

Striking the Middle Ground on the Education Debate: The Overarching Question of What is Best for *Our* Children

— Representative Jim Matheson, Utah's Second Congressional District

INTRODUCTION

Lately, for a politician to espouse the value of education is as downright American as loving your grandmother and watching baseball. In fact, there is probably not a single public servant who would not claim to believe that education is a high priority. Everyone believes that providing for our future requires the education of our children. However this widening emphasis on education at times creates ideological schisms between political parties and avoids the practical nature of what is being discussed.

THE NATIONAL RHETORIC

The national education debate right now is characterized by three major themes: choice, accountability, and flexibility. In many ways there is great consensus, and in many ways there is bitter partisanship over these three concepts.

CHOICE

Both political parties believe that there should be some form of school choice. No one thinks that every public school is a perfect fit for every child. Yet the form that school choice should take has great variation. President Bush has proposed a program where any child that is in a school receiving Title I funds under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Title I funds are given to schools that serve high numbers of children in poverty) which is designated as "dangerous" or as "failing" be given the opportunity to transfer to another school. School transfers are to be financed by breaking apart the Title I funds given to the school, and giving a portion of them to each child to finance their education at another public school or private school, or even to finance tutoring programs.

Educators believe that public funds should remain in public schools, and they should be targeted to the neediest of children. However, opportunities for public school choice, innovative charter schools and magnet school programs receive National Education Association (NEA) support. School choice characterizes the pattern of education debate: consensus on concepts, division on details.

ACCOUNTABILITY

A similar pattern is evolving in discussions about accountability. Everyone believes that schools should be accountable. No politician, educator, or public administrator would declare the value of funding failing programs; no one wants to put money into something, which does not work. The broadly accepted answer is accountability.

President Bush defines accountability as yearly testing of all students in grades three through eight. Without testing educators do not know where a child is, they cannot provide needed remediation, and they cannot be held responsible for the results of their efforts. Test scores should be used as indicators of student progress, and schools failing to meet standards should lose funds, while rewards should be given to those who meet or exceed standards according to the President's plan.

Others express concern about what they call "high stakes testing," the use of a single measure to evaluate students and make funding decisions. They decry the practice of "teaching to the test" in which all that occurs in schools is tailored to a single test. They insist that other forms of assessment are necessary. Again, what emerges is a broad difference in the details, despite agreement on the concept of accountability.

FLEXIBILITY

In the area of flexibility there is again an over-arching acceptance of the principle. Most bureaucrats would not design a program with impossible paperwork and hundreds of restrictions – on purpose. Everyone believes that local educators should have power to make decisions about what occurs in their classrooms and should be supported in providing the best possible education to each of their students. Yet, again the policy implications of these beliefs take very different forms.

Some believe that there should be options for states showing high achievement on standardized tests to opt out of all federal program requirements. There should be no guidelines on how money is to be used, and instead it should all be left to the state's discretion. There is a movement to consolidate federal education programs into few funding streams, and then have limited requirements on how these funds are to

be used. It is a concept of rewarding states that are “accountable” with “flexibility.”

In contrast, others would like to preserve the separate federal education programs that currently exist. They contend that each is designed to meet a unique and valuable need, and that they must continue to do so. They see guidelines as checks on the appropriate use of funds to meet federal priorities. Perhaps here, more than in any other case, there is a contrast in the opposing views.

In the middle of all the debate is the practical reality of what really ought to be accomplished on education. Historically, the federal role in education began to help in areas where the states lacked the resources to serve specific student populations. Several examples of these programs include Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Title I was designed to provide federal dollars to schools serving a high number of students in poverty, schools shouldering an increased burden because of their student populations. It was not intended to help all schools or all students, but it was intended to meet a specific need that states alone were unable to finance. Impact Aid served a similar role. This funding was designed to help schools serving a large number of students living on federal lands, since federal lands are not taxable by local authorities. Schools serving children living on these lands lose a large base of local tax revenue, which typically would help finance public education. Impact aid is designed to help offset expenditures and provide these schools with the missing operating funds.

Over time, the scope of federal involvement has increased, generating many concerns about over-regulation, increased bureaucracy, and the size of expenditures. These concerns about how the federal government ought to be involved in education have given rise to the discussions on choice, accountability, and flexibility outlined above.

However, the situation in Utah does not necessarily conform to these national concerns. There are many unique characteristics and needs to be considered in education reform.

THE SITUATION IN UTAH

In evaluating education it is necessary to create a context for the debate. This means looking closely at the situation in Utah and the effects of policies at the state level.

Many of the concerns being expressed nationally are valid, but often the pictures of “failing schools” do not accurately depict education in Utah. Utah’s schools are characterized by committed teachers, committed administrators, and — perhaps most of all — committed parents who care about quality education. These individuals invest their time in the heroic, daily act known as teaching. Parents give record numbers of volunteer hours to their children’s schools (Parent Teacher Association (PTA) organizations are involved in 85 percent of Utah’s schools compared to only 20-30 percent nationwide). Recent data shows Utah’s schools rank eighth

in the nation on the eighth grade NAEP tests.¹ Students continue to score well above the national average on tests and attend college at high rates.

Utah’s schools also face tremendous challenges. Census data shows Utah to have the highest ratio of students to teachers in the nation, and Utah also ranks the lowest (51st) in the nation in per pupil expenditure. Classrooms are chronically overcrowded; textbooks are outdated. And, the growth causing these challenges will continue. In the next ten years the State Board of Education estimates that Utah will add approximately 100,000 new students and need to build over 124 new schools, a 15 percent increase.

Overall, tremendous commitment has allowed Utah to overcome the odds against it: too little money and too many children in classes. Granted, these are general statements. They do not account for every situation. Certain parents struggle with uncommitted teachers, and certain teachers struggle with uncommitted parents, however they do represent much of the norm.

Decreasing class size, increasing the resources available, and meeting the increasing challenge of new immigrant and refugee students are all priorities in Utah. These are not partisan issues. They are the reality of what Utah needs. However, the national debate on education does little to address these needs in its current form.

THE MIDDLE GROUND

Despite ideological differences between parties, addressing the challenges in Utah’s education system is a practical matter. It is about what works for our schools. It is about meeting priorities. Following are several practical, common sense principles to guide federal decisions on education. These are not steeped in any ideology. They do not conform to either Republican or Democratic priorities. Instead they cut across the rhetoric and ask a simple question: What is best for our children? They do not generate a perfect proposal, but they begin to redefine the way we examine education, specifically the federal role in education.

1. The federal government should meet its obligations and keep its promises. New education programs should not be initiated until the existing ones are adequately funded. This is a simple concept, but one that is often lacking in federal politicking. If states and local schools are depending on federal dollars to meet certain priorities, providing these should be the first objective in federal education policy. New programs create new obligations, and subsequently new revenue sources that local educators come to count on. New programs should be initiated only after existing obligations have been met.

This means that when looking at consolidating existing

¹ Bennet, W.J. (2001). *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators 2001*. Washington, DC: empower.org.

programs, or creating new programs there must be an overarching rationale for decisions that are made. This requires care to not embrace a plan to consolidate programs just because it sounds like a comprehensive change. Those programs, which work, ought to be preserved. Those, which fail, ought to be consolidated, but it is important to understand the implications for local schools before eliminating programs.

2. The federal government should strive to decrease bureaucracy in education whenever possible. Schools are organizations with teachers having tremendous responsibility. They generally do not have other employees to fill out grant applications, process forms, or interact with government agencies. Things should be as simple as possible, and they should be administered at the local level. Less bureaucracy means fewer strings attached, and it means that programs are administered at the local level. It does not inherently mean state instead of federal; rather it means fewer layers through which funds and administration should pass.

3. The federal government should address areas of critical national concern. The historic model of federal involvement in education is not all wrong. It is based on targeting funds to offset local burdens and meeting identified national objectives. Coordinated efforts to solve specific problems should continue to be a priority of federal education policy.

4. The federal government should fund education within the context of fiscal responsibility. There are many valuable federal priorities within and outside of education which must be weighed out. It is irresponsible to not budget for expenditures. What is necessary is a framework for decision-making, whereby expenditures and revenues are examined, debt is paid down, and valuable federal programs are protected.

THE RESULTS OF COMMON SENSE

The federal government only provides approximately seven percent of funding for local schools and alone it cannot address all the challenges Utah faces in education. Local solutions and local commitments will be necessary and must be sustained to continue Utah's legacy of educational quality and success. However, following the above principles would lead to a federal education policy that would make sense in Utah.

1. If the federal government keeps its promises local schools can better address their unique concerns. Although the federal government does not control the class size in Utah, one of the best ways to address this problem is for the federal government to meet its obligations, for example, fully funding the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This act promised the states that the federal government would provide for 40 percent of the costs associated with educating special needs students. Over time the federal

contribution on behalf of IDEA has never risen over 15 percent. This leaves a tremendous burden on local schools since the cost of educating these students is astronomical. Decisions in federal court require local schools to educate children, however the mandate is not matched by federal funds. The answer is simple. Educating these children is the right thing to do. Providing federal funds to help offset the state's expenditure is appropriate because they place such a burden on the local schools.

If existing programs such as IDEA and Title I are funded first, it is assured that the most needed funds will get to schools. Then, when looking at consolidation of programs and funding other initiatives these principles can be kept in mind. Let me give just two examples of how this may help Utah.

One of the only sources of funding for ongoing teacher training in Utah is the federal Eisenhower Professional Development Program. School Board members report that they have seen greater increases in student achievement through these training activities, than any other program. Nevertheless, over-crowded classrooms are the norm in Utah. Current plans to consolidate the Eisenhower Professional Development Program with Class Size Reduction may free money for a moderate decrease in class size, but it could also remove one of the only sources of professional development available to teachers. Institutions of higher education have also effectively used this funding to provide training for teachers, particularly in math and science. Adjusting this program and administering it to the state may remove the opportunity for universities to obtain these funds.

Secondly, many schools in Utah have started after-school programs using the 21st Century Learning Center grants. These funds pay for homework clubs, which have dramatically increased student academic achievement. They allow for schools to open early and stay open late so that students have a safe place to be rather than on the streets. Often, Utah schools can obtain these competitive grants through hard work, innovation, and teachers' commitment. However, formula allocations frequently shortchange Utah's students because they are based on population or the per pupil expenditure made at the state level (such as with Title I). In a state with the lowest per pupil expenditure and a rapidly increasing student population not always reflected in census data, changing the allocation and administration of these competitive funds may remove the only designated source of money for effective after school programs in Utah.

It is an examination of the implications of such program consolidation that must occur before decisions are made at a federal level. In addition, these existing programs should be a priority over new, in order to assure that Utah does not have to cancel effective programs.

2. If the federal government works to decrease bureaucracy local educators will be more empowered. Accountability measures implemented at the local level will actually create educational success. Utah recently passed U-Pass leg-

isolation which is already ahead of the national effort to test students regularly across subject areas. If bureaucracy is decreased, national mandates will not supplant or interfere with these local efforts. There will not be a national test or an indirect effort to create a national curriculum, and Utah schools will not lose dollars in federal attempts to mandate accountability for only seven percent of their funding.

Utah educators will be able to continue their efforts to measure student progress over time, and parents will be provided with important information about their child's school. This will occur because these are state priorities currently being pursued. In addition, local schools will be able to count on funding because it will not pass through another layer of bureaucracy at the state level, whenever possible it will go directly to the districts and the schools. There will also be no undue strings attached to federal education dollars.

Finally, local schools will also continue to provide public school choice, but will be able to recognize their own limitations due to over-crowded classes and schools. Federal mandates will not require these local entities to exceed their capacities. Instead, they will be able to operate in the manner they have already proven successful.

3. If the federal government addresses areas of national concern, Utah's schools will also benefit. An excellent example of this is an increased national focus on math and science education. A national commission has studied how to improve math and science education. A united, systemic attempt to address this nationally would benefit Utah's schools.

Like much of the nation, Utah has a shortage of math and science educators. Fewer students are pursuing higher education in math and science fields, fewer professionals are entering math and science fields, and even fewer are becoming qualified teachers in these areas. And the situation is cyclical. A direct, comprehensive federal effort to address this national concern would also help Utah's students and businesses. Federal programs to repay educational loans for individuals with a math or science degree who become teachers in shortage areas are a good example of limited intrusion, but worthwhile results.

4. If the federal government is fiscally responsible, sustained support for education in Utah will be possible. Long term planning, which includes debt reduction, protection of federal obligations such as Medicare and social security, and realistic spending forecasts, will enable federal support of education to be sustained. There will not be unexpected deficits, unbalanced budgets, and other federal financial crises which force dramatic cuts in discretionary spending. Instead, local educators will be able to plan on federal resources from year to year. There will not be a sudden need to cut the hours of Title I aides because federal funding is frozen or decreasing (such is occurring in Utah this year), instead there will be a comprehensive effort to provide sustained federal funding.

When all the rhetoric of support for education is backed up with the reality of funding, Congress will no longer only talk about how education is valuable, but will demonstrate it by consistently funding its commitments to the nation's neediest students. Federal funding promises fulfilled will mean local funding priorities that can be made a reality – smaller class sizes, better textbooks, and quality teachers for every student.

CONCLUSION

Despite a seeming unity in the pursuit of quality education, there exist many different approaches to accomplishing such a goal. However, understanding what Utah's needs are and taking a common sense approach to federal policy defines the middle ground. This middle ground is a pragmatic and sensible look at practical solutions, rather than ideological platitudes. This middle ground approach is especially valuable because it is capable of providing what is best for Utah's children.