2019

Education in Presidential Politics

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June 30, 2019
In some presidential elections more so than others, education has been a political football. When not focused on foreign policy or the economy, politicians may give lip service to the topic of education more so than they normally would. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, education became an increasingly critical issue in national politics. Tracing its role, especially from Lyndon B. Johnson to Donald Trump reveals some unexpected paradoxical moments. An exploration of party platforms, speeches, and legislative proposals reveals how education has been used for purposes such as national defense, economic competition, and civil rights.

**Race to the Top**

Just days before the election that would decide his successor, President Barack Obama visited Benjamin Banneker High School in Washington, DC. He spoke to an assembly of high school students and their teachers about recent accomplishments in education. His audience, of course, was also television viewers, as he hoped to boost his former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in a victory over Donald Trump. “By 2020,” he declared, “I want us to be number one again,” a statement reminiscent of Goals 2000, the education plan of Bill Clinton’s administration. Obama went on to celebrate accomplishments during his two-term administration: the spread of state-funded preschool, increased Head Start enrollment, and the highest ever graduation rates, especially for African American and Latino students. He referred to the U.S. Department of Education’s Race to the Top program—which provided billions of federal dollars to states for school improvements—and to Congress’s “fix” made to No Child
Left Behind, allowing teachers more flexibility so that they would no longer just be “teaching to a test.”

In the 2016 presidential election, neither Hillary Clinton nor Donald Trump had made education a major issue in their campaigns, but their parties’ platforms included obligatory education planks. The Democratic Party stood for universal preschool and quality schools for all students. Opposing for-profit charter schools and not mentioning private schools at all, it stated, “A strong public education system is an anchor for our democracy.” It emphasized the importance of schools to address specific needs of “low-income students, students of color, English Language Learners, and students with disabilities” and to close gaps in opportunity, curriculum, and achievement. The Republican Party made no mention of preschool but supported a broad range of schooling choices including public, private, charter, magnet, parochial, and online options. It reminded the nation that the U.S. Constitution included no mention of education, so it was therefore a community concern with parents as the child’s first and most important teacher. “Centralizing forces” outside the community and family were blamed as having wrought “immense damage.” It opposed national standards and in a statement with the heading “Academic Excellence for All” decried the $2 trillion spent since 1965 on scores of programs that had produced minimal results. “If money were the solution,” it concluded, “our schools would be problem free.” Reminiscent of Ronald Reagan and the Moral Majority, the GOP platform supported the teaching of the Bible and prayer at public school events. The theme of opportunity was present throughout the platform, evident in sections entitled “A Chance for Every Child,” “Academic Excellence for All,” and “Choice in

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1 Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on Education,” Benjamin Banneker Academic High School, Washington, DC, October 17, 2016.
Education.” Access to educational options was identified as a civil right that should not be based on “address, ZIP code, or economic status.”

“I honestly don’t think we need a Department of Education,” said Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) during the 2016 Republican primaries. He was not alone. Ted Cruz, Rand Paul, Rick Perry, and Donald Trump joined him in this sentiment. Ever since President Jimmy Carter had reluctantly opened the Department of Education as a campaign promise to the National Education Association, Republicans beginning with Ronald Regan had threatened to shut it down, but—based on the Trump administration’s 132-page proposal to merge the Education and Labor Departments—carrying out the threat would not be the easy task that Republicans had made it to appear. If it were easy, the succinct House Bill proposed by Kentucky’s Thomas Massie simply stating, “The Department shall terminate December 31, 2018,” might have gained more support from his fellow Republicans than it did.

During his 2016 campaign, Trump made school vouchers his main civil rights argument. Urban public schools, he argued, were such a “disaster” that vouchers were needed as a path of opportunity for African-American children to improve their educational options. Hillary Clinton agreed that education was a path for creating opportunity, but her solution followed the long-held Democratic Party approach that increasing federal funds was the main answer. In both cases, while the candidates’ messages seemed to be directed at African Americans, their campaign strategists had ensured that these messages reflected what white voters expected of each party based on their attitudes toward education and race. This connection between race and education

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had been strong, though sometimes subtle, since the 1960s. However, before exploring more recent education reforms, those interested in federal trends in education policy will find helpful an overview of key initiatives from the nation’s founding up to President Johnson’s signing of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

**Before the Space Race**

With its focus on community and family control of education, the 2016 Republican Party platform was referring to the Tenth Amendment to the Constitution, which reserves powers not delegated to the federal government for state control. Education then, since it is not addressed in the Constitution, is one of those state powers. Therefore, earlier presidents and presidential candidates spoke more in terms of educational principles and philosophy rather than policies and practices. The Enlightenment presidents, Washington through Madison, held up education as a purveyor of virtues necessary for good citizens of a republic. Jefferson did attempt, however, to gain a role for federal government in education by advocating for a Constitutional amendment to permit this, and Madison advocated for a national university. Other than these failed attempts, early presidents mostly gave lip service to issues of education. Later, Lincoln supported the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, creating a number of agricultural colleges. Garfield, as a congressman, worked to open the first U.S. Office of Education, which Hoover unsuccessfully attempted to make a cabinet-level post.

In the early 20th century and with the rise of the progressive movement, education proposals gained more traction in presidential politics. In 1908, Socialist Party candidate Eugene V. Debs promised to create a federal department of education. In 1920, his party responded to

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African-American migration to northern urban centers by advocating for their “civil, political, industrial, and education rights.” In the same election, the Democratic Party platform proposed that states cooperate with the federal government in educational endeavors. It seemed by 1932—especially with the New Deal momentum involving a multitude of new government programs—that federal involvement in education might soon become a reality. After all, Franklin D. Roosevelt had named education among a long list of other new rights. Although the Supreme Court later rejected the concept of education as a “right”—identifying it instead as a “privilege”—the push for increased federal support for education would continue. Indeed, in 1944, Roosevelt signed the most significant education act to be passed to that point, the G.I. Bill. This bill provided university and vocational training opportunities to over two million World War II veterans, transforming family trajectories for people of all ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Though Lincoln and Roosevelt signed bills into law that resulted in substantial changes to higher education, the nation still seemed ill prepared for federal involvement in elementary and secondary education. Congress rejected Truman’s attempts in 1947 and 1949 to provide federal funds to public schools, both times calling it an “intrusion” into state affairs. The nation’s fear of government intrusion, however, was suddenly replaced in 1957 by another fear—the potential loss of the Cold War to the Soviets. This fear was initiated by a metallic sphere less than two feet in diameter, a Soviet satellite called Sputnik. Fear quickly turned to blame. Why did it appear the U.S. might be losing the space race and possibly even the Cold War? Was America not producing engineers and scientists capable of developing comparable technologies?

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9 Ibid.
Elementary and secondary education had become an issue of national security and defense, leading to the first major initiative that would influence pre-collegiate education, the National Defense Education Act. The 1958 NDEA stated,

...the security of the Nation requires the fullest development of the mental resources and technical skills of its young men and women.... [NDEA] will correct as rapidly as possible the existing imbalances in our educational programs which have led to an insufficient proportion of our population educated in science, mathematics, and foreign languages, and trained in technology.

The Congress reaffirms the principle and declares that the State and local community have and must retain control over and primary responsibility for public education.\(^\text{10}\)

The act that President Eisenhower signed into law provided $70 million annually for four years to support the instruction of science, mathematics, and modern foreign languages—thus began an increasing trend of federal government reach into the education arena. Unlike future reforms, however, NDEA did not impose systematic accountability measures.

**A Lever Long Enough**

Education reforms of the 1960s were influenced by a social consciousness of poverty represented by the ideas of three individuals. First, Gunner Myrdal, a Swedish economist wrote a 1940 study entitled *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* that explored the circle of poverty and its causes within African-American communities. An individual’s poor education, he explained, would lead to limited employment opportunities, resulting in a low standard of living and inadequate nutrition, housing, and education for children in the family. Myrdal’s study influenced the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka*, and his concept of the circle of poverty impacted the social agenda of John F. Kennedy in the early 1960s.\(^\text{11}\) The second individual was Michael Harrington


who authored a 1962 book of which Kennedy requested copies to share with members of his administration. Harrington’s book, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, painted a picture of two Americas—one that was made up primarily of affluent whites and another consisting of poor nonwhites. The latter group, the new “invisible poor,” had silently grown in the 1950s and, unlike the poor of previous generations, were trapped in a “culture of poverty.” Whereas education had been a way of escaping poverty in the past, it had come to be perceived by the new poor as an institution that made them feel inferior to the rest of society. Kennedy’s economic advisor Walter Heller was a third individual key to the 1960s educational reforms. In his Congressional report, Heller, borrowing language from Myrdal and Harrington, described “the vicious circle” in which “poverty breeds poverty.” His solution was to use education as a weapon to fight a War on Poverty. In a 1963 radio interview with Senate majority whip Hubert Humphrey, Heller explained that—even with proposed tax cuts—the education programs would easily be covered by projected increases in the Gross National Product of $30 to $40 billion.\(^\text{12}\) Kennedy—armed with the research, theoretical framework, and economic plan to carry out his vision—was prepared to launch a War on Poverty.

Kennedy’s assassination in November of 1963 did not squelch enthusiasm for his agenda. If anything, it may have actually fed his successor’s determination to carry it out all the more. Only two months after the tragic incident, Lyndon B. Johnson stood before the joint houses of Congress to declare the nation’s War on Poverty, describing how it would be fought with better schools, health, homes, training, and employment opportunities.\(^\text{13}\) The following year, as Congressional hearings opened for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of


1965, Anthony J. Celebrezze, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, quoted Johnson:

“Just as ignorance breeds poverty, poverty all too often breeds ignorance in the next generation . . . . [This program] is designed to break this cycle which has been running on from generation to generation in this most affluent period of our history.” At the same hearing, Education Commissioner Francis Keppel, supported the bill with the following dramatic statement:

“Archimedes . . . told us many centuries ago, ‘Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum strong enough and I can move the world.’ Today, at last, we have a prospect of a lever long enough and supported strongly enough to do something for our children of poverty.”

Education was only one of three pillars in LBJ’s Great Society. The other two were social welfare and civil rights, with all three being closely intertwined. In 1964, Johnson had signed the Civil Rights Act and the Economic Opportunity Act. Part of the first act served to codify into law what the Supreme Court had already declared in the 1954 Brown decision, that schools may not be segregated by race. Part of the second act created an enduring, popular program called Head Start. From its inception, Head Start was intentionally planned as an independent agency so as not to fall under the auspices of the federal education bureaucracy. This arrangement would avoid criticism that the federal government was intruding into the state’s domain of public schools and would also simplify the provision of funds. The justification for this was that Head Start, as a social welfare initiative for preschoolers in poverty, was much more than an educational program. It involved parents and focused on the holistic development of the child—socially, physically, and cognitively.

15 Hunt et al., Encyclopedia of Educational Reform, 721.
It may be considered a reasonable comparison to parallel Johnson with Horace Mann who was considered the father of the 19th-century common school movement. Both acted on the assumption that education had the potential to end poverty, injustice, and crime. Certainly, LBJ was aware of the magnanimity of the bill he was about to sign, staging the signing ceremony in such a way as to reflect its historical importance. On Palm Sunday, Johnson sat behind a bench at the Texas one-room schoolhouse where he had begun his own education. Seated on the bench beside him was his first teacher, flown in from California where she had retired. He spoke of the “sense of urgency” behind the ESEA, stating,

Over a century and a quarter ago, the president of the Republic of Texas, Mirabeau B. Lamar . . . made the mistaken prophecy that education would be an issue “in which no jarring interests are involved and no acrimonious political feelings excited.” For too long, political acrimony held up our progress. For too long, children suffered while jarring interests caused stalemate in the efforts to improve our schools.17

The document Johnson signed that day stated as its purpose “to strengthen and improve educational quality and educational opportunities in the Nation’s elementary and secondary schools.” Title I provided funds to local education agencies for the education of children in low-income families. Title II, a provision that appealed especially to private schools, supported the purchase of library resources, textbooks, and other instructional materials for both public and private schools. Other title programs supported supplementary educational centers, research, and teacher training.18

Controversy amid Increasing Reforms

Concerned about federal intrusion into state responsibilities, 80% of Republicans in the House had voted against ESEA. However, by the time of its renewal in 1974, little opposition

remained. Gareth Davies in his book See Government Grow offered an explanation for this phenomenon. Part of the reason for such a shift in Republican support was that ESEA required only limited accountability from the states. States were permitted a great degree of latitude in spending the funds and suffered no penalties for failing to fulfill ESEA’s purpose. Since no evidence was required from states proving increased academic achievement for students in poverty, funds continued to flow to the states whether student achievement improved or not. Republican fears subsided when they realized that federal control was minimal. Besides, states were still providing approximately 92% of their own education budgets, so the federal contribution—though valued by the states—was still a relatively small portion.19

While the ESEA required little academic accountability, there was another type of accountability that proved significant for African Americans, especially for those in the South. Until ESEA delivered federal funds directly into the public schools’ budgets, there was little teeth behind the 1954 Brown decision or the school desegregation requirement of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Southern states in particular could often get by with maintaining segregated schools without any repercussions. Because of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, however, this could no longer be the case:

No person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance (emphasis added). 20

Now that states were receiving 8% of their education budgets from the federal government, they were bound to comply with desegregation; otherwise, they would lose those funds. The controversy would be about what method to use to bring about compliance.

Though most voters claimed to be in agreement with the concept of desegregation of schools, the vast majority were not quite as agreeable to the most prominent solution offered—busing. Politicians therefore found navigating the issue problematic. Hubert Humphrey’s 1968 campaign strategists advised him to avoid using the term “integration” of schools because it was too closely tied with the controversial concept of busing. The same voters who rejected busing, however, were likely to embrace language of “equal opportunity.” In George McGovern’s 1972 campaign, strategists found that white voters responded well to the idea of taking funds currently being used for busing and applying them instead to inner-city school facilities, instructional materials, and teacher salaries. Nixon’s and Ford’s advisors cautioned them that, although white voters may not be supportive of busing, they generally were supportive of equal educational opportunities for African Americans and were troubled by political language that seemed insensitive to the educational needs of African-American children.21

The 1972 Republican Party platform did not shy away from the issue of busing. The GOP platform reminded its constituency,

Months ago President Nixon sent Congress a two-part comprehensive proposal on school busing. The first is the Student Transportation Moratorium Act of 1972—legislation to halt immediately all further court-ordered busing and give Congress time to devise permanent new arrangements for assuring desegregated, quality education. 22

The platform went on to describe Nixon’s companion legislation, the Equal Educational Opportunities Act that would provide $2.5 billion to help urban schools and to broaden

assistance to Latinos, American Indians, and English language learners. While reaffirming a commitment to equality of education opportunity, the platform declared that busing brought “division within communities and hostility between classes and races” and that it was “unnecessary, counter-productive and wrong.”

The 1972 Democratic Party platform avoided the negative connotation held by the word “busing” by replacing it with “transportation” and by mentioning student transportation only once among a number of other possible strategies to accomplish desegregation. They had to tread carefully because overt statements on busing might alienate white voters. Instead, they focused heavily on support of desegregation by way of a number of options:

School attendance lines may be redrawn; schools may be paired; larger physical facilities may be built to serve larger, more diverse enrollments; magnet schools or educational parks may be used. Transportation of students is another tool to accomplish desegregation. It must continue to be available according to Supreme Court decisions to eliminate legally imposed segregation and improve the quality of education for all children.

Nixon, having run both in 1968 and in 1972 as the “law and order” candidate, saw busing as undermining his efforts because it contributed to racial tension and school violence. Eliminating busing might reduce turmoil in the schools, but there had to be a plan to replace it with something else. Sidney Marland, Nixon’s Commissioner of Education, believed that student delinquency could be eased in part by a strong career education program that aligned closely to the needs of the labor market. Using discretionary funds, Marland ignited a reform movement that by 1973 had involved 750,000 students in a career education program. Such an alignment of public school curriculum with the needs of business, Marland thought, would make

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23 Ibid.
learning more relevant and would thus help to resolve “high unemployment and the attendant problems of disaffection and drug excess among the young.”

After Nixon’s resignation, Gerald Ford was neutral toward initiatives birthed from LBJ’s Great Society. He took no measures to expand them but neither did he try to limit them. Regarding education, Ford maintained the traditional approach that control of public schools should remain under the auspices of state and local governments. This approach would begin to shift after Ford lost the 1976 election to Jimmy Carter when, for the first time in history, the National Education Association (NEA) endorsed a presidential candidate. The NEA had contributed a great deal of both money and volunteers to see Carter elected. In competition with them, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) had supported Ted Kennedy in the primaries. Carter’s win meant a victory also for the NEA. They gained prestige for their association but wanted more—the wanted sustained influence on education through the federal government. They called for Carter to fulfill his campaign promise to create a cabinet-level Department of Education. He would eventually but reluctantly do so.

Carter took two full years to fulfill his promise to the NEA. As a Georgian, he had to be cautious not to offend the states-rights sensibilities of his Southern supporters. Elevating the Office of Education to a department would revive the notion that the federal government was intruding into powers that constitutionally belonged to the states. Additionally, he had campaigned on being a uniter and one who would reduce the power of interest groups in politics. This move would contradict much of what he had represented during the election. Nevertheless, he pushed for the new department on the grounds that it would increase efficiency.

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26 Hunt et al., *Encyclopedia of Educational Reform*, 721.
28 Ibid.
Accountability Movement

It did not take long after the creation of the Department of Education for critics to call for shutting it down. One of its most vocal detractors was Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan. Referring to it as Carter’s “new bureaucratic boondoggle,” Reagan reiterated his belief that functions such as welfare and education are handled best when they are in the control of state and local governments. Upon taking office in 1981, Reagan appointed Terrel H. Bell as Secretary of Education with the task of dismantling the department. Bell, however, grew to believe that the department was helpful and should remain in place. In William Bennett, Reagan found someone willing to carry out the task and replaced Terrel with Bennett starting with his second term. Though Reagan and Bennett were somewhat successful in temporarily weakening the department and cutting its budget, it did survive.29

Perhaps Reagan’s influence on education could be summarized by one of his radio addresses. Just weeks before the 1986 midterm election, Reagan used his weekly radio airtime to chat about his accomplishments in education—most likely in hopes of encouraging voters to send Republican legislators to Washington to continue his conservative agenda. “The schools are the best they’ve been in years,” he said, “markedly better and still improving.” In his folksy way, Reagan reminisced back to 1981 when “there was a widespread feeling in our country that our schools were not doing their job.” He explained that it was the people’s concern that motivated him to establish the National Commission on Excellence in Education for the purpose of evaluating the status of America’s schools. In a much more informal manner than the A Nation at Risk report had originally stated it, Reagan paraphrased, “If a foreign nation had done to our schools what we’d stood by and let happen, we would have considered it an act of war.”

In addition to the reforms resulting from the commission’s report, Reagan went on to discuss increased test scores, the First Lady’s *Just Say No* campaign to “rid schools of drugs,” and the recent governor’s conference where school choice was encouraged.\(^\text{30}\)

School choice by way of vouchers had become a controversial proposal from the Reagan administration. Secretary Bennett had pitched vouchers as a means for disadvantaged children to attend either a private or a different public school outside of their own district. Vouchers would create a rivalry among schools, Bennett argued, that would result in an improved educational experience for all children. In response to a question about potential entanglements between church and state, Bennett explained that the aid would go directly to parents who would then redeem the voucher at the school of their choice.\(^\text{31}\) Republican support for vouchers in one sense was logical because the idea aligned with principles of competition in the marketplace. In another sense, the idea conflicted with the party’s stand during the 1970s’ battles over desegregation in which Republicans had supported neighborhood-based schools. Nevertheless, beginning with Reagan and continuing through Donald Trump, vouchers were used as a key civil rights plank for the Republican Party.\(^\text{32}\)

An interesting paradox about Reagan is that, while he was for limited government, his administration by way of *A Nation at Risk* is credited with birthing the accountability movement. The man who wanted to shut down the Department of Education introduced such a paradigm shift in the relationship between the federal government and public schools that the intrusion that

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was fought against for so long flowed into the states with increasing force. Under Reagan, states were required to increase standards, improve instruction, and make curriculum reforms—all without any real increases in federal funding.

Credited with having sparked the accountability movement was Leon Lessinger’s 1970 book *Every Kid a Winner: Accountability in Education*. Harkening back to the early 20th century progressive movement’s demand that experts fill government appointed jobs rather than political cronies, Lessinger’s theme was that schools should be centrally controlled by experts who reported their progress to the public. Locally-controlled schools, he believed, bred mediocrity; shining light on measures of success would encourage progress. The best way to do this was through standardized achievement tests, the results of which would identify the degree to which a school had succeeded or failed. Lessinger’s ideas gained attention under the Reagan administration and increasingly were applied with each education reform thereafter.

In the 1988 election, George H. W. Bush benefited from Reagan’s popularity, but he still needed to find his own niche as a candidate. He did so by promising to be an “education president.” Oddly, his supposed niche was just more of the same from Reagan’s agenda: school prayer, tuition tax credits, choice, and vouchers for private schools—none of which were high priorities for most voters. Bush seemed surprised after winning the election that Americans were generally pleased with their schools, although they did perceive that inner city schools had been in decline. With the nation’s concern for urban schools and with the Los Angeles police brutality incident against Rodney King in March of 1991, the time was ripe to propose a program to help the nation’s inner cities. Bush’s advisors believed that education reform with an

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emphasis on vouchers was the answer. The concept of vouchers was appealing for a number of reasons. It was consistent with conservative principles, would cost the federal government nothing, expanded educational options to low-income families, and gained favor with socially-minded voters.36

In April of 1991, with the following year’s election in sight, Bush rolled out his plan: America 2000, which was developed in cooperation with the National Governor’s Association (NGA), of which Bill Clinton was head. With criticisms that he had focused on foreign policy to the neglect of domestic issues, Bush needed a domestic accomplishment under his belt, and this education plan should serve that purpose well. In addition to proposing vouchers, America 2000 continued Reagan’s theme of excellence, and—to stiffen accountability—it called for national standards and standardized achievement tests. To this end, Bush’s administration collaborated with Congress and the NGA to create the National Council on Education Standards and Testing.37

Congress never passed America 2000, but after defeating Bush, Clinton made minimal revisions to the bill and changed its name to Goals 2000, which he signed into law in March 1994. Internal polling data during the 1992 election had informed Clinton that school choice was popular among voters of all races, so he left that provision in the act. Additionally, because offering school choice did not require federal funding, it was compatible with his campaign promise to deliver a “leaner not meaner” government. A major difference between Goals 2000 and Bush’s plan was that Clinton limited school choice only to public schools. Vouchers for private school enrollment would not be an option.38

37 Spring, The American School, 435.
Clinton’s greatest contribution to public education may have been that he helped to tone down the criticism. Otherwise, he basically continued the trend started under Reagan of accountability but with little financial commit. In his first term, such reservations may have been as a result of his “leaner not meaner” government promise. In his second term, however, his hands were tied from the 1994 midterm Republican Revolution and their Contract with America. The conservative wing of the Republican Party controlled both houses of Congress, which caused Clinton to declare, “The era of big government is over.” The impact of this on education would be that, by the end of his second term in 2001, Clinton—despite all the rhetoric—had left the status of public schools generally as he had found them in 1993.39

Ironically, it was a Democratic president who announced that “the era of big government is over,” and it was a Republican president who extended the government’s reach into education farther than it had ever been. George W. Bush, as governor of Texas, had earned a reputation of being strong on education reform. During the 2000 presidential campaign, this image was enhanced by his wife Laura who had been a teacher and librarian and also by his talk of “compassionate conservatism,” which sounded similar to his father’s “kinder, gentler” rhetoric. Bush’s verbal commitment to work toward academic achievement for minority students was buttressed when, after the election, he appointed Roderick Paige to be Secretary of Education. Paige was an African American who, as superintendent of Houston Independent School District, had modeled increased academic achievement for students in high-poverty schools. Bush sought to replicate this type of achievement in the nation’s schools. As governor of Texas, Bush had implemented an accountability system that increased certification requirements for teachers, imposed rigorous curriculum standards, and assessed students on proficiency of those standards

via standardized achievement tests. Though many of his initiatives had been unpopular with Texas educators, the data reports on achievement gave him credibility to run on education as one of his major campaign issues.\(^{40}\)

With the ESEA up for renewal, the timing was right for Bush to infuse his educational agenda into the new act. He called it No Child Left Behind. Although he had bipartisan support in the likes of Senator Ted Kennedy, many Democrats and the NEA were leery, especially with verbiage referencing vouchers, merit pay, and state flexibility in spending federal funding. They, nevertheless, saw NCLB as an opportunity to strengthen funding for education, and—especially after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks—were ready to unite the nation in something positive. NCLB overwhelmingly passed in both Houses.\(^{41}\)

Title I continued to be for the improvement of academic achievement of disadvantaged students. Title II increased qualifications for educators, and Title III required special language instruction for English language learners. Subsequent titles outlined a number programs, but one that received a great deal of criticism related to the conditions for schools not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress.\(^{42}\) Over time, educators and communities increasingly perceived the measures for “failing” schools as too punitive and as harming the schools and students most in need of assistance. This criticism was one of the factors leading to measures taken during Barack Obama’s administration 2012 to allow states more flexibility in how they meet the standards, and in revisions to the act when it was renewed in 2015 as Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA included slight modifications to what was in NCLB, one of which is to give back to the states more authority in how they hold schools and districts accountable.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 365-7.
\(^{41}\) Davies, See Government Grow, 286.
Conclusion

As he traced the background of school reform since the 1960s, Gareth Davies presented three stages that provided conditions leading to the accountability era. Johnson’s Great Society agenda and ESEA represented the first stage, as federal government began to expand in sustained and unprecedented ways into public school funding. The second stage involved enforcement of students’ civil rights during the Nixon and Ford years, and the third stage followed the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report and was sparked by discussions of excellence in education. After these stages progressively strengthened the accountability movement, it would seem improbable that federal control would diminish any time soon. Yet, as recently as the 2012 presidential primary, a teacher from the debate audience in Orlando asked Republican presidential contenders, “What as president would you seriously do about what I consider a massive overreach of big government into the classroom?” Michelle Bachmann’s response was the most direct: “I would go over the Department of Education. I’d turn off the lights. I would lock the door. And I would send all the money back to the states and localities.” Several of the other candidates on the panel expressed similar sentiments.

The rhetoric, party platforms, and legislation have served many purposes. At times, that purpose has been as a frivolous prop to create a certain image of a political party or candidate. There have been, however, and will continue to be opportunities to place education reform in the context of other current circumstances—of larger societal problems—and to accomplish something meaningful for students and society. Just as education reform has played a role in

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issues of national defense, economic competition, and civil rights, it may in the future serve a role in an unexpected issue that may contribute further to the vision of a Great Society.
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