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Interview with Cato Institute's Neal McCluskey, speaker at VOICES of Conservative Women event

May 8, 5:36 PM Hennepin County Conservative Examiner Crystal Kelley



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I was given the opportunity by VOICES of Conservative Women to interview Cato Institute's Neal McCluskey, keynote speaker at Thursday night's VOICES Education Policy Event. Mr. McCluskey is the author of Feds in the Classroom: How Big Government Corrupts, Cripples, and Compromises American Education.

McCluskey is the associate director of Cato's Center for Educational Freedom. His background in education is diverse: he was a high school English teacher, a freelance reporter covering education in suburban New Jersey, and more recently, a policy analyst at the Center for Education Reform.

We sat down a few hours before his speech to discuss his book and the American educational system in general.

I had the pleasure of reading your book last night. What made you decide to write it?

Well, there are some practical reasons for it, just because I'm interested in federal education policy, but the genesis of it was when I first started working at Cato.

The president of the Cato Institute, Ed Crane, had wanted for some time for someone to find out where federal education money goes. So I wrote up one of our policy analyses, which is about a 30-page paper, to try and determine just that. Early on in that research, I found that you can't really track where the money goes. I had a grand scheme that I was going to find the dollars as they came to Washington and follow them through the Washington bureaucracy, the schools, and where they get to the kids. That would have been an impossibility, or very difficult. It turned out somebody really needed to itemize what these dollars are budgeted for and what the federal government intends to do.

Then I did some breakdowns of how the Constitution doesn't give the federal government any authority to govern in education outside of a very few specific things. And then I asked, "What are the justifications the federal government offers for what it does?" I broke down the programs by the ones

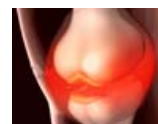
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you couldn't imagine any justification for and ones you can sort of have justification for. So I basically end up making the argument for what the federal government can and can't do, what it does do, and why so much of what it does do is wrong.

That fell into the hands of an editor at Rowman & Littlefield who actually asked if I would want to expand it into a book. I wasn't looking to write a book on it necessarily, but I said "sure." It was actually his suggestion to add chapters that looked at the judicial aspect of it with the role of federal courts and things like that, and then I really greatly expanded the history sections.

The history sections were fascinating; for example, learning things like "Why Johnny Can't Read" was written in 1955, when one might think illiteracy within the public schools is a much more contemporary problem, and that the Department of Education and the National Education Associations were established by 1870.

I really got into the history, and it's really important because I think most people don't have any idea about the history of American education. I had a vague notion, but mainly what I had been taught in school, which is basically that the Puritans came, they established public schools, New England had public schools, and eventually everyone had public schools because it worked so well. And that was totally bogus.

People need to know how we went from total local control of education to essentially federal control, and so the editor's suggestions and my pursuing federal education policy and my wanting to talk about the history lead to those chapters. The social aspects of it, in particular, are interesting because there's a very strong notion that you have to have government schools that all kids attend, and that diverse kids attend with each other to unify them. History suggests public education essentially didn't develop that way; in most places it sprang from homogeneous communities. Where there weren't homogeneous communities, you had a lot of conflict or you had a lot of oppression, which is a particular interest of mine. So just the original paper, coupled with the suggestions from the editor, added to areas I wanted to look into anyway, produced this book.

It seems we are able to prove correlations between socioeconomic status in the home and school success, but there is no evidence that throwing money at the schools helps with the ultimate success of students. Why do we continue to do it?

I think there are two major reasons. One reason is people don't have a lot of time to think through education policy and don't have a lot of time to think what the money's used for; none of us has time to think through all the things the government's doing in any meaningful way. People, I think, tend to reasonably assume that if we put more money into it we can get better resources, better things, and people will learn better, just as when you put more money into a car you go from a Yugo to a Cadillac, and you get a bigger car, it's faster, more reliable, etc. People don't have time to think beyond that, so lots of people do that, they think, "Yeah, we need the money."

One of the most telling manifestations of this is technology. Everybody thinks you need to have the newest computers and computer labs. Where I live in Alexandria, Virginia, we have T.C. Williams High School, which was featured in the movie "Remember the Titans." They built a new T.C. Williams, and it's got its own planetarium, it has television studios, it has radio studios--all sorts of technology--but there's almost no evidence that technology leads to better educational outcomes. In fact, usually what's found is the kids can manipulate the technology very well and the teachers can't keep up. Then the technology is corrupted. But people look at that and say, "Well of course, we need to have these cutting-edge things so we have cutting-edge kids in a new economy." They don't work that through to realize kids need to know math and science and reading, which are very low-tech to teach, and to be able to think critically, which doesn't require a lot of input. So part of the problem is that it makes intuitive sense to people.

The other part of the problem--and this is the root problem in public schools--is the people who are making policy are the people whose livelihoods rely on public education: the teachers unions. Unlike the general public, they are able to organize and mobilize and think through all these issues about education policy, and it usually comes down to, for them, that we need more money.

Do you consider the passage of the ESEA (1965's Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which as defined in the book "gave the federal government control over an amount of education money unprecedented in American history and established a host of new programs aimed at compensating poor school districts for the deleterious effects of poverty") to be the pivotal moment in public education, and if not, what was?

It was certainly important, but really, probably the most important events happened in the 1930's with the Supreme Court. (In the 1931 Supreme Court case *O'Gorman & Young, Inc., v. Hartford Fire Insurance*, the Court invoked a "presumption of constitutionality," meaning a presumption that all statutes passed by legislatures are constitutional unless proven otherwise. In 1937, rulings in both *Coast Hotel v. Parish* which, McCluskey writes, "turned the Constitution on its head," and *Helvering v.*

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Davis, which defended the right of Congress to enact almost any legislation authorizing the federal government to spend money in the name of "the general welfare," were issued.) Helvering v. Davis has opened the door for all kinds of federal education transgressions. We essentially had a cowardly Supreme Court.

In the book, you write that the debate still continues over whether the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (which promised to provide 40 percent of each individual's special education cost) is a federal commitment or spending maximum? Which is it, in your opinion?

I don't know which it is, but it's just bad. You never want to be in a position in which the federal government is renegeing on promises, which it constantly does.

Do you think we will ever be successful in abolishing the Department of Education?

I'm hopeful. People used to think, "Oh, the Department of Education; it's for the *children*." Well, now the approval rating for the Department of Education is worse than the IRS. As people are being educated about the Department and what it does, they will start to rise up. The *New York Times* just did a piece on how the Department has "spread its tentacles" into nearly every aspect of public education, and that's the *New York Times*.

Is there any research on how students fared after Whole Language and Outcome Based Education

(OBE--think profile of learning) were used in the early years of their educations, as to college and career success?

Well I don't think they followed the OBE kids, but they did find out early on that the California Whole Language experiment was a disaster.

Do you oppose No Child Left Behind (NCLB) because it was poorly written or because it was poorly implemented? If it were constructed as it was in the original blueprint, would NCLB have been more acceptable?

No, I think from the beginning it was fundamentally flawed. It's blatantly unconstitutional. Originally, the private school vouchers were included, but they didn't have a chance.

It is poorly written and therefore poorly executed because, for example, despite the fact that the word "proficiency" appears hundreds of times in NCLB, it was left completely undefined. This leaves it open for individual states, and even districts, to define what "proficiency" means. Left to set the standards for themselves, they said, "Would it be easier for me to set the bar high and try to have as many students as possible meet that standard, or to set the bar lower?" Ultimately, of course, what most of them decided was to lower standards. But no, NCLB is just a huge piece of intrusive legislation in any form it passed.

Can you tell me about any new projects you're working on?

I'm working on writing a chapter in a book. A colleague of mine at Cato, Pat Michaels, is a climate guru--he does all the global warming related work--and he thought it would be interesting to do a book that looks at how climate change ideology has been seeping into a lot of areas beyond science and among climatologists. So my chapter will be on education and how there are federal programs or UN programs that are supposed to teach kids about climate change that are full of a lot of dubious material and things like that. So I'm just really starting to do the research on that. You shouldn't feel the need to deprogram your kids every time they come home from school.

What do you think the future holds for education in America, say in the next 20 years?

In the next two to three years, it could get worse. President Obama just wants to be able to declare that something is "innovative" and have the federal government support whatever that might be. But maybe if there are experiments on a national level, and not in only one or two states that screw up their kids, then people would understand and resist federal involvement in education on a broader scale.

In 20 years, I'm hopeful about school choice, but it needs to reach beyond public, charter and magnet schools and include the private schools as well. We are going to see, and in some cases are already seeing, schools popping up that speak to the individual needs/desires of different children and families, and I think we'll just see more of that--as long as we can keep the federal government out of it.

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