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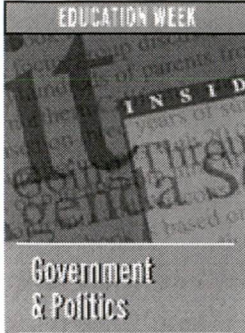
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With 2000 Looming, Chances of Meeting National Goals Iffy

By David J. Hoff

Almost 10 years ago, President George Bush and the state governors set goals aimed at preparing all the nation's children to improve their achievement in core subjects and outpace the world in at least math and science by 2000.

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Read the accompanying chart, "[Progress Report on National Education Goals](#)," in This Week's News.

With one year remaining, the prospects of reaching those goals--and most of the other four set soon after the chief executives' 1989 summit in Charlottesville, Va., and two others added in 1994 appear practically nil.

Student scores have risen in mathematics but stayed about the same in reading, according to the panel charged with tracking progress toward the goals. And the results from international assessments given in 1996 suggest the United States is far from dominating the world in math and science.

Pathway To the Goals

1989

September: President Bush and the nation's governors attend a two-day summit in Charlottesville, Va., called by Mr. Bush to set a national education agenda. The group issues a statement declaring the plan to establish a process to set national education goals.

1990

January: Mr. Bush proposes six national education goals in his State of the Union Address. The governors adopt the goals the next month.

1991

April: Mr. Bush launches his America 2000 education reform package, calling for private school choice, model schools, national content standards and national tests in core subjects. The program fails to win congressional approval, but the Department of Education underwrites

Read a related story, "[States Only Part of the Way Toward Their Goals for 2000](#)," in This Week's News.

As the country approaches the target date for the original goals, however, many of the leaders and observers of the campaign say it has nevertheless been a success and needs to continue.

"Without [the goals], we'd have an awful lot of interest in education but not much direction," U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley said in a recent interview.

"The goals are part of a general ... shift in attitude that is taking academic achievement seriously," said Patricia Albjerg Graham, a professor of education history at Harvard University's graduate school of education and the president of the Spencer Foundation in Chicago. "It's a mistake to take the goals literally. But symbolically, they are part of other efforts to say American kids need a stronger preparation in academics."

In that context, the goals could be considered a success. After their two-day summit in September 1989, Mr. Bush and all the nation's governors issued a statement saying that the goals would serve to make the country internationally competitive. The statement further said that the leaders wanted education goals "to reorient the education system and to marshal widespread support for needed reforms."

But even if American students and schools haven't

But even if American students and schools haven't met the performance measures outlined in the goals, the public's heightened concern over the quality of its schools in recent years has led to an intense debate over how to improve education.

Child Health Improves

Still, 2000 will arrive with many of the goals unmet. Student achievement isn't significantly better than in 1990, when President Bush announced the original six goals in his State of the Union Address and the National Governors' Association later adopted them at the group's annual winter meeting.

Of the 26 indicators the National Education Goals Panel uses to measure progress, only five have shown statistically significant increases in the 1990s, the committee of governors, legislators, and federal officials says in its eighth annual report on the goals, released last month. Another three indicators showed decreases.

In the rest, no longitudinal data exist to determine whether there has been advancement, the report says.

Most of the success has been in the health of young children, a sign, the goals panel says, that they will be ready to learn once they enter school--the first goal. The high school graduation rate hovers near the 90 percent mark called for in the second goal, and may be achieved next year.

But the goals centered on student achievement--the ones that have received the most attention--are unlikely to be met. The fifth goal, which says U.S. students will lead the world in math and science achievement, clearly won't be realized, according to 1996 data collected by the Third International Mathematics and Science Study and noted in the recent goals report. Only in 4th grade science did American students lead the world.

To cite those data as a sign of failure, however, may be misleading and contribute to a misperception that schools and students are doing poorly, some researchers say.

While TIMSS researchers set standards for the types of students that needed to participate in the study's sample, "very few countries" included the diverse cross-section the guidelines demanded, said Iris C. Rotberg, the research professor of education policy at George Washington University's graduate school of education in Washington.

"The test-score comparisons simply don't tell us anything about the quality of education in the different countries," she said. The United States' mediocre showing in science, for example, is contradicted by the number of top scientists educated in the the country's schools, Ms.

Education underwrites national standards-setting efforts.

1994

March: President Clinton signs the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, which writes the original education goals into law and adds new ones on teacher quality and parent involvement. The measure also establishes grants to help states in setting standards and creating new student assessments.

1996

March: The governors and leading business executives meet at a corporate conference center in Palisades, N.Y., to energize school reform. They agree to focus on setting standards within their own states.

Rotberg argued.

Focus on Academics

Regardless of the debate over whether the goals will be achieved, their success in encouraging a new focus on what students are learning and on measuring their achievement in itself is a significant--and possibly momentous--outcome of the 1990 goals, supporters of the effort say.

The goals "have served as a focal point of debate," said John F. Jennings, the director of the Center on Education Policy, a Washington clearinghouse on education issues, and former Democratic education aide on Capitol Hill. "They've helped to further the idea that there should be standards in one form or another."

While that may be true, policymakers have never supported the goals effort with the dollars needed to produce radical change, said Samuel C. Stringfield, a principal research scientist at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. By comparison, he noted, when President John F. Kennedy said the United States should put a man on the moon, he recommended that billions be spent.

"When the governors and president met in 1989 ... they came behind with nothing that approximated what Kennedy had done," Mr. Stringfield said.

Others say the goals process has been narrowly focused on schools' role in children's learning, practically ignoring the roles of parents and community institutions.

"The goals are written from the school perspective, and they lay all the responsibility on the school," said Dorothy Rich, the president of the Home and School Institute, a Washington nonprofit that trains school officials on how to encourage parents to be actively involved in their children's learning. "It tends to be a top-down or school-out perspective."

Even the goal of increasing parent involvement--which was added in 1994--places the burden on the schools to create programs for parents, she said. "There's no role spelled out for the parent," Ms. Rich said.

A Shift to States

Many of the leading players in the nearly 10 years since the Charlottesville summit acknowledge that the resulting activity has focused mainly on what schools need to do and how they should change.

The first task governors undertook after setting the goals was to find ways to define what students should know and ways to measure that knowledge, said Michael Cohen, who was the education coordinator for the NGA at the time of the summit. Mr. Cohen now serves as education adviser to President Clinton--himself a prominent participant in the summit as governor of Arkansas.

"The discussion and debate of standards was the consequence of setting goals," Mr. Cohen said. Eventually, "that debate has overshadowed the

discussion of the goals in other areas."

At the time of the 1989 summit, only the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics had drawn up national standards in a major subject.

By 1992, the National Council on Education Standards and Testing, a congressionally created advisory panel, called for national standards and assessments that would become models for the states to follow. With grants from the Bush administration, national subject-matter groups produced voluntary standards in various core subjects.

Congress passed the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, President Clinton's chief reform initiative, in 1994. The law called for a new national panel to certify national standards and any state standards submitted for review.

But political opposition to any federal role in standards-setting derailed the process, especially after the Republicans, led by the conservative wing of their party, took control of Congress in 1995.

Mr. Clinton never appointed members for the standards-certification panel because his administration conceded to the GOP majority that it should be abolished.

"The idea was that these national standards would guide people," said Eva L. Baker, a co-director of the Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing at the University of California, Los Angeles. "That vision started breaking up right away."

By 1996, at an NGA education summit with business executives, there was little talk about what to do about national standards. The focus was exclusively on state action.

Now, 49 states--Iowa excluded--have or are drafting standards in core subjects. Some experts contend, however, that many of those states have produced documents lacking in specificity or the challenging content expected by the leaders of the standards movement. National groups that have evaluated states' standards give them frequently divergent grades.

Testing Derailed

In much the way that the national-standards movement has diverged from the path its advocates laid out, those who set the goals haven't generated the support for the national assessments they envisioned.

President Bush included individual student testing in his America 2000 school reform package. It failed because Democrats, then in control of Congress, refused to endorse the reforms and the private school choice included in the same bill.

Mr. Clinton revived the issue in 1997, calling for national tests in 4th grade reading and 8th grade math. In his original time line, the tests

would have been given for the first time this spring.

But Congress has severely limited development work on the proposed voluntary tests. The National Assessment Governing Board is allowed to draft test questions, but it's forbidden to do the work needed to validate them.

"It's alive, though it's not kicking," Secretary Riley said.

In its latest report, the goals panel cites data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress to evaluate the student-achievement goals. That test, however, only samples achievement, and even then, cannot be used for reporting individual scores.

Even state assessments designed as benchmarks for state standards have fallen short, according to Ms. Baker, the UCLA researcher. Most of those tests measure how students perform on a standardized scale and aren't specifically designed to measure what's in the state standards.

With the target date for original goals looming--and success doubtful--policymakers are asking: What next?

"The issue is not whether we are going to meet these goals by 2000, but whether we're going to work until they're met in every state, no matter how long it takes," Mr. Cohen, the president's education adviser, said.

The goals panel, which is authorized to receive federal funding through Sept. 30, is preparing a report to Congress to explain what role it or a successor may play in evaluating progress toward the current or any new goals.

Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., a goals panel member and one of Congress' most vocal supporters of the goals, is calling on Mr. Clinton to convene a new summit.

"Pulling people together and reinvigorating the process is the important thing," he said. "An unfortunate result would be if we let the opportunity pass and not focus on the goals at all."

The White House is considering forums to discuss the goals, but hasn't decided whether to heed Mr. Bingaman's call for a new summit, Mr. Cohen said. But he added that the Clinton administration is expecting to be part of a debate over "whether to continue having goals and who's going to set them."

Even some long-time supporters of the goals process question whether it should continue.

"I'm glad we've done it," said Chester E. Finn Jr., the president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in Washington and an assistant U.S. secretary of education in the Reagan administration. "It didn't accomplish what we'd hoped it would accomplish. Instead of doing more of it, let's do something different."

Meanwhile, other groups are setting their own agendas. Last fall, for example, the Consortium on Renewing Education, a think tank based at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn., said the nation could double student achievement by 2020 with an emphasis on local control coupled with stringent accountability. ("Think Tank Inks Blueprint To Lift Achievement," Nov. 18, 1998.)

Century's Final Era

To Ms. Graham, the Harvard historian, the flurry of activity symbolizes a trend emphasizing increased student achievement. The movement is the final era in the history of U.S. education in the 20th century, she suggests.

Early in the century, schools were called on to assimilate immigrants into society. Then, progressive educators tried to make what students learn in school relevant to their daily lives. Next, the civil rights movement called for schools to integrate black and other minority students into traditionally white institutions.

"Whatever we've wanted our schools to do in the past, eventually the schools have done," Ms. Graham said. "We'll muddle our way through to having a higher fraction of students learning academic material. Each of these other stages took 20 or 30 years; this one will too."

PHOTO: Surrounded by students from the Zamorano Fine Arts Academy in San Diego, President Clinton signs the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, his school reform plan, into law in March.

--Nel Cepeda/San Diego Union-Tribune

Out of a summit in Charlottesville, Va., in 1989, President Bush and the nation's governors set goals for schools to reach by 2000.

--AP/Wide World

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