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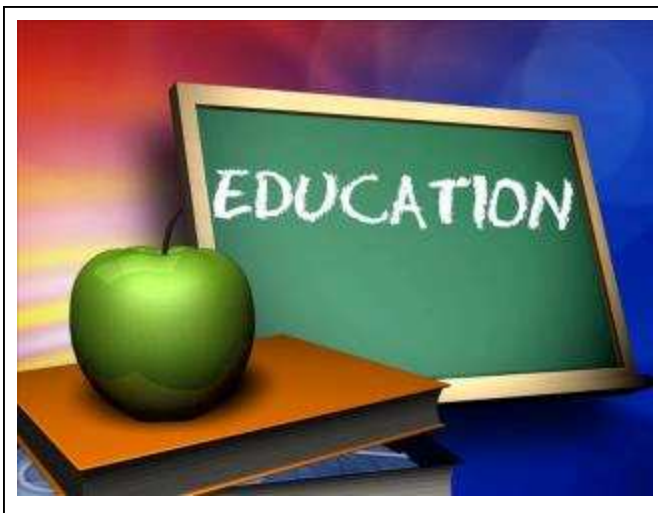
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- 1) **Neal, the voters have recently sent a pretty strong message, at least in my mind about the direction of the nation. What in your opinion, have the voters said?**

I think the clearest message they sent is that they are not happy with the state of the nation, and they blame a very expansive and expensive federal government. Two exit polling questions from the midterm elections capture this perfectly. First, 41 percent of voters said they either "strongly" or "somewhat" support the Tea Party

– once considered the “fringe – and only 31 percent expressed opposition. Even more telling, 56 percent of respondents said they thought “government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals.” Only 38 percent thought “government should do more to solve problems.”

2) Let’s talk about the Tea Party- do they seem to have a specific agenda about education and the Department of Education?

The Tea Party is hardly one, uniform entity – it is more a general, constrained-government sentiment that a lot of people share. As such, it doesn’t have a specific agenda on education. Generally, though, from looking at the stands of new electees with Tea Party connections, those people either didn’t address education specifically, or talked about devolving power from Washington and returning it to local governments. Many also discussed school choice, and a few specifically called for eliminating the U.S. Department of Education. I take that to mean education isn’t high on their agendas, but they generally want less federal involvement when it comes up.

3) Now, the Republicans have a new leader in John Boehner. What seems to be the republican position about the Department of Education?

This is almost as hard to pin down as what the Tea Party thinks. Some congressional Republicans like No Child Left Behind, and therefore presumably like the unprecedented power it gave Washington in education. Presumptive Speaker Boehner, who was a chief mover of NCLB in 2001, is among those, and they almost certainly wouldn’t want to see the demise of the U.S. Department of Education (ED).

Others are harder to pin down, and often address the question of ED’s existence just by saying it is politically unrealistic to think it can be abolished. And then there are incoming Republicans like Senator Rand Paul who have explicitly called for ED’s demise. If education even gets on the radar over the next two years, it will be very interesting to see how Republicans – and, for that matter, often-conflicted Democrats – come down on the federal role.

4) Neal, you and I have had some wonderful discussions about getting kids an appropriate education. Can the states and the local municipalities be left to their own devices in terms of providing a free appropriate education, or are we always going to be having some dissention or argument about this?

There will always be conflict as long as government runs schools, because all people are different and have different values, goals, and needs. If they all have to support a single system of schools – whether controlled at the federal, state, or local level – they will never all be able to get what they want, and conflict will be inevitable. That is why school choice is essential: Government should ensure that all people can access education, but the choice of education provider should be up to parents and educators should be free to provide education as they see fit. Then like-minded parents and educators can seek each other out, and conflict can be avoided.

There will still, no doubt, be battles over how much to fund students, especially if we were to go to some kind of student-weighted formula that gives students differing amounts depending on characteristics such learning disabilities of English language fluency, but the battling would be hugely decreased.

In the absence of school choice there would be a need for the federal government to ensure that state and local

authorities aren't discriminating in their provision of education, but otherwise state and local governments should be left alone. Allowing the feds to do more has mainly just translated into a lot of federal spending and little educational improvement.

5) There seems, at least in my mind to be a very strong conservative movement in this country. Do they have a specific agenda or platform, or is it just one of some disgust with the way things are?

I think the general movement is represented by the Tea Party, which has no specific platform but is clearly angry about rapid expansion of federal power far beyond what it is constitutionally permitted. How that translates on specific issues is unclear, except, perhaps, that Tea Partiers do not want to see any tax increases. I think we will only know where the people stand on specific issues when proposals for things like real cuts to federal education programs are made. Then we'll see who wants small government only in the abstract.

6) Now, there still seems to be a groundswell of liberals on the West Coast and on the East Coast. What would they like in terms of the Department of Education?

George Wood, executive director of the left-leaning Forum for Education and Democracy, recently had a guest entry on the blog of the Washington Post's Valerie Strauss in which he called for abolishing ED and rolling it into a department like Health and Human Services. His reasoning: It makes sense to include education with issues like child health, and ED has simply gotten too into micromanaging schools. I'm not sure that most liberals would call for ending ED – I think that they like that a cabinet-level, education-only department gives educators better access to federal policymakers and funds – but I suspect that there is a lot of sympathy for ending federal rules and regulations, especially that impose standards and tests.

Like among conservatives and libertarians, I think there are some pretty substantial splits among liberals on the proper federal role in education.

7) I think a lot of people are distressed with all the laws and legalities out there regarding education. Any chance in hell of things getting simplified and streamlined?

I think there is. If there is one area where it seems there could perhaps be relatively easy compromise between congressional Republicans and the Obama administration, it would be easing some of the NCLB rules and sanctions that apply to almost all schools, and sending money to states more in the form of block grants as long as the lowest-performing schools remain subject to federally mandated interventions. There are a lot of obstacles in the way of that actually happening, but it at least seems like a plausible middle ground.