



Left behind: Critics say federal education fix won't work

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“No Child Left Behind has become unworkable,” Chairman for the Senate Education Committee Lamar Alexander admitted recently. Many very smart people in politics and education policy agree.

But Alexander, a Tennessee Republican, has no intention of giving up. And neither do all those smart Republicans and Democrats, teachers' union leaders, education advocates and parent and student group representatives who have recently been rearranging themselves in the most unusual alliances.

Because no matter how much evidence piles up on the left and the right that solving education problems in 50 states with hundreds of billions of dollars in federal tax money over the past 12 years hasn't worked, no one with any stake in the matter is about to let go no matter how many children are left behind.

The reasons are as complicated as the motivations of individuals and groups involved. And as simple as the fundamental rule of our federal government: Once created, a federal program and the amount of money spent on it can almost never be stopped.

The U.S. Constitution assigns no role in public education to the federal government. The policy that evolved into No Child Left Behind began with President Lyndon Johnson's mid-1960s “War on Poverty,” with a 32-page law providing extra federal assistance for poor and disadvantaged children.

Since then, hundreds of additional programs and thousands of regulatory constraints have been heaped on the federal education initiative. Per pupil spending has more than tripled. More than half a trillion federal tax dollars have been allocated since No Child's enactment in 2002.

And at no time have the dramatic increases in spending and regulation led to anything resembling a proportionate increase in student progress. Average student test scores in math, science and reading are historically flat, according to the government's National Center for Education Statistics. But that doesn't seem to matter.

Getting rid of federal involvement is a tough sell. It threatens the interests of a welter of millions of individuals and groups benefiting from government largesse, including their political representatives.

Those politicians who are entrusted to hold education lobbyists and special interests accountable are, in fact, beholden to them.

Federal involvement is by now so ubiquitous that substantially withdrawing from K-12 education is politically unfathomable. Promising a fix is something politicians can get people to rally behind even if there's clear evidence their proposals won't deliver.

“Once created, politicians and lobbying groups have every incentive to ensure that those programs continue even if they're not effective,” Courtney Collins told Watchdog.

Collins is the author of “[Reading, Writing, and Regulations: A Survey of the Expanding Federal Role in Elementary and Secondary Education Policy](#).” “One of the main problems,” she said, “is that it's politically advantageous to say you're going to fix education.”

None of these interests is more politically powerful than the teachers' unions. In the past two years, the two biggest unions, [National Education Association](#) and the [American Federation of Teachers](#) made a combined \$36.9 million in political contributions and spent about \$7.5 million on lobbying, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

The union army is staffed with an ever-growing number of public education employees — especially those who do not teach in the classroom.

According to a recent [study](#) by the [Thomas B. Fordham Institute](#), the number of non-teaching staff in the United States — aides, librarians, principals, district staff, guidance staff, support staff, etc. — now comprises one-half of the 6.2 million total public school employees. Their salaries and benefits alone account for one out of every four education dollars. Put another way, more than double the percentage of those in South Korea and Finland, which consistently rank at the top of global education rankings.

According to the [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development](#), a grouping of 34 democratic countries with market-based economies, the United States is second in the world in overall education spending, behind Switzerland.

In 2011, the most recent [data](#) available, Americans paid \$15,345 per pupil, dwarfing Mexico at \$3,286 per pupil. The OECD average was \$9,487.

Among OECD members, the [U.S. ranks](#) 17th in reading, 20th in science and 27th in math.

“We spend more than any other country in the world and our results just don't speak to that,” Michael Brickman, national policy director for Fordham told Watchdog.

“Unions always get a cut from more members,” Brickman said. “There is a voice for reform but it competes with powerful interests who want more spending for the sake of more spending.”

Harder still in the effort to affect real change is shadow boxing the moral imperative of something called No Child Left Behind. The U.S. Department of Education's mission, “to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access,” can mean anything anyone wants it to mean, [Neal McCluskey](#), associate director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, says.

Ultimately, what the interested parties can agree on is that it means more money and is necessary to fix what Alexander readily admits is an unworkable program.

Over the life of No Child Left Behind, the DOE received roughly [\\$850 billion](#), \$35 billion more than the \$815 billion the Department of Defense spent to fight the Iraq War, according to the [National Priorities Project](#).

“The federal government isn’t capable of transforming an education system,” McCluskey said. “The problem is we’ve kept the same sort of system in place only we’ve made it worse.”

Not unlike Medicaid, states that would otherwise want control over their education systems are held hostage to the “free” federal funding. Should state leaders want to break free their critics label them enemies of education or of the poor. Worse, they’re fools for turning down billions that will simply be distributed among compliant states.

Resisting No Child also meant states risked losing supplemental funding designated for schools and school districts with high percentages of poor students. It was the bait used to lure states into accepting even the most contentious regulations, McCluskey wrote in a policy analysis called [A Lesson in Waste](#).

“It wasn’t required to leave the lights on, but certainly school districts began to budget for it every year,” McCluskey told Watchdog.

To plug those gaps, states and local governments would’ve been forced to raise revenues, assuming they had the capacity to do so. Like so many programs, when the feds come calling it’s just easier to take the money even if it doesn’t get results.

In the place of real reform, the heavy hitters in education are debating whether or not to eliminate standardized testing, the accountability backbone of No Child Left Behind.

The proliferation of intense, high-stakes tests — [federal mandates now require states to administer 17 annual tests](#) — and the subsequent parent and teacher revolt has the attention of the political class.

Alexander has proposed two options: keep the existing testing mandates in place while rolling back teacher accountability, or allow school districts and states to decide.

In other words, hold fast to the unworkable system or return to the flawed era that No Child Left Behind was supposed to fix.

The debate has yoked Republicans, who think the testing is federal overreach, to the teacher unions that believe student performance is too burdensome on their membership.

More confusing still are former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush — a likely 2016 GOP presidential frontrunner — and President Obama arguing that measuring the performance of disadvantaged children is tantamount to guaranteeing their civil rights.

Collins said allowing a modicum of control to return to the states is a step in the right direction.

“There’s an economic argument for doing as much at the local level as possible,” she said, “because the people making those decisions are close enough to recognize the best fit for those specific classrooms.”

But don’t expect the idea of a centralized, one-size-fits-all approach to improve the educations of 50 million kids attending 100,000 public schools to die. Don’t expect common sense to prevail over power.

“We’ve got to get away from doing the same thing over and over again,” said McCluskey. “It’s the definition of insanity.”