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What Now? Federal Education Policy Adrift

By [Marc Tucker](#) on February 7, 2014 9:50 AM

With each new report from the PISA surveys, the United States drifts a little further down the international rankings of national school performance. You might think that would concentrate the minds of our federal policy makers. What we have instead is a farce.

On the books, current federal education policy is the language of the No Child Left Behind Act. But those policies are now largely discredited and have been replaced both by the Race to the Top program passed as part of the emergency measures enacted in the depths of the Great Recession and by the policies of the Administration, in the form of waivers from the provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act issued on the authority of the U.S. Secretary of Education.

Since the Obama administration came into office, states wanting relief from the hated provisions of No Child Left Behind or a shot of badly needed funds or both had to lift the caps on the number of charter schools in their states; sign up for the Common Core State Standards or a reasonable facsimile thereof; and promise to drive their accountability system with a new system for teacher evaluation based to a considerable degree on the test scores of their students. There were other things, too, but everyone understood that what really mattered to the United States Government was charters, the Common Core, teacher evaluation and test based accountability.

I am, as readers of this column know, fully committed to the Common Core, but the Department, by virtually requiring the states to sign up for it, gave a ton of ammunition to the foes of the Common Core by seeming to legitimate their claim that the Common Core is a federal program (which it isn't) aimed at giving the United States Government primacy in determining the American school curriculum. That was a mistake. The Common Core did not need that kind of help and was not better off for getting it.

The Administration is a big proponent of evidence-based decision-making in education. Except when it comes to its political priorities. Its embrace of charter schools is a prime example. It is easy enough to find particular charter schools that outperform particular regular public schools. But when you put all the evidence on charters together across multiple states, it shows that charters do no better than regular public schools with respect to student performance, after you take student background into account. If you look at the global evidence for school choice, it shows that choice systems, when implemented at a national level, produce results slightly worse than those for regular public schools, and, in addition, produce greater disparities between schools serving students from wealthier families and those serving students from poorer families.

But, undeterred by the evidence, the Department not only insisted on taking the caps off charter schools in the original Race to the Top legislation but has continued to do so in its most recent Race to the Top competition. A triumph of ideology and politics over the facts.

There is no country with a top-performing education system nor any top-performing state in the United States that owes its success to a policy based on firing teachers, nor has any top-performing country or state used test-based teacher accountability as the fulcrum of their education strategies. Nor have any of them used teacher evaluation as their core strategy. These ideas are hair-brained. And they have been rejected as hair-brained by the top-performers.

But, don't worry. These ideas may be policy, but most are not yet law. The prospect of agreement in the Congress on any replacement for No Child Left Behind seems as remote as ever.

We are not, however, without proposals. The Republicans, who have now decided that they are as concerned as the Democrats about widening income inequalities, have come up with a solution: the very same market solutions I just mentioned for which there is no evidence whatsoever of effectiveness. It seems that evidence is no more a requirement for Republicans than for Democrats.

The President, in his State of the Union message, advanced no new ideas in the field of schooling, but he did plump for a big investment in early childhood education and made the case for high schools that combine academics with industry partnerships. I am a big fan of early childhood education and no less a fan of vocational education, but I was struck at the lack of mention of school reform. Did the President think that we have done the job on school reform--no evidence of that either--or has he just given up?

The Common Core is now under sustained attack from people who will say anything about it--whether true or not--to bring down what they see as another federal government intrusion into their local rights and freedoms, and by others who are tired of too much testing and the use of

standards and tests to circumscribe teachers' work and deprive them of their jobs. Probably the single biggest liability of the Common Core right now is the ham-handed way it has been implemented in too many places.

If I were making federal education policy right now, I would be looking for ways to get far more and much better resources to classroom teachers designed to enable them to teach the Common Core well to their students. I would be working hard to come up with policies to attract the most capable high school graduates to a career in school teaching. I'd be trying to make it a lot harder to get into our schools of education and make the preparation of teachers much more rigorous. I would be looking for ways to strengthen the profession of teaching and create incentives and supports for teachers to continually improve the quality of their practice. These are the kinds of things other countries have done to produce far better results than we are getting, at a much lower price to tax payers. Why are we going down rabbit holes, seeking solutions where there are none, when the solutions to our problems are not that hard to find?

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