, he could achieve that in other ways that won't increase education costs. One way could be pushing vouchers: the D.C. voucher program (which Congress, buckling under pressure from the teachers union, closed to new students in 2009) gives low-income students an education grant of up to \$7,500. (Public school spending in D.C. is \$28,000 per student.) [House](#) speaker John Boehner is pushing for the D.C. voucher program to be revived, so this could also be a way for Obama to burnish his new "centrist" credentials. The voucher program also has proven results: a 2010 study by the Education Department's Institute of Sciences found that voucher students had an 82 percent high school graduation rate, twelve percentage points higher than their public school counterparts.

In a January [op-ed](#) for the *Wall Street Journal*, former D.C. schools chancellor Michelle Rhee also suggested some ways that schools could be improved without budget increases. One way would be to fire ineffective teachers and replace them with teachers who could actually deliver results. (Of course, firing teachers based on effectiveness, not seniority, will ensure a difficult battle with the unions.) Another would be to look for wasteful uses of education [funds](#). "Billions of dollars today are wasted on things such as paying for advanced degrees for teachers that have no

measurable impact on student achievement,” wrote Rhee.

Obama’s right to be serious about improving education — it’s unacceptable that American students are lagging [so far behind internationally](#). But there are plenty of ways to achieve real reform without increasing funding.