

# Forbes

## Bernie Sanders Is On To Something In Education

Neal McCluskey

January 8, 2020

Presidential candidate Bernie Sanders is taking the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), and test-centric education policy, to task. “We do not need an education system in which kids are simply taught to take tests,” Sanders writes in USA Today. “We need a system in which kids learn and grow in a holistic manner.”

Sanders is right that federal law has narrowed education largely to a test score (though it has moved away from that a bit with NCLB’s successor). Unfortunately, he is way off when it comes to solutions.

NCLB was signed into law in early 2002 to improve the academic outcomes for all students, especially those in schools with the worst test scores. And it was passed with strong bipartisan support, because a lot of people had reached the logical conclusion that too many families, especially low-income, were powerless. They had far too little political capital to change their districts, and could not afford the cost of homes in “good” ones. The only hope for them, many concluded, was for the federal government to *force* states and districts to pay attention to everyone.

The intentions behind NCLB were good, and the assessment of a fundamental public schooling flaw—families have little power—was dead on. But the practical effect was to concentrate power even further from families and communities, putting it in Washington, D.C. And the law relied on essentially one measure—standardized test scores—to determine “good” or “bad” performers, and did so without accounting for unique situations, from poverty levels to English-language learner concentrations, before slapping labels and sanctions on schools and districts.

Senator Sanders is right to criticize NCLB. But he is greatly mistaken to also attack school choice, which he does based on some charter schools being managed by for-profit companies, most being non-union, and none supposedly being “publicly accountable.”

The fact is, only school choice empowers *families* to hold their schools accountable by controlling education dollars, especially low-income families who cannot afford to buy expensive homes to escape schools they feel are not serving them well. “Public” accountability, in contrast, is dependency, forcing the poor to rely on political processes and bureaucracies to make schools work. But such processes tend to leave the poor and political minorities largely powerless; they have neither the elite political networks, nor often the sheer size, to significantly influence political decisions.

There is one other thing: All children, families, and communities are different, so no one system could serve them all equally no matter how much political power they had.

In addition to shunting choice aside, Senator Sanders suggests that “underinvestment in our schools” is a major problem.

How one defines “underinvestment” is, of course, crucial, but by what measures we have it is tough to see anything like major underfunding. For one thing, we spend more per-pupil on elementary and secondary education than almost any other industrialized nation. Moreover, as the graph below shows, while there was a decrease in inflation-adjusted spending as a result of the Great Recession, it came after decades of almost unremitting spending increases, and we are almost back at record levels. What has been stagnant, at least since the late 1980s, is average teacher salaries, but that is because the money has been spent elsewhere, especially on other staff.

Bernie Sanders is right that NCLB-style reform—blunt, top-down control—is no way to run an education system. But he is wrong to attack the opposite of such reform: school choice, which empowers diverse families and educators alike to seek out and provide education as *they* see fit.

*Neal McCluskey is the director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom and author of the book "Feds in the Classroom: How Big Government Corrupts, Cripples, and Compromises American Education."*