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Education

By Times Dispatch Staff

Results from the latest international assessment of educational performance put the United States smack in the nothing-to-write-home-about category. America ranks average in reading and science, and below average in math.

As numerous parties have observed, this poor performance comes almost a decade after the No Child Left Behind Act, two decades after Goals 2000 and despite huge increases in spending on schools that include an inflation-adjusted doubling of federal outlays, per pupil, since 1970.

The lesson President Obama draws from this? We need greater federal investment in education, of course: "Eisenhower doubled federal investment in education after the Soviets beat us to space. That's the kind of leadership we must show today," he said a few days ago.

But as the Cato Institute's Andrew Coulson points out, the National Defense Education Act was "an expensive failure. . . . High school mathematics performance actually fell in the eight years following passage of the law. . . . By 1983, math scores had still not returned to the level they had been at before the NDEA was passed."

Well, maybe this time will be different. Maybe, if the U.S. doesn't change anything about public education but the level of funding and the amount of bureaucracy, higher scores will materialize anyhow. They'll probably arrive *circa* 2012 — borne aloft on the backs of unicorns and leprechauns.

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