
C H A P T E R 1 4

Educational Reform Under Republicans and Democrats

From the 1980s onward, American presidents became more consistently involved in educational policy than ever before (Spring, 1997). A large part of this involvement emerged from the rising degree of public criticism of public education during the late 1960s and the 1970s (Cooperman, 1985).

During the period beginning in 1981, both Democrats and Republicans proposed a number of reforms to improve the educational outcomes of American students (Spring, 1997). In this chapter, we focus on three reforms each by the Democratic and Republican presidents that emerged during this period. For both political parties, of these three reforms, one was clearly successful and the other two were more controversial.

The Republicans initiated three noteworthy programs: the Back to the Basics movement, under Ronald Reagan; the School Choice initiative, especially under George H. W. Bush; and the No Child Left Behind program, under George W. Bush. The Democrats, under the leadership of Bill Clinton, undertook policies to promote computer literacy, school choice limited to public schools, and the implementation of national standards for schools. The different perspectives of Republicans and Democrats on school choice in particular present an interesting contrast.

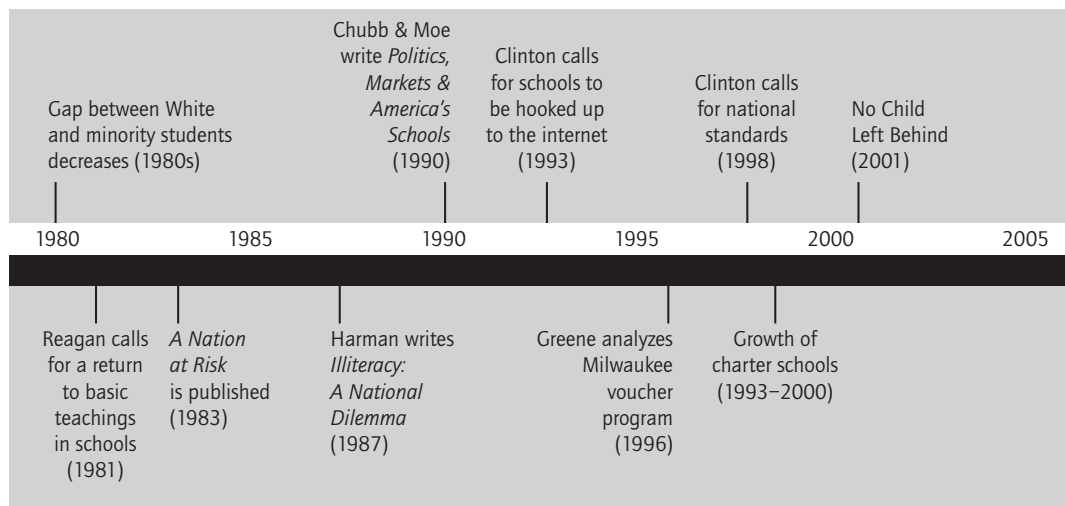
REFORMS UNDER REPUBLICAN PRESIDENTS RONALD REAGAN, GEORGE H. W. BUSH, AND GEORGE W. BUSH

The Back to the Basics Movement

The Back to the Basics movement was an educational reform movement initiated by the presidential administration of Ronald Reagan (from 1981–1989). Of the three reforms inaugurated by the Republicans since 1980, this is the one that is generally regarded as being the most successful (Bell, 1988; Garrett, 2005; Zak, 2000).

The Back to the Basics movement started largely as a result of the decline in achievement test scores that took place from 1963 to 1980 (Reagan, 1983). Although, as we discussed in

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Chapter 12, one cannot blame all (and perhaps even most) of the decline in test scores on school factors, the Reagan administration focused primarily on school components in the Back to the Basics movement. Reagan declared that to raise the educational accomplishments of children, schools needed to return to teaching the most essential aspects of knowledge and self-discipline. The liberal policies of John Dewey were finally in place by the early 1960s. Many people, mostly conservatives and some moderates, blamed the academic decline over the next two decades on the implementation of liberal child-centered policies. The Reagan administration asserted that part of the reason academic achievement was down was that American schools had become so child centered that they no longer maintained the preparation-centered nature that had made American schools great (Reagan, 1983).

Certain reports, research studies, and books came out during the Reagan and George H. W. Bush administrations that appeared to support the notion that America's public schools were in decline and were in serious need of reform. In the early 1980s, the National Commission of Excellence in Education (1983) released the report *A Nation at Risk*. The report pointed to the now infamous 110-point drop (using the College Board's adjusted figure) in SAT scores (formerly known as the Scholastic Aptitude Test or Scholastic Achievement Test), a concomitant decline in some SAT results, and a steady increase in the need for remedial math courses in the nation's 4-year public colleges. The report also lamented the falling scores of American students in international test scores. In 1987, another influential book was published, written by David Harman, titled *Illiteracy: A National Dilemma*, in which he asserted that many Americans could not read well enough to perform adequately at their jobs. It is not clear just what America's literacy rate is at this time. It depends on the definition of *literacy* that is used. Official estimates vary from 79% to 97% for the *basic* type of literacy (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). The U.S. Census Bureau (2001) contends that America's *functional* literacy rate is about 87%.

Bill Bennett, secretary of education under Ronald Reagan, encouraged schools to focus on teaching basic material such as reading, math, and science. Bennett asserted that the

traditional basal approach to reading should be taught, rather than the whole-language approach. The traditional basal approach emphasized phonics and accurate pronunciation in reading (Stahl, 2001). Historically, teachers have employed a basal paradigm to their instruction because English is a phonetic language (Jeynes & Littell, 2000; Stahl, 2001). The whole-language approach was a more child-centered approach that emphasized teaching whole words and teaching material that was enjoyable to children (Goodman, 1989, 1992; Jeynes & Littell, 2000). The belief was that if children enjoyed reading, they would learn to read more in the long run. In the whole-language approach, instructors focused more on whether children enjoyed reading rather than on their accuracy (Goodman, 1989, 1992). Most schools did not listen to Bennett until the early 1990s, when California and Texas declared their whole-language programs to be failures.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, the gap between the performance of African Americans and Whites on standardized tests decreased substantially for the first time. Many educators credit the Back to the Basics movement with this decrease, but other factors were probably involved as well (Conciatore, 1990; Haycock, 2001; Haycock & Jerald, 2002; Jerald & Haycock, 2002; Jones, 1984; Walberg, 1986). There is research indicating that basal instruction especially benefits minority children (Haycock, 2001; Haycock & Jerald, 2002; Jerald & Haycock, 2002; Wilson & Daviss, 1994). It is not difficult to fathom why focusing on the basics at school will tend to benefit poor and minority children the most. Children from affluent homes have parents who can afford to make certain that their children get the basics despite whatever shortcomings a school might have. They have the resources to afford ordering "Hooked on Phonics" for a few hundred dollars even if their children do not receive the basics at school. However, for many poor families, this alternative would be a great financial strain.

To give historical substantiation to his work, Reagan quoted Thomas Jefferson, who said, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free . . . it expects what never was and never will be" (as cited in Reagan, 1983, p. v). To provide factual substantiation for his views, Reagan drew from the report *A Nation at Risk*, as mentioned, a report by the National Commission of Excellence in Education, in 1983, which lamented the decline in American student achievement and presented evidence indicating that the decline was putting American students well behind their counterparts in other industrialized countries. The report argued that if current trends continued, the United States risked having a lower standard of living and reduced power status in the world.

Reagan (1983) averred that something far more than just increased government spending on public education was needed to remedy the nation's education woes. He supported this claim with the fact that for many years, educational expenditures had risen at twice the rate of inflation and yet test scores had fallen. In his view, more money was not the primary answer. Although many educators nevertheless remained committed to more money for education, most were puzzled as to why the unprecedented increases in educational expenditures during the 1960s and 1970s had not yielded higher test scores (Garrett, 2005; Ravitch, 1974).

President Reagan (1983) recommended that six steps be taken in his Back to the Basics plan. First, he called for school standards to be raised. He pointed out that 35 states required only one high school math course in order to graduate from high school. Similarly, he pointed out that 36 states required students to take just one science class to graduate

from high school. This was a contrast to the 4-course math and science requirement typical of American high schools in the late 1800s and early 1900s (National Education Association, 1893, 1918).

Second, Reagan called for greater teacher empowerment in administering classroom discipline. He asserted that too many students were assaulting teachers and that teachers often lacked the authority to quiet children down and to get them to do their homework.

Third, Reagan called for Americans to take action along a multidimensional front to reduce student drug and alcohol abuse. Reagan believed that this behavior had a baleful impact on school outcomes.

Fourth, Reagan believed that teachers needed to have higher expectations of students and assist more of them to take college preparatory classes.

Fifth, Reagan called for a higher level of parental involvement. He argued that students absorb the most when parents and teachers work together for the good of the children.

Sixth, Reagan called for basic virtues to be taught in the school, that is, moral or character education.

At first, Reagan's call to focus on the basics was controversial. However, over the long run, people realized that the movement was necessary (Kearns & Doyle, 1989; Garrett, 2005). School standards were simply intolerably low, and many companies complained about the low quality of high school graduates (Kearns & Doyle, 1989). Standardized test scores did begin to edge upward after the Back to the Basics movement was set in place (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). However, the biggest accomplishment of the Back to Basics movement was that for the next decade, the achievement gaps between White and minority students, as well as wealthy and poor students, showed some significant reduction for the first time (Conciatore, 1990; Haycock, 2001; Haycock & Jerald, 2002; Jerald & Haycock, 2002; Jones, 1984; U.S. Department of Education, 2000). To be sure, although the Back to the Basics supporters would like to take all the credit for narrowing this gap, it is likely that other factors also contributed (Hedges & Nowell, 1999). Nevertheless, the reduction is consistent with other research that suggests that poor and minority children are the ones who benefit the most when the basics are taught (Haycock, 2001; Haycock & Jerald, 2002; Jerald & Haycock, 2002; Wilson & Daviss, 1994). When all children are taught the basics in school, the playing field becomes more level.

Overall, the Back to the Basics movement was probably the most productive Republican educational reform movement of the era from 1980 to the present.

Added Insight: Why Does Teaching the Basics Help Poor Children?

Research indicates that when the basic subjects (e.g., math, phonics, science, and social studies) are emphasized, poor children of all backgrounds and minority children, who are still somewhat more likely to be poor than Whites, benefit the most (Haycock, 2001; Haycock & Jerald, 2002; Jerald & Haycock, 2002; Jeynes & Littell, 2000; Wilson & Daviss, 1994). This finding is important because mastering the basics is unequivocally essential if students are to succeed in school and in life as a whole (Boyer, 1995; Sykes, 1995). If an individual cannot do simple math or read at a certain level, job opportunities will be minimized and the realization of one's dreams might be truncated (Boyer, 1995; Sykes, 1995).

The question emerges as to why teaching the basics benefits poor children the most? The answer is simply that children from affluent homes receive basic instruction whether their schools impart these teachings to them or not (McCabe, 2003). Pecunious parents can afford to buy the best materials, send their children to the best tutors or after-school tutelage, or share from their own repositories of knowledge. Indigent families are unlikely to possess any of these advantages. Therefore, when instructors do not teach the basics, impoverished children suffer the most and the achievement gap tends to widen. In contrast, when teachers train children in the basics, the achievement gap abates.

School Choice

Both the Republicans and Democrats had school choice initiatives during the period since 1980; however, they were somewhat different. Both political parties believed school choice would benefit the nation's education system. However, the Democrats under President Bill Clinton favored a choice system that was limited to public schools, and Republicans favored extending the choice to include private schools as well (Doerr & Menendez, 1991; Kirkpatrick, 1990; Manno, 1995).

The Republican movement to initiate school choice programs that included private schools grew under Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush (Edwards, Hawley, Hayes, & Turner, 1989; Kirkpatrick, 1990; Minutaglio, 1999). Although their desire for private school choice has never been adopted except at an experimental level, it remains a major plank of the Republican Party's platform. It is more controversial in its impact than the Back to the Basics movement, and this is a major reason it has not been more fully applied.

Although Reagan supported school choice, the movement really did not gain much momentum until the publication of Chubb and Moe's book, *Politics Markets and America's Schools* (1990). In their book, Chubb and Moe ask an interesting question: Why is it that America's university system is generally regarded as the best in the world but our public school system is regarded as below average? Chubb and Moe hypothesize that the reason is that at the university level, schools in the private and public sectors compete against one another, while at the elementary and secondary school levels, public schools have a virtual monopoly. At the university level, institutions such as Stanford (private) and UC-Berkeley (public) as well as USC (private) and UCLA (public) compete against one another, and each institution is made better by that competition. However, at the elementary and secondary school levels, the school tax burden is substantial enough so that most people feel they cannot afford to send their children to private schools (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

Chubb and Moe (1990) assert that to restore American elementary and secondary school education to a high quality, private schools must be allowed to compete on more equal footing with the public schools. They argue that if the government allows this to transpire, two positive educational effects will occur. First, more American children will attend private school, where they will receive a better education, on average, than they would in a public school. Second, the competition from private schools would compel public schools to become better. Consequently, Chubb and Moe maintain, America's entire elementary and secondary school system would improve.

The way to end the public school monopoly, Chubb and Moe (1990) assert, is to ease the financial burden of parents by giving a voucher to each family that sends its children to private school. This voucher would partially compensate for the fact that families pay taxes to support public schools even if their children do not receive their training through public education. Other proponents of school choice have recommended that tax breaks be given to parents engaging in choice instead of vouchers (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993). One potential advantage of this approach is that it might be easier to adjust the tax break to the income of the family. For example, a given school choice plan would likely give a larger tax break to the poor than to the wealthy. In contrast, one advantage of granting a voucher is that it might be easier to give school choice benefits to those individuals who do not pay any taxes.

Experimentation but Not Wide Implementation of School Choice

Although the Republican presidents have backed school choice in principle, the implementation of school choice has been limited to isolated efforts in cities such as Milwaukee and Cleveland (Greene, Peterson, Du, Boeger, & Frazier, 1996; Jeynes, 2000; Peterson, Greene, & Noyes, 1996). At first, this may seem surprising, because one of the groups whose support is important to school choice, African Americans, is generally the most enthusiastic ethnic group when it comes to school choice (Phi Beta Kappa/Gallup Poll, 2002). Not only do polls indicate a high degree of African American support for school choice, but many African Americans have protested outside the White House, declaring that the federal government was not doing enough to promote school choice (Green, 2000).

The primary reason for the strong African American support is easy to understand. Many African Americans live in dilapidated urban areas, where public schools are dens for drug pushers and gangs (Green, 2000; Irvine & Foster, 1996; Phi Beta Kappa/Gallup Poll, 2002). Concurrently, most African American parents cannot afford to send their children to religious and other types of private schools where gangs and drug pushers are rare (Green, 2000; Jeynes, 2000). Many African American parents would love the opportunity to be given a tax break or a voucher so that they could afford to do so. As has already been intimated, a primary reason African Americans want school choice is often more out of a desire to remove their children from baneful influences than it is for scholastic reasons (Green, 2000; Irvine & Foster, 1996).

It is largely because of the support among African Americans that school choice initiatives have been launched in Milwaukee and Cleveland (Greene et al., 1996; Howell & Peterson, 2002). Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that despite the support of three Republican presidents in the last quarter century, school choice has not emerged as a large-scale practice (Jeynes, 2000). One of the primary reasons for this is that while many Americans would feel comfortable with poor urban and rural Americans getting a tax break or voucher, most would not feel at ease with the affluent or upper middle class getting such a boon. It is very likely that if school choice is ever implemented on a large scale, tax breaks and vouchers would have to be distributed on a sliding scale. That is, the poor would get a large benefit, the middle class some degree of benefit, and the wealthy would receive no benefit at all. There are some states, such as Florida and Colorado, that allow parents of children doing poorly in school and attending schools that have been designated as failing to use public funds to send their children to better-performing schools, whether it be public, Evangelical, Catholic, or other private schools (Greene & Winters, 2006). In Florida, Pennsylvania, and

Arizona, individuals and corporations can make tax-deductible contributions that fund scholarship-granting programs, and scholarships can be used to cover the cost of private school tuition or tutoring (Greene & Winters, 2006).

Early assessments of the school choice programs presently in place indicate that children generally do receive a moderate academic benefit from attending a private school instead of a public one, although the first year of attending a different school is often a period of adjustment for the children (Greene et al., 1996). Research also suggests that even when adjusting for socioeconomic status, children attending religious schools outperform children from public schools (Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982; Jeynes, 2002). However, not all social scientists are convinced that the analyses of school choice programs in Milwaukee and Cleveland offer decisive evidence in favor of these programs (Witte, 1999, 2000; Rouse, 2004).

It is difficult to determine the degree to which Republican presidents will pursue the practice of school choice. In the ideal world, it is clearly one of the party's top priorities (Garrett, 2005). However, while many Americans support the poor having school choice, presently Republicans do not have the backing of a majority of Americans for a broad-based plan. Therefore, instead of initiating extensive school choice programs, Presidents George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush chose to sponsor initiatives that will facilitate school choice program implementation at a later time (Howell & Peterson, 2002). For example, during his administration, President Bush Sr. called for the establishment of magnet schools across the country (Bush, 1989). He also initiated a \$13 million federal government investment in expanding experimental educational programs, including school choice (Bush, 1989; Edwards et al., 1989).

Analyzing the Possible Effects of School Choice

One of the greatest problems in assessing the effects of school choice abides in the lack of relevant data collected on its impact on children. In addition, almost none of this research has examined the effects of school choice on academic achievement. Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe (1995) observe that "most of the empirical research is piecemeal and tends to be very specifically focused" (p. 3). Gewirtz et al. therefore contend that much of the research on school choice has been "inadequate" (p. 6). To be sure, some recent data indicate that school choice may positively impact academic achievement (Greene et al., 1996; Peterson et al., 1996; Witte & Thorne, 1996), but overall, the evidence is sparse. There are three reasons for coming to this conclusion. First, the number of studies that social scientists have done measuring the influence of school choice is relatively small. Second, for those studies that have attempted to assess the effects of school choice, it is not clear whether this is in fact what has ultimately been measured. Many studies have focused on how choice affects (a) the distribution of students among schools (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Woods, Bagley, & Glatter, 1998) and (b) what parents consider when making their choices (Woods et al., 1998). Third, the dynamics of school choice are complex and difficult to examine. For example, the effects of school choice are going to differ in urban areas, where there will be more choices, versus rural areas, where choices are limited (Gewirtz et al., 1995). School choice will often differ depending on how schools promote themselves and will have various effects rooted in copious education philosophies (Colopy & Tarr, 1994; Pardey, 1991). Fourth, the school choice debate has become so politicized, it has become hard to disentangle the research of many social scientists from their political views.

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Beyond these problems, it is not clear how many of the effects found in favor of choice or nonchoice students are actually a product of choice and how many result from simply changing schools or from certain students dropping out of a choice program. Greene and his colleagues (1996) found, for example, that children participating in the Milwaukee voucher program obtained an academic advantage over similar Milwaukee children not participating in the program by the third year of participation. Opponents of choice may note that choice did not produce an academic edge for choice students during the first 2 years of the program. However, the fact that it took over 2 years for differences to emerge could be explained in large degree by the fact that changing schools is a difficult experience for many children (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Nevertheless, supporters of choice can take some satisfaction in the fact that academic achievement rose by the third year. One can argue that this may partially be a result of children who struggle in their new schools, often dropping out of the project by the third year, leaving only those students who are doing reasonably well as the study's sample. Overall, Greene's study appears to partially support some of the merits of school choice programs that include private schools, but more research needs to be done. Although broad programs of school choice have not yet been implemented, school choice including private schools remains one of the chief educational desires of the Republican Party, though it also remains a controversial part of the Republican perspective.

No Child Left Behind

George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind initiative also represents a controversial Republican educational policy. President Bush signed the policy into law on January 8, 2002. Initially, No Child Left Behind earned bipartisan praise as an educational act that could help many disadvantaged children. David Broder, the dean of the Washington Press Corps, stated that he thought the legislation was the most essential piece of educational legislation in 35 years (Moranto & Coppetto, 2004). Even the name of the plan seemed ideal. After all, who could argue with a plan whose goal it was to ensure that no child would be left behind? The initial response to the legislation was helped by the fact that President Clinton's Secretary of Education Richard Riley (2002) indicated that Clinton had anticipated going in a similar direction.

President Bush's goals were certainly commendable, but the actual implementation of the plan ultimately stirred up controversy (Yeagley, 2003). No Child Left Behind possessed the primary goal of assisting the educational achievements of the economically disadvantaged, increasing the pool of highly qualified teachers, increasing the literacy rate of students, and holding schools accountable for the success or failure of their students (Poswick-Goodwin, 2003). Bush also authorized one of the greatest increases in federal spending for education in the post-World War II era, 41% in just the 3-year period from 2000 to 2003, and federal funding for Title I schools in particular has risen substantially (Poswick-Goodwin, 2003).

No Child Left Behind sets specific standards that schools need to abide by using standardized tests to ensure that they are meeting those goals (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 2001). The aim of No Child Left Behind is to ensure that schools achieve 100% proficiency for all students in reading and math by the year 2014 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). To monitor whether these goals are met, No Child Left Behind requires

that children be tested in reading and math from third through eighth grade (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

One of the most novel and controversial aspects of No Child Left Behind is that it contains specific directives for schools that fail to show improvement over various lengths of time. For example, if schools do not show progress in meeting proficiency standards after 2 years, they are placed in a “school improvement” category. At this stage, a school needs to develop a 2-year improvement plan and use 10% of its Title 1 funds for professional development (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Over time, if schools do not improve, there are additional actions that they must take, including providing tutoring services for students and paying transportation costs for children who choose to go to different schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

If a school has still failed to show academic progress after 4 years, it is placed in the “corrective action” category, which results in requirements such as implementing new curriculum, replacing staff, and possibly extending the school day or year. After 6 years, if a school is chronically failing, it then goes through a “restructuring” phase, which may take any number of different forms. Most frequently, the principal will be replaced. However, it is also possible the school could be closed and then reopened as a charter school or, under certain circumstances, might even be bought out by a private company (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

No Child Left Behind also strongly discourages the use of emergency credential teachers and requires a certain length of time for them to complete their credentials in order to continue in the teaching profession (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). President Bush has stated that the reason for this requirement is that a disproportionate number of emergency credential teachers are giving instruction in the poorest schools (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 2001). Virtually all educators acknowledge that although there are many fine emergency credential teachers, on average they are not as well trained and experienced and therefore on average will be less effective than those with credentials (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 2001). Therefore, Bush argues that having a disproportionate number of emergency credential teachers in the nation’s poorest schools will only exacerbate the gap that already exists between wealthy and poor students (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 2001).

Many states in the United States are having no problem meeting the goals and directives of No Child Left Behind, because they are largely already in place (Ritter & Lucas, 2003). However, there are other states, most notably California, that have had a high percentage of emergency credential teachers and relatively low standards (Neu & Hale, 2000). These states are finding No Child Left Behind a shock to the school system (Gardner, 2003; Posnick-Goodwin, 2003). California had a phenomenal number of emergency credential teachers at the time that No Child Left Behind was first implemented (Ritter & Lucas, 2003; Neu & Hale, 2000). Even though Californians acknowledged that this was a problem and was harmful, especially toward impoverished children, politicians and educators did little to alleviate the problem (Neu & Hale, 2000). When No Child Left Behind was set in place, it forced states like California to address the problem (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 2001). Nevertheless, most educators believe that although rectifying the situation was necessary, the Bush administration allowed too short a time period for states inundated with emergency credential teachers to adjust to the new mandates.

Criticisms of No Child Left Behind

The previous section leads us to now address the principal criticisms of No Child Left Behind. First, as mentioned, the legislation leaves little time for states with a high number of emergency credential teachers to adjust to the new mandates. This argument has a great deal of credence and may reflect the fact that many Washington policymakers do not have much experience in the classroom.

Second, some educators claim that the federal government is not providing enough money to meet the mandates. Although it is true that schools can always use more money, this argument is weakened by the fact that Bush has authorized one of the greatest increases in federal educational spending in memory and at a rate of increase about 4 times greater than the rate of inflation (Poswick-Goodwin, 2003).

Third, some educators claim that many public schools will not be able to meet the standards of No Child Left Behind and that hundreds of schools will eventually close (Yeagley, 2003). Some skeptics even claim that the legislation is part of a long-term plan to eventually force privatization of schools (Bracey, 2003). Based on Bush's past preference as governor of the state of Texas to work toward the improvement of public schools rather than privatization, this criticism lacks substantiation (Moranto & Coppetto, 2004). It is possible, although unlikely, that countless schools will close down. However, if this happens, what is very likely is that many principals and staff members will lose their jobs.

The fact that many principals and staff members will lose their jobs raises two salient controversial aspects about No Child Left Behind. First, the legislation clearly shifts the burden of failure from the children to the schools. President Bush makes it clear that he will no longer tolerate children "falling through the cracks" because of inadequate schools (Moranto & Coppetto, 2004). Instead, the schools must either train children properly or face considerable staff changes. Such a change in orientation is likely to face massive resistance on the part of teachers' unions, instructors, and principals. Beyond this, although No Child Left Behind conveys the impression that it contains a no-nonsense approach to incompetence in educational leadership, in reality, because of the tenure system, principals and staff who are fired will probably just transfer to other school districts.

The fourth criticism of No Child Left Behind is that it does not adequately acknowledge that some schools, especially those operating in rapidly declining neighborhoods, are more difficult to improve than others (Bracey, 2003). While this criticism is probably one of the most valid, it is also true that it is a formidable task to obtain an objective measure of such things. Given that No Child Left Behind is the most recent Republican initiative, the jury is still out on what its long-term effects will be. Its aims are honorable, but its implementation is currently controversial.

The Republican Party has initiated other reforms and proposals, such as merit pay for teachers and increased federal support for traditionally Black colleges (Bush, 1989; Edwards et al., 1989; Reagan, 1983). In 1991, President Bush also propounded America 2000, which included several goals that he believed must be met in order to raise the nation's educational prowess (Finn, 2002; Manno, 1995). First, it required raising standards for all students. Second, tests needed to be implemented to meet those standards. Third, it called for a reduction in federal government red tape that would allow for more educational innovations by schools, families, and communities. Fourth, it encouraged school choice. Fifth, Bush urged that control of the schools be shifted from professionals and teacher unions, that is,

the producers, to parents, civilians, and other community leaders, that is, the consumers (Manno, 1995).

Although the Republicans proposed these other initiatives, the Back to the Basics Movement, school choice, and No Child Left Behind are the most salient.

Contemporary Focus

No Child Left Behind

No Child Left Behind has become one of the most hotly debated educational initiatives in recent memory. The aims are certainly laudable, to ensure that all children are able to reach their full educational potential. Also meritorious is the fact that George W. Bush authorized one of the most substantial increases in federal spending for education in the post-World War II era by raising this 41% in just his first 3 years in office (Poswick-Goodwin, 2003). However, two aspects of No Child Left Behind have been especially controversial. First, the initiative insists that poorly performing schools raise their academic performance or they could potentially face rigorous federal action (Moranto & Coppetto, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Some school authorities are concerned that some public schools will be unable to meet these standards and will be compelled to make formidable staff changes and could conceivably eventually face closure (Bracey, 2003). Second, critics contend that No Child Left behind does not allow schools in states with low standards sufficient time to execute transitions (Bracey, 2003).

Overall, critics of No Child Left Behind assert that although this rubric may possess meritorious aspirations, it is replete with uncertainty. On the other hand, proponents argue that if the nation's schools are not held to certain minimum standards, the children who can least afford to suffer from ineffectual schools, poor and at-risk students, will be the ones who pay the highest cost.

- What do you like and dislike about No Child Left Behind?
- What do you think of this initiative overall?

REFORMS UNDER DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON

Preparing Students for the Technological World

President Bill Clinton's emphasis on schools adapting to the technological revolution was clearly his most triumphant educational reform during his presidential term (1993–2001). Just as the Back to the Basics movement represents the Republicans' educational jewel of the post-1980 world, Clinton's insight into the important relationship between education and technology was the Democratic jewel. He argued that in the technological age, computer literacy was becoming almost as important as other forms of literacy, and he particularly emphasized schools being hooked up to the Internet. By the time Clinton left office, 98% of public schools were connected to the Internet (McLarty, Panetta, Bowles, & Podesta, 2001). The percentage of public school classrooms connected to the Internet rose from 3% in 1994 to 77% in 2000 (McLarty et al., 2001).

President Clinton believed that increased technological access was key for students to learn how to compete in a computer-based global economy (Shapiro, 1998). He initiated the greatest outlay in federal expenditures for educational technology that the nation had seen to that day, increasing federal expenditures from \$23 million in 1993 to \$872 million in 2001 (McLarty et al., 2001; Tatalovich & Frendeis, 2000). The latter amount included \$65 million for community technology centers to reach over 180 disadvantaged communities (McLarty et al., 2001). Clinton's Technology Literacy Challenge program not only focused on connecting each public school to the Internet but also sought to increase the number of multimedia computers in the classroom (McLarty et al., 2001).

Although most Americans now view President Clinton's technological initiatives as an important component of educational policy, he did have his share of critics at the time. Clinton's policies focusing on technology to prepare children for the job market were too centrist for some of his educational supporters, who wanted him to focus on fostering student cooperation in the schools and child-centered education (Shapiro, 1998). There was a sense among some liberals that Clinton had "sold out" to the business community by focusing on education as a job creator rather than on more idealistic themes (Shapiro, 1998). Nevertheless, as time went on, Gallup Polls indicated that the American people steadily increased their support of Clinton's educational policies (Harvey, 2000). Furthermore, he eventually silenced his critics by advocating additional policies, including advocating hiring 100,000 new teachers to reduce class size and give children the individual attention they need (Guth, 2000; McLarty et al., 2001).

Clinton's technology-in-education policy reflected his fundamental belief that students needed to be prepared for the new economy that awaited them after graduation (Coleman, 2000). His forward-looking policy was a key accomplishment in his administration.

Public School Choice

Clinton, like the Republicans, believed that to revive American education, the nation's public schools needed to be infused with new levels of competition (McLarty et al., 2001). Unlike his Republican counterparts, however, Clinton claimed that simply creating increased public school choice would be sufficient competition to produce the desired effect. He encouraged various communities and states to develop programs of school choice to stimulate competition among the schools, believing this increased competition would lead to higher levels of quality (McLarty et al., 2001). In some respects, Clinton followed through with George H. W. Bush's (1989) call for increased public school choice. However, since Bush was more amenable toward school choice including private schools than he was of public school choice, he did not pursue public school choice with the same energy that Clinton did (McLarty et al., 2001).

President Clinton personally met with governors across the country and encouraged them to launch public school choice programs. The charter school movement especially grew under Clinton's two terms in office (McLarty et al., 2001). Technically, Albert Shanker (1996) was the first to introduce the idea of charter schools in the 1970s. However, with the exception of a schooling experiment based in Philadelphia, there was little effort to apply the charter school paradigm until Clinton was elected into office (Bradley, 1994). At that time, the fledgling charter school movement was just getting off the ground. However, by the time Clinton left office, there were more than 2,000 charter schools in the country, in 34 states and

the District of Columbia (McLarty et al., 2001). For his last year in office, Clinton secured a \$45 million increase in funds designed to increase public school choice (McLarty et al., 2001).

Although there is no question that Clinton made a great deal of progress in promoting school choice, the benefits of these actions are debatable. The evidence that is available to date shows that students in charter schools do no better academically than their counterparts in regular public schools (Sarason, 1999). Advocates of private school choice have pointed to these results as evidence that choice will produce the needed level of competition only if private schools are included (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Kirkpatrick, 1990). On the other hand, opponents of school choice assert that Clinton's efforts were simply a waste of time because choice does not work (Sarason, 1999).

Admittedly, there are some indications that school choice may do some good in the lives of the participants. Minnesota possesses the most developed system of public school choice in the country. Barbara Zohn (personal communication, 1994, May 14) reports that self-report surveys by the students involved in the Minnesota choice program are "very good." She notes that a much higher percentage of "choice students" desire to pursue a college education than do students who remain in their districts. Zohn adds that the survey results indicate that many students who once "did not think" of going to college now anticipate attending. The second result is especially salient because of the makeup of the students that participate in Minnesota's choice program. The largest of Minnesota's choice programs involves "students at risk." These are students in Grades K-12 that schools identify as at-risk students. They generally are from homes in which there are problems with chemical dependency or teenage parents. The schools supply child care for teenage parents and even night school for those students who find it difficult to attend during the day. Of Minnesota's 40,000 students involved in the choice programs, nearly half are at-risk students (Colopy & Tarr, 1994; B. Zohn, personal communication, 1994, May 14). Nevertheless, it is clear that more research needs to be done to determine whether public school choice is really effective, especially since some, like Lewis Finch (1989), claim that "supporters of choice base claims of success on contrived data" (p. 13). To date, there really does not appear to be strong evidence suggesting that public school choice aids academic achievement.

The Participation Rate Issue

Beyond these arguments emerges the issue of the small number of students who are likely to participate in school choice even if such programs are available on a wide scale. Generally speaking, the rate of participation in school choice programs internationally and domestically are about 12% to 15% (Jeynes, 2000). This trend holds whether one is talking about school choice programs that involve just public schools or those that include private schools. Given this fact, it appears unlikely that school choice will emerge as the grand source of reform that its advocates promise (Jeynes, 2000). As a result, few children will benefit from the program, and few schools will possess the incentive to change significantly. Having stated this, it may well be that even this level of participation in choice will force public schools to increase their quality and become more competitive. Indeed, one can argue that competition is more likely to increase especially if private schools are included. To whatever extent minority and poor school children continue to be the focus of most school choice programs, this may also make such programs remunerative. However, based on such low participation rates, it is hard to argue that school choice programs will revolutionize American education.

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The early research indicates that private school choice (the Republican plan mentioned earlier in the chapter) probably does raise academic achievement, but private school choice remains problematic for two reasons. First, many Americans would favor the poor and the middle class getting tax breaks but would balk at the wealthy getting a tuition tax break. Second, the participation rate in other nations tends to be low. On the other hand, Clinton's public school plan avoids the tax break controversy. However, the academic benefits of charter schools, magnet schools, and other expressions of public school choice have not been convincing. Consequently, the school choice debate will continue to be heated and controversial.

Educational Debate: Which School Choice Program Do You Prefer—the Democrat or the Republican Model?

Both Democrats and Republicans have propounded school choice paradigms. The Democratic initiative involves school choice in the realm of public schools. This strategy eschews the controversy inherent in choice programs involving tax breaks or vouchers to enable parents to send their children to private schools. Most Democrats believe that public school choice will supply a sufficient degree of competition to improve school outcomes (McLarty et al., 2001). The Republican approach calls for school choice in both the private and public school sectors. Advocates of this approach, such as Chubb and Moe (1990), believe that a sufficient degree of competition can be reached only if the nation's best schools, which are frequently private schools, are included in a choice program.

- Which school choice program do you prefer, school choice that includes public schools or an approach that includes both public and private schools? Why?

Nationalized Standards

President Clinton also expressed concern about the achievement gap between White and Asian American students, on one hand, and other minority groups, on the other (Coleman, 2000; Shapiro, 1998). He stated, and George W. Bush later agreed, that this chronic achievement gap was one of the most pressing problems facing American education (Shapiro, 1998).

Clinton was convinced that one of the reasons for the gap was that students in poor urban schools were not receiving the same level of demanding instructional material as their counterparts in suburban schools. To reduce this inequity, he proposed that national standards be established to ensure that all students at various grade levels are taught certain key concepts (Shapiro, 1998). Furthermore, Clinton stated that nationwide standardized tests be given at the fourth-grade level for reading and at the eighth-grade level for math that would monitor whether teachers were inculcating these concepts (Shapiro, 1998).

National tests were one of the most important facets of Clinton's educational program. He believes that children need to master the basics and that tests are vital to see that they are doing so (Coleman, 2000; Shapiro, 1998). Most other developed countries have similar tests, but some people are solicitous about too prodigious a role played by the federal government in education (Shapiro, 1998). To address this concern, Clinton said he would make the tests voluntary. The tests would be based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP),

a highly esteemed test that was already used extensively in the country. Senators from both parties were quite amenable to the idea, but many Republicans insisted that Clinton transfer the oversight of the testing from the U.S. Department of Education to the more neutral NAEP.

The Clinton initiative for higher standards and an augmented role for the federal government in education was prominent in Goals 2000, or the Educate America Act (Manno, 1995). Goals 2000 wrote into law the national education goals established by President George H. W. Bush in 1991, in his America 2000 plan (Manno, 1995). In addition, Goals 2000 called for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Smith, Scoll, & Plisko, 1995). Clinton desired to place special attention on Title I programs that “in 1965 . . . symbolized a new era of federal involvement in education, with federal involvement in education with federal assistance focusing on students who needed it the most: poor and disadvantaged children” (Payzant & Levin, 1995, p. 55).

For the most part, educators embraced Goals 2000 as a whole, although there were some critics. The component of the legislation that called for nationalized standards and testing was a controversial one. Critics claimed that Clinton was centralizing the decentralized system of which most Americans were so fond (Powell, 1999; Shapiro, 1998). Clinton denied this claim and stated that he was simply trying to make adjustments to a generally decentralized system. Other critics claimed that under Clinton, “schools and schooling are dominated by a concern with testing” (Shapiro, 1998, p. 46). Shapiro notes that “during the 1980s and 1990s, the number of standardized tests administered to students during their pre-college years has increased by almost 400 percent” (p. 46). And furthermore, according to Shapiro, “The language of increased content, higher levels of performance, and important test scores—sadly, the language of your administration’s education policies—will only contribute and exacerbate the confusion of schooling with some genuine, humanly liberating and meaningful education” (p. 50).

Some argued that Clinton was inaugurating a precipitous turn toward centralization of America’s schools (Manno, 1995). For example, Howard Howe (1995), a former U.S. commissioner of education and professor at Harvard Graduate School of Education, asserted that Clinton was creating “an elaborate bureaucratic structure that brings Uncle Sam into the classrooms of 2 1/2 million American public school teachers” (pp. 374, 376). The extent to which American students may be overtested and required to satisfy a plenary set of standards is controversial and remains a subject of much debate (Howe, 1995; Perrone, 1991; Powell, 1999).

A Closer Look: The Essence of the Debate About Standards: Necessity Versus Liberty

There is no question that the educational community and the nation’s leadership stand at a crossroads regarding educational policy. A decentralized education system is a long-standing tradition in the American experience that dates back to the early political debates between the Democratic-Republicans and the Federalists, addressed in Chapter 3. Liberty is one of the traditions that Americans most value. A decentralized system of schooling is largely a result of the American love for liberty in education. Through this system of schooling, many citizens believe that schools can maximize their sensitivity to

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students, parents, and innovative teachers. In recent years, however, it has become patent that decentralization exacerbates inequality. In a decentralized system, children, by definition, are not taught much of the same information that is shared at other schools. Moreover, the standards at schools across the country vary considerably.

Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush believe that reducing the achievement gap must be a national priority and that part of the solution is establishing national standards.

Just how far the Clinton and Bush initiatives will take the nation on the road to centralization is incalculable. Attempts to make specific conclusions will produce nebulous arguments at best. However, what is certain is that the nation is now involved in a debate that confronts the value of liberty with the reality of necessity.

- In your view, in which direction should the country go in this debate?

In defense of President Clinton, like many political leaders, he was at a loss about how to reduce the achievement gap. Although the gap had finally been narrowed during the 1980s, it still remained unacceptably large after four decades of trying one reform after another to hasten the process (Green, 2001; Slavin & Madden, 2001). Per-student expenditures had soared since the 1950s; schools were integrated, with millions of dollars spent to bus students; bilingual education was introduced and backed by millions of dollars of expenditures; multicultural education became a staple of American public school education; and experiments were undertaken to give parents more localized control of schooling (Podair, 2002; Ravitch, 1974; U.S. Department of Education, 2004). After all of these attempts, the achievement gap stubbornly remained, and Clinton's actions reflected a deep frustration. Something had to be done to deal with this persistent problem. As a result, he acted forcefully in making these recommendations (Shapiro, 1998).

Although standardized testing had been on the increase since the 1960s, conjoining this method with national standards gave new importance to the move toward increased testing (Shapiro, 1998). It also paved the way for George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind policy, examined earlier, which called for even more standards and testing than Clinton had envisioned (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Bush, in essence, gave the same rationale for his education policy as Clinton had given for his: The achievement gap had to be eradicated.

There is no question that Clinton and Bush have both concluded that a decentralized system breeds inequality. The question that emerges from both of their policies is whether in the name of equality, the United States is now headed toward having a much more centralized system of education. For the moment, both Clinton and Bush assert that this is not so. We probably will not know the full answer for decades. Nevertheless, the possibility is real. John Coleman (2000) notes that "education . . . is becoming increasingly nationalized as an issue" (p. 164); and, consequently, greater centralization seems inevitable. Many factors, including national dialogue, parental frustrations, teachers' unions, national reports, and a slow-growing economy, have all contributed to the nationalization of the educational dialogue.

The reality is that there is presently a powerful degree of momentum in the direction of increased standardization and testing. There is little reason to think this trend will change

any time soon. For the moment, many political leaders feel they must either choose decentralized system or greater equality, and for the foreseeable future, they have chosen greater equality.

The Democratic Party also initiated other reforms, including Clinton's attempt to reduce the student-teacher ratio by using federal funds to hire more teachers (Guth, 2000; McLarty et al., 2001). This initiative came out of the belief that children perform better when they are in smaller class sizes because they receive more individual attention. Reducing class sizes in this way would require considerable federal expense. On one hand, many educators supported this initiative because in the United States, there is a correlation between class size and student achievement (Guth, 2000; McLarty, et al., 2001). However, many social scientists believed that although Clinton's intentions were good, the education money could be spent in better ways (Hanushek, 1995; Woessmann & West, 2002). They asserted that based on international and national data combined, the relationship between class size and achievement was not that strong (Hanushek, 1995; Woessmann & West, 2002). Clinton (1995) also propounded the Gun-Free Schools Act, designed to reduce acts of gun violence, which had become more frequent in the nation's schools (Coleman, 2004).

Finally, another educational trend resulted from both Republican and Democratic initiatives of this era, an increased engagement in education at the state level. A good deal of this development can be attributed to President Reagan's efforts at creating a "New Federalism," which encouraged more self-governance at the state level (Busch, 2001; Conlan, 1988). Reagan's belief was that encouraging states to become more active in initiating reforms was more efficient and more congruent with what the framers of the Constitution had originally intended (Busch, 2001; Conlan, 1988). In many respects, President Clinton continued this emphasis on encouraging states to undertake educational reform initiatives, such as school choice at the public school level (McLarty et al., 2001).

THE POLITICAL ATMOSPHERE TODAY

The initiatives presented in this chapter are indicative of the fact that especially since 1980, education has earned a central place in the nation's political dialogue (McLarty et al., 2001; Manno, 1995). On the whole, this is probably a positive development. Many educators are now more content because politicians juxtapose educational quality with some of the most essential contemporary policies, including economic prosperity, alleviating crime, and fighting poverty (McLarty et al., 2001; Manno, 1995). However, one should also acknowledge that the new place of centrality that education possesses also translates into a politicizing of the educational debate. Teachers' unions and parents' groups, in particular, are becoming active political entities that are often at odds philosophically (Liebermann, 1997; Loveless, 2000). Each espouses a perspective that sometimes approaches an assertion that if one is a true teacher or parent, one should advocate a particular political view. Although this is understandable, it introduces the risk of prompting politicians to act out of political expediency rather than considering what is educationally productive (Liebermann, 1997; Loveless, 2000). Nevertheless, one can only hope that the primacy that education now enjoys in the political sphere will translate into reasoned judgments and responsible decisions that will make a stronger United States of America.

CONCLUSION

Both political parties have made contributions to education that are either clearly positive or more controversial. Even though, from the contemporary American standpoint, the controversial actions may be more numerous than the clearly enlightened ones, we should also recall that many of the most long-lasting and influential educational movements also started off as controversial. The final analysis of the Republican and Democratic initiatives of the last 25 years will not be written for some time to come.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Most Americans treasure the notion of individualism as much as any nation in the world. Not surprisingly, people from other countries believe that Americans often prize individualism to the detriment of the good of society. Most trends in American society as a whole are toward greater individualism. However, some argue that with the government's insistence on setting nationwide standards and its reluctance to allow a broad program of school choice, American education is going in the direction of being less individualistic. Why is American education going in the direction opposite that of American society on this issue? Is more individualism good or bad in education and society as a whole?
2. Some educators argue that the technological and Internet revolution will change college education to such a degree that distance education (education over the Internet) will become the standard practice and that eventually most college classes will not involve going to class. Do you agree or disagree with this perception?
3. Do you think that the best educational ideas emerge by combining the perspectives of both political parties, or from each political party working primarily among its own members? Why?
4. Some educators claim that with all the changes that take place in society, children will always need the basics or fundamentals of education. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?

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