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Jeff Jacoby: How separating school and state would pay off

05:01 PM CST on Monday, March 8, 2010

Central to President Barack Obama's approach to education is a drive for uniform national standards in reading and mathematics.

The argument seems straightforward: The No Child Left Behind law enacted in 2002 required states to establish their own academic standards, but most of them – under pressure from teachers' unions and school administrators' associations – set the bar quite low. The only way around the states' aversion to high standards, the [Obama](#) administration and others have concluded, is to impose uniform national standards, using the federal purse as leverage.

But if the goal is to have more American students get a successful education, it is far from clear that imposing a single set of benchmarks from above is the best strategy for getting there.

For one thing, the political resistance to rigorous academic standards that has been so effective at the state level is likely to be effective at the national level. The teachers' unions and administrators' organizations that oppose higher performance mandates are at least as influential on Capitol Hill as they are in the statehouses.

Moreover, the very nature of American society – a nation of 300 million comprising a multitude of ethnic, religious, social, and ideological traditions – argues against the imposition of one-size-fits-all education standards. There is no uniform answer to the question of what parents want most from their children's education.

"The greater the diversity of the people falling under a single schooling authority," Neal McCluskey of the [Cato Institute](#) observes, "the greater the conflict, the less coherent the curriculum, and the worse the outcomes."

Anyone who called for legislation to establish mandatory national standards for television programming or restaurant menus would be laughed at: Americans don't think the government is competent to decide what shows they can watch on TV or what they can order for dinner when eating out. Is it any less risible to think that government knows best when it comes to your children's education?

Rather than centralizing even more government authority over the nation's schools, genuine reform would move in the opposite direction. It is parents – not local, state, or federal officials – who should control education dollars. School and state should be separated, with schools being funded on the basis of their ability to attract students and teach them well.

The primary responsibility for children's education should be vested in the same people who bear the primary responsibility for their feeding, housing, and religious instruction: their mothers and fathers.

More government control is not the cure for what ails American schools. The empowerment of parents is. No teachers' union, no school board, no secretary of education, and no president will ever love your children, or care about their schooling, as much as you do. In education as in so much else, high standards are important – far too important to hand off to the government.

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