

COMMENTARY

Campaign 2000

Notes to the Next President
On Education PolicyBy **Iris C. Rotberg**

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There is no shortage of rhetoric about the problems of U.S. education—nor do we lack proposed quick fixes. It has become fashionable to exaggerate the shortcomings of our education system. At the same time, we oversimplify the initiatives that are needed to address real problems. First, we should recognize that poverty and its associated societal problems overwhelm everything else as a contributor to low student achievement. That does not mean children from low-income families cannot achieve in school. Many overcome the odds and excel.

Nor does it mean educators should be relieved of the responsibility to provide these children with a quality educational experience. But the rhetoric about strengthening academic standards or holding teachers accountable for students' test scores will not counter the very high correlation between poverty and low achievement. That correlation is pervasive, both in the United States and in other countries. Less poverty, more than anything else, would translate into higher student achievement.

Second, we should direct federal education resources to the lowest-income school districts and schools:

- If federal resources were concentrated on the poorest schools, they would begin to address, if only in a small way, our major inequalities in school finance. The lowest-income children typically attend schools with the fewest resources. Moreover, a significant proportion of these resources is spent on security, social services, and maintaining deteriorating physical facilities, leaving less for instructional purposes. Federal funds, in turn, are too widely distributed to address the needs of low-income children. A substantial amount goes to affluent districts, thereby reducing the funding available for poorer districts. Additional funding for low-income districts would increase the opportunity to attract and retain highly qualified teachers and reduce school and class size. If money doesn't matter, affluent parents—who insist on expensive services in public schools and supplement those services with private

Continued on Page 51

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Continued from Page 72

contributions or pay high private school tuition—haven't heard the message.

• We should be realistic about what federal education programs can and cannot accomplish. The federal government currently accounts for only 7 percent of the approximately \$330 billion spent each year on public elementary and secondary schools. The United States has nearly 15,000 school districts. A federal program funded at \$200 million, for example, provides an average of less than \$14,000 per district, an amount that would not support even one additional half-time teacher for the entire district. Here, too, it would be wise to focus federal resources on a limited number of well-funded programs that serve schools and students with the greatest needs and avoid the proliferation of underfunded programs—each with its own bureaucracy and paperwork requirements—that promise more than they can achieve.

• The federal government also should ensure that its funding results in additional spending on education, that it is targeted to the intended beneficiaries, and that it does not supplant what otherwise would have been spent by states and localities. Federal programs can accomplish little if states and localities reduce overall education expenditures, or funding for low-income schools, by replacing their expenditures with federal grants.

Third, the American public should be given an accurate and realistic assessment of the current status of U.S. education and the public policies required to make a difference:

• Do not tell the public that our schools have failed or that student achievement has declined. Those conclusions are not supported by the evidence. Do not cite the findings of international test-score comparisons as an indicator of the success or failure of our schools. These studies are seriously flawed. They tell us little about the quality of education because countries differ substantially in a range of variables the international studies do not, and cannot, control—for example, student selectivity (overrepresentation in the sample of the highest-achieving students), the proportion of low-income students in the test-taking population, and the country's practice with respect to the inclusion or exclusion of low-achieving students, language-minority students, students with disabilities, vocational or apprenticeship programs, and

entire regions of the country.

• Do not assume that the latest quick fix will produce academic benefits. "Connecting" every student to the Internet or ending social promotion will do little to improve the overall quality of education. Moreover, we need a lot more evidence before we can conclude, for example, that charter schools will have a significant effect on student achievement, that they will, indeed, include "all" children, and that they can be staffed by an inexhaustible supply of qualified teachers. Or that vouchers (the code word is "free choice") can be financed in meaningful amounts and will result in an ever-expanding supply of private schools that offer high-quality education at modest tuition.

Perhaps most important, we need more information before we can be confident that charter schools and vouchers will *not* encourage racial, ethnic, and religious homogeneity within schools as well as increased isolation of language-minority children and children with disabilities.

• Do not accept the current conventional wisdom that states and school districts should hold teachers' "feet to the fire" in an

effort to raise students' standardized-test scores. Test-based accountability systems often do more harm than good because they establish counterproductive incentives. They turn schools into "cram courses" designed to raise test scores rather than to educate students; they encourage schools to assign children to special education programs in order to reduce the number of low-achieving chil-



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dren taking the test; and they are likely to discourage the most qualified teachers from remaining in the teaching profession, particularly in low-income districts. Moreover, even reported test-score gains, or losses, typi-

cally are spurious and do not tell us about the quality of a child's educational experience. They tell us instead about cramming, familiarity with the test, and, if we look behind the data, which students (low-achieving, special education, language-minority) do, or do not, take the test.

• Do not support education policies without assessing their potential impact on our ability to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers. If "reforms" are to strengthen education, they will need to contribute to a

ble for the broader problems in our society. One in five children lives in poverty. The aggregate income of the poorest 20 percent of U.S. households is one-third the aggregate income of the richest 1 percent. Given the high correlation between student performance and socioeconomic status, we should not blame teachers for the resulting educational problems.

We will not raise student achievement by substituting rhetoric for a realistic assessment of our educational problems and the policies that will

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school environment that attracts the best teachers. We will not attract these teachers if salaries are noncompetitive or if education policies create excessive or contradictory demands. Many teachers will move to schools with better working conditions or leave the teaching profession altogether. Our lowest-income children will be hurt the most.

• Do not hold schools responsi-

serve to address them. Proclamations that "all children can learn to a high level" will not make it happen and, instead, obscure the need for well-financed programs focused on the lowest-income school districts. We can begin by giving the American people accurate information about the major commitment needed to make a difference in students' academic achievement. ■