



PHOTO / MARTHA STEWART

The Right Role for the Federal Government

Give parents the information they need to pick their school of choice

benefits of the school accountability law (see “Grinding the Antitesting Ax,” *check the facts*, page 49). But NCLB’s complicated regulations proved to be unworkable and ineffectual.

Now, the Obama administration has sought to boost school improvement through Race to the Top by getting states and districts to compete for some federal dollars with promises to execute needed reforms. Not surprisingly, state and district promises are more easily made than kept (see “Obama’s Education Record,” *features*, page 39).

Four strategies. Four failures. What should the federal government try next?

Why not do what the federal government has always done well? Collect the facts about schools and student performance and let the data speak for themselves. When the original Department of Education was founded in 1867, its main task was to collect school statistics on such fundamentals as student enrollment, dollars spent, and numbers of teachers hired. Gradually, the federal government acquired the capacity to compile a sophisticated battery of information on the state of American education. Indeed, the only reason we know that America’s schools have not improved much over the past 50 years is that the federal government has collected the information.

So why not use the power of the federal government to collect even more specific information on student learning? A giant step in the right direction was taken with NCLB’s original passage. When it is reauthorized, further steps need to be made so that accurate information on knowledge gained each year in each classroom is available to every parent.

And to receive federal dollars, districts must give parents the freedom to use this information to select the school of their choice—traditional public, charter, or private.

That is what the Koret Task Force has recommended. It’s the right answer to the nation’s multiple-choice education quiz.

— Paul E. Peterson.

When school districts are failing, what should the federal government do?

- A) give districts money?
- B) deny districts funds?
- C) subject districts to tight regulations?
- D) force districts to compete for federal dollars by promising to improve?
- E) tell the truth while insisting parents be given a choice of school?

Policymakers have responded to this, the nation’s most challenging multiple-choice education quiz, with four different wrong answers. Now, with the release of the Koret Task Force report, policymakers have a chance to get it right, as they consider the reauthorization of the federal education law, No Child Left Behind (NCLB). (See the cover story, “Let the Dollars Follow the Child,” *features*, page 8. Disclaimer: Although I am not its principal author, I signed the report.)

President Jimmy Carter chose the first answer, swelling the federal share of education spending to an all-time high. Yet according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, high-school seniors perform no better today in math, reading, or science than they did when Carter held office.

President Ronald Reagan curtailed the share of K–12 education spending paid out of the federal treasury. That did not lift student performance either.

With the passage of NCLB, the George W. Bush administration subjected failing schools to sanctions if test performance did not improve. Notable gains were made, as Eric Hanushek points out in his provocative analysis of the

MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.
