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INSTITUTE for EDUCATION POLICY STUDIES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the implications of the Bush Administration's education plan based on interviews conducted with leading policymakers, educators, and researchers. The plan was issued on January 26, 2001, in a document entitled *No Child Left Behind* (available at http://www.whitehouse.gov). Central to the document are proposals to increase the flexibility of federal programs, strengthen accountability for student performance, and offer school choice options. These proposals, in turn, are relevant to a set of key federal policy issues: (1) the purposes of federal aid to education; (2) the role of the federal government in promoting educational equity; (3) the level and type of federal control; (4) the amount, allocation, and targeting of funds; and (5) the contribution of federal programs to student achievement.

The purpose of the interviews was to provide information about both the potential benefits of the plan and problems that might arise. Respondents were asked their reasons for supporting or not supporting the plan as well as their views about the factors that might make a difference in the proposals' effectiveness. Using the theme of the document, "No Child Left Behind," the interviews focused on the proposals' effects on students from low-income families in terms of the level of education resources and the strength of academic programs available to these students.

The study was conducted by the Center for Curriculum, Standards, and Technology, Graduate School of Education and Human Development, The George Washington University. Graduate students carried out in-depth interviews as part of a course on federal education policy taught by the senior author. The 19 respondents were chosen from the federal government, education organizations, interest groups, research organizations, and universities. They were selected to represent a wide range of perspectives and views and to be highly knowledgeable about the key issues. The interviews were conducted in March and April 2001, a period during which Congress

had begun drafting legislation based on the Bush Administration proposals. The questions posed in the interviews focused on the proposals as they appeared in *No Child Left Behind*, although most also are relevant to the legislation currently under consideration by Congress.

The interviews addressed three key components of the plan:

- Reducing bureaucracy and increasing flexibility. The Bush Administration's proposal states:

  > States and school districts will be granted unprecedented flexibility by this proposal in how they may spend federal education funds. Accountability for student results is expected in return. . . Overlapping and duplicative categorical grant programs will be consolidated and sent to states and school districts. . . A charter option for states and districts committed to accountability and reform will be created. Under this program, charter states and districts would be freed from categorical program requirements in return for submitting a five-year performance agreement to the Secretary of Education and being subject to especially rigorous standards of accountability.

- Increasing accountability for student performance. The proposal states:

  > States, districts and schools that improve achievement will be rewarded. Failure will be sanctioned. Parents will know how well their child is learning, and that schools are held accountable for their effectiveness with annual state reading and math assessments in grades 3-8. . . . Under this proposal, a state's definition of adequate yearly progress must apply specifically to disadvantaged students, as well as to the overall student population. . . . Each state may select and design assessments of their choosing. In addition, a sample of students in each state will be assessed annually with the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 4th and 8th grade assessment in reading and math.

- Empowering parents. The proposal states:

  > Parents will have more information about the quality of their child's school.. Students in persistently low-performing schools will be given choice. . . . Schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress for disadvantaged students will first receive assistance, and then come under corrective action if they fail to make progress. If schools fail to make adequate yearly progress for three consecutive years, disadvantaged students may use Title I funds to transfer to a higher-performing public or private school, or receive supplemental educational services from a provider of choice. . . .[The proposal also] broadens education savings accounts. The amount of funding that can be contributed annually to these accounts will be increased to $5,000 and allowable uses of funds will be expanded to include education-related expenses in kindergarten through 12th grade.

The summary below presents the respondents' main conclusions about the plan's potential impact on the education of students from low-income families.

Proposal to Increase Flexibility

Respondents generally concluded that the Bush Administration's proposal for program consolidation, if applied to the smaller programs, could strengthen education in low-income communities because it would decrease the current fragmentation of education programs. It also would permit those closest to the situation to set priorities for the use of funds. Districts would not be required to use federal funds for a particular purpose—for example, to reduce class size—but instead would have the option of using the funds in other ways, perhaps to hire more qualified teachers, if they felt that would be more beneficial. One risk, however, would be that both total funding and targeting of funds to low-income communities might decline if federal education funds were combined into a block grant without specific targeting requirements. Therefore, most respondents recommended maintaining the separate identity of major programs like Title I to ensure that federal funds continued to serve students in high-poverty schools.

Many respondents also were concerned that low-income students would lose resources if proposals for flexibility led to the elimination of fiscal requirements, such as requirements with respect to supplanting and maintenance of effort. The elimination of these requirements could lead both to overall reductions in education spending as well as to reductions in the proportion of funds allocated to high-poverty schools. Some respondents cautioned, however, that the federal government should be sensitive to the burdens placed on districts and frame the requirements so that the time spent in meeting them did not detract from instructional needs.

Respondents differed in their assessments of the potential impact of increasing states' flexibility to determine the allocation of federal funds. Most respondents expressed concern that low-income communities would lose resources if states allocated funds. They noted that the main purpose of federal funding was to increase educational equity, but states did not have a good record of getting funds to low-income communities because of political pressures to distribute funds widely. Other respondents, however, argued that states' priorities had changed since the original Title I legislation, and many now "led" the federal government. These respondents felt that states should set the criteria for funds distribution because they were closer to the situation and therefore better able to assess their own needs.

Proposal for Test-Based Accountability

Respondents described both the potential advantages and disadvantages of the Bush Administration's proposal for test-based accountability. Indeed, many of the respondents did not believe the proposal was either clearly positive or negative but instead pointed out the tradeoffs, the importance of proceeding cautiously, and the conditions that would need to be in place for the proposals to make a contribution to education equity. Whether

or not they supported test-based accountability, respondents generally concluded that any successes it might have would depend on whether states and districts could meet a set of conditions—aligning standards, curricula, and tests; administering high-quality diagnostic tests; ensuring that teachers were well qualified; and providing adequate resources. Respondents felt that few communities currently met these requirements.

Respondents who generally supported the test-based accountability proposal felt that it would strengthen the education of low-income students. First, requirements for testing and reporting disaggregated scores would increase the visibility of educational disparities and, in turn, the likelihood that schools and children that had previously been ignored would receive attention and resources. Second, the focus and structure provided by the tests, along with associated standards, would be particularly helpful both to low-achieving students and to teachers who had received inadequate training or were teaching out of field. Finally, the use of NAEP would encourage states with low standards to increase expectations for student achievement and to align their standards more closely with NAEP.

Other respondents, however, believed that the test-based accountability requirements would be more likely to weaken than to strengthen academic programs for low-income students. They were concerned that schools would teach to the test, thereby narrowing the curriculum and focusing on rote learning. Students, particularly those in high-poverty schools with inadequate resources, would have less time to spend on subject matters that were not tested. The most "intellectually alive" and creative teachers, in turn, would be discouraged from entering and remaining in the profession because they would be relegated to "delivering a script." Students in high-poverty schools would bear the greatest burden of the accountability requirements because their schools are under the most pressure to raise test scores. A focus on test scores also might increase the gap if students in high-poverty schools were expected to meet the requirements without at the same time being given adequate resources and learning opportunities. Moreover, the tests would provide a limited and sometimes misleading indicator of the quality of education because the scores would reflect a range of other factors, including poverty, inadequate resources, measurement error, selection of students to participate in the test, and teaching to the test.

Proposal for Vouchers

Respondents who supported the voucher proposal felt that the public schools in low-income communities were not working and, therefore, it was important to try something different. Vouchers could contribute to educational equity by giving some students an alternative. Even if the Bush Administration's proposals did not cover the costs of private schooling, they could benefit students by paying for tutoring and other supplemental programs and at the same time give parents a chance to be involved in their children's education. Vouchers also might encourage additional philanthropic giving to support scholarships. However, one respondent (who supports choice programs generally) felt that the current proposal for supplemental services was essentially giving up on schools and instead offering students a clearly unsatisfactory alternative.

Most respondents concluded that the voucher proposal was unlikely to have a positive impact on educational equity, either because it was too small to make a difference or because it would weaken education for many students in low-income communities. The respondents felt that it was unrealistic to expect either the voucher or the savings plan to enable many low-income students to attend private schools. Vouchers would not cover the costs of most private schools, and private schools would not have spaces available for, or would not accept, many of the students who were eligible for voucher programs. Moreover, the savings plan would not help low-income families, because they do not pay taxes. Therefore, both the voucher and savings plans would primarily subsidize only those families who already had some money for private education.

Respondents had mixed views about whether the voucher plan would weaken public schools. Some felt that it would be too small to make a difference because it could serve relatively few students. Others felt that vouchers would be detrimental to public schools because the schools would lose resources and political support. They also were concerned that vouchers would weaken public schools because the schools would lose higher-achieving students to private schools and, therefore, the students not wanted by private schools "would be left behind" in public schools.

The Broader Context

Several respondents commented that the Bush Administration's proposals could have only a minimal impact on educational equity because they would be overwhelmed by large school finance inequities and by decisions about total federal spending. Respondents also emphasized that federal expenditures for education are a very small proportion of total spending on education. The federal government provides less than 7% of total funding for elementary and secondary education; therefore, federal programs cannot compensate for the fact that students in low-income communities have fewer resources devoted to their education than do students in more affluent areas. Respondents described the importance of reducing school finance inequities and increasing federal funding for programs like Title I in order to strengthen education in low-income communities.

They also stressed that "massive interventions" were required to make significant improvements in education in low-income communities. While respondents had different views about the specific steps that should be taken, they generally concluded that more comprehensive approaches were needed. Some felt that the focus should be on a choice program that was broader in scope than that proposed by the Bush Administration. Others suggested large-scale economic investments in education or focused on the high correlation between educational problems and poverty and recommended major interventions to address problems of poverty.