

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND – GEORGE W. BUSH EDUCATIONAL AGENDA

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Abstract: *This paper is meant to outline the ways in which the 2002 legislation, No child left Behind, which has had a major effect on public education in the United States, redirected educational thinking along new channels, thrusting the teachers, schools and school districts into a new federal educational policy.*

Key words: *student's performance, teachers' quality, parents' role, flexibility, discrepancies between scores.*

1. General Considerations

“The federal legislation known as No Child Left Behind has had a major effect on public education in the United States.” [2].

The Law, signed by the president George W. Bush on January 8, 2002, at Hamilton HS Ohio, reinforces a whole series of federal programs with the declared purpose to improve performance of American schools.

“Passed with bipartisan support by a republican Congress (...), the hundreds of pages of the law have touched every public school classroom “in the United States [2].

It also offers parents more flexibility in choosing schools attended by their children and also insists on developing reading skills, reauthorizes the ***Elementary and Secondary Education Act*** (1965), represents the latest legislation, which launches educational reform based on standards.

In the introductory speech, which presents the educational policy of his administration, President George W. Bush points out that in America there are too many children with low expectations and very few children are offered the chance to progress and *“are therefore left behind: If our country fails in its responsibility to educate every child, we're likely to fail in many other areas. But if we succeed in educating our youth, many other successes will follow throughout our country and in the lives of our citizens” [1].*

Most of the President G. W. Bush educational Agenda may be found in ***No Child Left Behind***.

A construction project intended to repair and restore the building of U.S. Department of Education in 2002 required the installation of structures at all entrances of the building in order to protect employees and visitors from falling debris.

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The *Department of Education* would give a different purpose to these structures, using them as a way to promote the law – *No Child Left Behind*.

The Law involved transforming the role of the Federal Government in education, so that no child would be neglected and instead, would remain under its protection.

It is remarked that, while America prepares to enter the 21st century full of hopes and promises, most of its students are neglected. 70% of fourth grade graduates are unable to read properly on the national reading tests. Nearly one third of those who want to attend a college must follow preparatory courses to be able to be admitted.

Although education is primarily each state's responsibility, the federal government can't tolerate such results any longer.

Since 1965, when the government took the first initiative in education *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, federal policy has strongly influenced schools in America.

For years, the Congress has created hundreds of programs for educational problems, which have been offered through 39 different federal agencies and cost about 120 billion dollars per year. President Bush stated that “*after spending billions of dollars on education, we have fallen short in meeting our goals for educational excellence. The academic achievement gap between rich and poor, Anglo and minority is not only wide, but in some cases is growing wider still*” [1].

In response to these disappointing results, the President considered that the federal government should intervene more efficiently on the system of education. Among the primordial initiatives are:

- Increasing student performance evaluation.

States, districts and schools which improve their results are awarded and failures sanctioned. Parents receive information about how their children learn and schools are evaluated to prove their effectiveness by annual national tests in Mathematics and Reading at the 3rd through 8th grade level.

- Funds offered by the Federal Government will be used to create effective programs based on both research and practice to improve schools and teachers' quality.

- Reducing bureaucracy and increasing flexibility. The George W. Bush administration provides more flexibility to states, districts and local communities in accessing funds.

- Increasing parents' role.

Parents have much more information about the quality of the schools in which their children learn and students from schools with low performance are given the opportunity to choose a better school.

These priorities are part of a general trend to reform the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* and they are meant to correlate federal funds to specific performance targets to ensure further improvement of the educational results.

“*There were initiated sweeping changes to the 37-year - old Elementary and Secondary Education Act and thrust the nation's educators, schools and school districts into a new world of federal educational leadership.*” [3].

Funds are directed toward disadvantaged schools and districts, giving them the possibility to achieve expected results. Funds may be lost if performance standards are not reached.

“*The 2002 legislation redirects educational thinking along new channels. Under its terms, every state, to*

receive federal aid, must put into place a set of standards together with a detailed testing plan designed to make sure the standards are being met.” [4].

No child in America should be neglected; each of them must be educated at his/her maximum potential.

“The federal government is no longer seeking to help only children with special needs, such as special education students or children from poor families. It is attempting to ensure that all children have an equally good education” [2].

2. Educational Policy

The educational policy of the George W. Bush administration, regarding reform consists in a few key components (many of them being implemented during the re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act).

2.1. Eliminating Discrepancies between Scores

Evaluation and high standards. States, school districts and schools must be evaluated to see to what extent all students, including those who are disadvantaged, cope with high standards.

➤ States should develop a system of sanctions and awards for districts and schools to improve results.

➤ Annual tests. Annual tests in Reading and Mathematics provide parents the necessary information to know their children’s performance and to be informed how school educates them. These data are a vital diagnostic tool for schools to improve their activity continuously.

Offering adequate time for planning and implementation, each state may select and design tests of their choice. In addition, a sample of students from each state is tested annually by National

Assessment of Educational Progress. From 3rd grade through 8th grade, the students will be tested in Reading and Mathematics.

Schools that fail to achieve adequate yearly progress for disadvantaged students are helped in a first phase, and if they do not restore their situation, corrective measures will be taken. According to Scott Franklin Abernathy “the law promises to close the long – standing achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students in the United States by using the results of standardized tests to identify, threaten, and, if necessary sanction schools and districts that do not fulfill this promise.” [6].

Improving reading is set as a first priority emphasizing the following aspects:

➤ The importance of reading in primary grades.

States that establish comprehensive reading programs, based on scientific research, applicable from kinder-garden to the 2nd grade are eligible to obtain funds from the **Reading First** program.

➤ Reading as a means of preschool instruction.

States participating to the **Reading First** program will also have the opportunity to access funds through **Early Reading First** program, which develops preschool reading methods.

2.2. Increasing Flexibility and Reducing Bureaucracy

➤ More schools can access programs from Title I and have the possibility of combining federal funds with local ones to improve the quality of the entire school, if bureaucracy is reduced, which will provide a greater flexibility in granting funds.

➤ Funds allocated to improve school technology are increased, in particular those needed for electronic equipment and technology, being distributed to schools according to their necessity, through states and school districts.

➤ Programs which overlap are combined into a single integrated program that is more easily accessible, reducing bureaucracy in this way.

Options flexibility is ensured through a charter of options for states and districts engaged in the process of evaluation and reform.

Some requirements will be optional for the member states of the charter, but instead they should ratify a five year agreement with the Secretary of Education and will be subject to some very rigorous evaluation standards.

2.3. Rewarding Success and Sanctioning Failure

This is a way of encouraging competition. States may be awarded for:

➤ *Diminishing the gap between scores.*

States with increased performance which minimize discrepancies between the scores of students from different economic backgrounds are awarded.

➤ *Assessment.*

Each state is offered a bonus if it accomplishes the conditions of a rigorous assessment for two consecutive years, including annual assessments for 3rd through 8th grades.

➤ *Disadvantaged students' progress.*

Schools which make real progress in improving disadvantaged students' score will be rewarded with the '*No Child Left Behind*' prize.

Secretary of Education is authorized to reduce federal funds for administrative expenses of those schools, which do not reach their performance objectives and

do not demonstrate some learning results in accordance with actual standards.

2.4. Promoting Parents' Informed Choice

➤ Parents may choose which school their children will attend, having access to school reports which record the scores of students belonging to all categories.

➤ Innovative programs which facilitate parents' informed choice and promote research on this topic will receive funds from the Secretary of Education, to extend choice possibilities and research on the effects of informed choice.

2.5. Improving Teachers' Quality

➤ The act of teaching should be done by teachers of high quality. States and school districts benefit from flexibility in using federal funds, so they can improve teachers' quality. It is expected that states provide teaching done by qualified and efficient teachers.

➤ Providing funds for improving the actual practice in classroom. High standards for teachers' professional development are established in order to ensure that federal funds will promote more effective practices in classrooms and quality research in this area.

➤ Improving the study of Mathematics and Science. The study of Mathematics and Science is improved through the development of partnerships between state and higher education institutions to educate more effectively and to enrich curricula.

2.6. More Safety in Schools in the 21st Century

➤ Teachers' protection.

Teachers have the authority to remove from classroom students who are violent and turbulent.

- Promoting safety in schools.

Increased funds are allocated to schools to promote safety and to prevent drug use during and after classes. States are allowed to provide funds to religious organizations and to any organizations which initiate action on these issues after classes.

- Saving students from unsafe schools.

Victims of violence, which took place in schools and students, who learn in schools in which they expose themselves to different dangers are offered the possibility to choose other schools in which to be safe. States must announce publicly, and especially the parents if a school is unsafe.

- Supporting education for character formation.

Additional funds are granted to support classes for character training, modeling behavior and to ensure teachers the methods needed to teach such classes.

3. Reactions against the law

This reform is severely criticized by professors of education, considering that teachers are deprived of their professional dignity and the school has been converted into a business focused on the “bottom” line standardized scores.

A common school, at first a factory and now a corporation, but always a business, is all that federal legislation enforced. Accountability is perceived as a great pressure put on the teachers’ shoulders to make them entirely responsible for the students’ educational accomplishment.

The schools justify their existence only for the sake of job preparation.

According to William F. Pinar, “through legislation (such as the Bush administration’s *Leave No Child Behind Act*), the education professorate is being pressured to comply with the political agenda of the right wing in America with its business rationale” [5].

In the introduction to *What is Curriculum Theory?*, he pointed out that the goal of this reform is an extended control on the curriculum, on what teachers are allowed to teach and on what children may study. Politicians appreciate that their political ascendancy depends on controlling how and what Americans think.

Teachers’ “scapegoating by politicians and by uninformed parents”, their “loss of academic freedom cannot be understood apart from right-wing politicians’ manipulation of public education as a political issue” [5].

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