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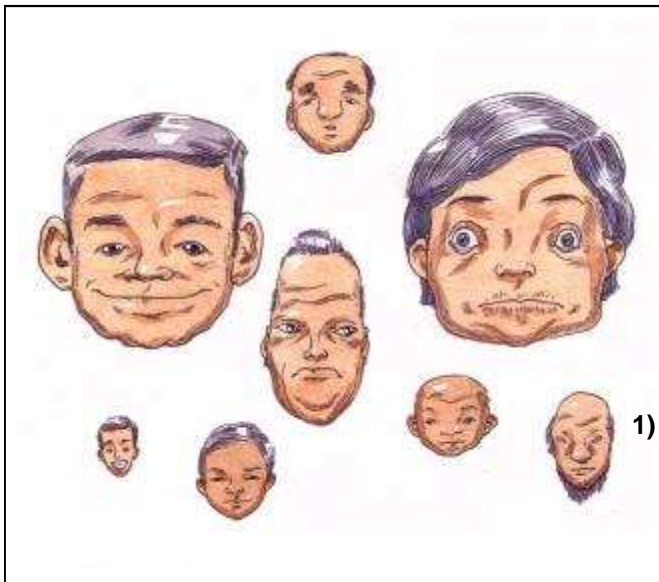
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Michael F. Shaughnessy - Getting the federal government out of education – except for enforcing equal protection laws – would definitely be a good thing.

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1) Neal, it has been an exciting election, and obviously I have my own opinions, but let's get yours- do the voters in your mind want to end Federal Involvement in Education (and Special Education)?

I certainly don't think we can look at the election results and say that voters, monolithically, want to end federal involvement in education. It seems likely that few voters even had education in mind when they cast their ballots. What we can say, however, is that a major concern for voters is the expanding size of government.

Indeed, in exit polls 56 percent of respondents said they thought "government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals." Meanwhile, only 38 percent thought "government should do more to solve problems." That corresponds nicely with the most recent Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll, which found that large majorities believe authority over education should reside at state and local levels, not federal.

Based on the election and exit polling results we can't conclude that most voters want to withdraw Washington from education, but we can conclude that withdrawing Washington from education would be generally consistent with voter sentiments.

2) Would this be a good thing or a bad thing?

Getting the federal government out of education – except for enforcing equal protection laws – would definitely be a good thing. If you look at outcomes and federal spending in elementary and secondary education, spending has ballooned over the last forty years while National Assessment of Educational Progress scores have been, essentially, flat. In higher education, there is powerful evidence that the student aid the federal government provides mainly enables colleges and universities to raise their prices at very fast rates, negating its value to students while enriching the Ivory Tower. Students end up little better off while taxpayers get ever-poorer.

From an educational standpoint, federal policy makes little sense. It has been very logical, however, from a political perspective: Politicians have bought votes by being candy men, and when they've proposed to ditch failed policies they've opened themselves up to low-blow – but nonetheless powerful – accusations by education special interests that they are somehow against education or children. But given the powerful, anti-government, anti-waste, anti-spending mood right now, this might be the safest opportunity we've had in decades to deal with the rotten truth about federal education involvement and start pulling out federal tentacles.

3) In your mind, SHOULD the Federal government be telling the state of Alaska how to run their school systems?

No. Under the Constitution the federal government has no authority to do so – except it must prohibit state discrimination in provision of education – and it has proven time and again that it is incapable of successfully doing much of anything in education other than squandering copious amounts of taxpayer dough.

4) Now, let's talk about accountability? How does a state-let's pick on Nebraska- how does the State ensure that all school systems are doing a good job? What criteria should a state be using?

The key in any state is school choice – empowering parents to hold schools clearly and immediately accountable by taking their kids and money out of schools they don't like and putting them into schools they do. Only then do poisonous politics get sucked out of education, because politicians no longer make education decisions, and educators must earn parents' business, not take it through lobbying and politicking. Best of all, choice furnishes real accountability without inflexible, one-size-fits-all standards that neither recognize that all kids are different, nor that there are far too many important things involved in education to capture them all in a single test.

5) As I type, there is a massive lawsuit in Louisiana about some special education kids who apparently have not received an appropriate education. Neal, are we ever going to have consensus on what constitutes an appropriate education for kids with autism, a hearing impairment, a learning disability or mental retardation?

Probably not, because people often have very different beliefs about how best to educate kids, both with disabilities and without. I also don't think we've ever found a "best way" of educating kids that actually works best for each and every kid. Again, this makes school choice critical: In such a system, schools can try new and different things, and parents can seek out what's best for their unique children. We can look at the very successful, popular McKay scholarship program in Florida – which is for children with special needs – to begin to see that choice in education is just as valuable, if not more so, for special education kids as for other children.

6) How do we tell the new incoming senators and congressmen that the average parent (and probably the average school system) does not want a bunch of rules and regulations that only high powered attorneys can understand?

Most directly, parents and taxpayers can tell them through emails and telephone calls. I think, though, that thanks to the No Child Left Behind Act that message is already pretty clear, with the law reviled for, among many things, its big bureaucratic burdens. And I think that the overall message of the most recent elections – get government out of our lives – sends that message across the board.

7) I think we may agree that often times it is not money- but values---how do we get kids and parents to VALUE a good education? Is there anyone in Washington that can do that?

No one in Washington can do that – it must be a bottom-up change in the culture. How that will happen I do not know, but I suspect some of it will come when jobs requiring great mathematics and science understanding – the subjects that generally require the most academic discipline – furnish big financial payoffs, which they don't necessarily do right now compared to pursuits like the law. But I'm also not convinced that our general attitude toward education is entirely bad: Doing well on tests is not a bad thing, but there is a lot of value in education that cannot be easily tested, including such oft-maligned, fuzzy abilities as critical thinking and thinking "outside the box."

The ultimate point, again, is that what is important in education can neither be reduced to a sound bite, nor is it at all settled what, exactly, is important, or where different things rank on scales of importance. And when there is that much uncertainty, the key to success is decentralization and freedom, not choosing one thing for all and hoping it works out.

8) Have the people in Washington learned that they should not make more promises than they can deliver?

Maybe, but I am still highly dubious. As long as politicians are rewarded for giving voters "free" stuff and paying for it with outrageous debt, they'll keep on making big promises even if they know they won't come to fruition. Similarly, if they can give out "free" stuff and make "the rich" pay for it they will keep making grandiose promises that ultimately do little more than redistribute wealth. Only if everyone has to pay the cost of the "free" stuff they get, or the public truly understands that there is no such things as a free lunch – something this election gives me hope is becoming the case – will I expect to see politicians make reasonable promises.

9) Have the people in Washington learned that they cannot shove what they want down the throats of the American people?

Elections can be a good way of sending that message, and this one seemed to. But memories can be very short...

10) What have I neglected to ask that perhaps we can discuss in a future interview?

I think we got it all.