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#### INKWELL

## Big ED's Fatal Conceit



by **Vicki E. Murray, Ph.D**  
 November 24, 2009, 3:28pm

The U.S. Department of Education wants to know [What's Needed to Make Sure Innovation is Working](#)? Its answer, of course, is more government. Last week, Jim Shelton, head of ED's [Office of Innovation and Improvement](#), and John Easton, leader of ED's [Institute of Education Sciences](#), argued government is the best arbiter of innovation. Leaving aside the mountain of scientific, empirical evidence to the [contrary](#) (including evidence produced by their own [department](#)), Shelton and Easton claim resources to promote innovation in the private sector, "are not organized, prioritized, or leveraged for maximum impact." They say what's needed is "a new vision, one that... builds a cohesive structure for school reform." But when has the federal government actually demonstrated any of those qualities when it comes to taxpayer dollars, never mind "vision"? "We've spent [\\$1.8 trillion](#) on hundreds of different federal education programs since 1965," explains the Cato Institute's Andrew Coulson, "and guess what: at the end of high school, [test scores](#) are flat in both reading and math since 1970, and have actually declined slightly in science." Maybe that's why by a margin of [15 to 1](#) education economists favor competitive education markets driven by parents over dysfunctional schooling monopolies run by politicians, bureaucrats, and special interest groups. Real education reformers with a demonstrated track record of success also know better-reformers like former Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction [Lisa Graham Keegan](#). Arizona is considered the [national leader in education options](#) for parents thanks in large part to Keegan's efforts. She has a very different [vision](#) than Shelton and Easton. "All of our efforts to regulate, certify, and guarantee quality in the education industry will only be successful to the degree we underpin the industry with competition." Arbitrarily assigning students to schools doesn't work. For Keegan, "The basic lack of choice in schooling is a foundational flaw that we must correct.... We can't go on blithely ignoring this." She recalls the advice of Nobel-winning economist [Friedrich von Hayek](#) in [Road to Serfdom](#) and [The Fatal Conceit](#), namely, "how little [men] really know about what they imagine they can design." Keegan recommends instead, "A single school choice, made by millions of parents on a daily basis, becomes a massively influential feedback mechanism for the larger system, far more powerful than the best public report card."

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