



Insight

Education must be a Priority for the new Congress

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Soon after the election, Secretary Duncan laid out the Administration's goals for education reform over the next four years in remarks to both the Chief State School Officers and Foundation for Excellence in Education. It should come as no surprise that those goals will continue to focus on policies that have failed to increase student academic achievement over the last four years. He made it clear that he had little interest in pursuing the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Why should he when his Department has succeeded in dismantling the law through their sweeping waiver authority. Secretary Duncan also made no mention of giving disadvantaged students and their parents more options to attend schools of their choice or to hold schools and districts accountable for student academic success or failure. Rather, he stressed the need for more federal grant money to improve the teaching profession with a special emphasis on principal preparation programs as well as to push to ensure that the Common Core Standards and assessments are in place in all states. Reading between the lines, the next four years will be more of the same: continued support of the status quo, particularly the teacher unions and the education establishment, few alternatives for disadvantaged parents to send their child to a better school, and a continued disrespect for the Congress and the legislative process.

However, states, school districts, and parents are beginning to feel the consequences of the policies pursued and enacted by this administration. When the 2009 economic stimulus funds ran out, states found they had no money to pay teachers funded by the stimulus and many were laid off. The Administration's waivers are allowing some states to set different academic goals for different subgroups of students i.e. the disabled and limited English proficient, thus returning to the days when such students received a lesser education than their peers. Another consequence of this administration's expansive waiver policy is the has weakening of graduation accountability requirements established in 2008 in order to allow schools to focus on college and career readiness, a priority of this administration. However, it is very difficult for students to become college and career ready if they drop out of high school failing to receive a diploma.

On the other side of the political spectrum, Congressman Paul Ryan (R-WI) and Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) gave two important speeches at the Jack Kemp Leadership Award Dinner in early December that focused on what it takes to rise out of poverty and contribute to society. The central theme from both men is the crucial role that education plays in providing a way out of poverty. For most conservatives, federal education policy is viewed as the ultimate enemy tying the hands of parents, teachers and principals at the local level to educate our children. And in many ways they are correct. However, federal education programs are not going away especially over the next four years. Conservatives need to find a way to "apply our principles" as Congressman Ryan stated, to federal education policy and address the "chronic inequalities of our education system" because a quality education is the way to free people from a life of dependency and put them on the road to economic prosperity.

Reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act must be a priority for the Congress in the next legislative session. Without a current statute, this administration will continue to govern by fiat with no one to hold them accountable for their actions. Regardless of what your position may be on the federal role in education policy, Members of Congress on both sides of the aisle should agree that the Secretary of Education should not have the

sole power to decide what happens in our schools at the federal level. Such agreement should spark bipartisan motivation in completing a reauthorization bill next Congress.

It will not be easy to forge bipartisan agreements on education policies because of the huge philosophical gaps between the two political parties. But education issues have historically drawn bipartisan support and with the divisive election behind us, it's time to find common ground on the issue most likely to turn the economy around, increase jobs, and lift people out of poverty. As long as two-thirds of our students cannot perform at grade level in reading and math, our economy will continue to suffer and job opportunities will be scarce. Education is the answer to this economic mess and it is good sign that future leaders of the conservative movement are recognizing that fact.