



Insight

Race to More Ineffective Ed Spending

NOVEMBER 8, 2011

We spend nearly \$600 billion each year on **education** in this country. This is more than the entire national budgets of India, Russia, South Korea, Singapore, and Finland combined, and some of these countries are the leading scorers on international education tests. Since the 1960s, when the Elementary and **Secondary Education** Act (ESEA) was first passed, per pupil education spending has increased by 272 percent. Yet educational outcomes have flat-lined.

“We do not do a good job of aligning education dollars with education outcomes and productivity, and often that money is not well spent,” Sen. Michael Bennet (D., Col.) recently said to the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pension (HELP) Committee, gathered for a bill mark-up to reauthorize ESEA. Despite Senator Bennet’s laudable sentiment, the latest ESEA bill proposal may lead to increased expenditures in education with no real assurance of educational gains.

The overhaul of ESEA, the definitive education law for the country, has been delayed for over four years now — the most recent version of ESEA, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), was passed into law in 2002. NCLB was created to ensure that schools communicated to students, parents, and communities about their academic performance and were held accountable for meeting their annual objectives and making progress towards 100 percent proficiency in math and reading by 2014. Earlier this year, the Department of Education announced that by their estimates, 82 percent of schools would fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) under the current accountability measures of NCLB.

While there are some promising bipartisan ideas in the most recent bill (which you can read more about [here](#)), the legislation also includes new programs that would open the door to even more spending, without any promise of improved results. The bill proposes to codify Race to the Top (RTT) and the Investing in Innovation Fund (I3), the president’s signature education initiatives, and to create a new program for **education research** and development, which the president first proposed in his FY 2012 budget — for a total of \$90 million.

This raises concerns, because results from the \$4.35 billion Race to the Top program are indiscernible, according to a recent GAO report. Twelve state winners are backpedaling on their original plans, and some are even delaying implementation. States are complaining of challenges as the Department of Education attempts to administer the largest competitive grant program in its history. Officials in 75 percent of grantee states, nine out of the twelve, have stated that they are facing difficulty hiring qualified staff to implement their ambitious RTT plans and have had difficulty complying with state procedures for awarding contracts. Some state officials have acknowledged that their timelines were “overly optimistic.”

In addition to RTT’s few and limited results, GAO reports that applying to RTT took thousands of hours and additional staff. State officials said they spent \$75,000 to \$620,000 on hiring application consultants. It may simply be too soon to tell just how effective, if at all, RTT will be. But because more time may be needed, it would be prudent to wait before we commit more funding by codifying this program.

More government programs inevitably come with more rules and compliance measures. NCLB's guidelines and regulations alone created 6.7 million hours of paperwork, at a cost of \$141 million annually. States and school districts work about 7.8 million hours each year collecting and distributing information to comply with Title I law, which costs \$235 million.

Additionally, the new Harkin-Enzi bill has a more prescriptive orientation, places an optimistic amount of faith in standards-based reform, and leaves even fewer options for school choice than NCLB, even though [charter schools](#) and voucher programs have shown proven results while serving in some of the hardest communities.

Currently, the aspirational deadline for ESEA reauthorization is Christmas. But the likelihood of this happening is low and spring seems a more likely estimate. Today, the Senate HELP committee will hold a hearing to discuss fixing NCLB with experts and practitioners. Let's hope that they discuss the dangers of quick fixes and not steer the country into another ten years of unintended consequences and good intentions gone awry.

This article originally appeared on [National Review Online](#) on November 8, 2011.