

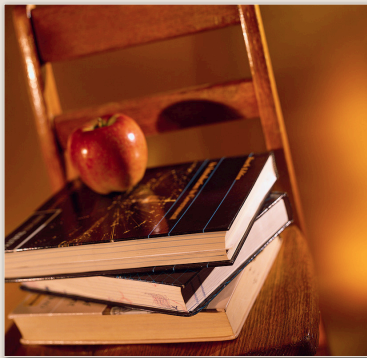
Four Failed Federal Education Reforms

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Over the years, federal funding of primary and secondary education has increased, while students' academic performance has flatlined. For instance, the high school reading and math scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress show that student performance has remained flat for the past 20 years [see Figure I].



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Recent education reform initiatives by several administrations produced, at best, minimal improvements in student performance at a high price to taxpayers. Given its track record, the federal government should get out of the education business.

Federal Education Funding

Federal education funding comes in several forms. While most federal funds go to the states (a total of \$37 billion in 2015) for K-12 school districts, \$4 billion is devoted to special projects such as educational reforms through initiatives.¹ Though federal money is only 11 percent of total spending on public schools, it comes with a host of strings attached.²

Federal spending on elementary and secondary education more than doubled from 1995 to 2003, with a large increase in funding for initiatives such as No Child Left Behind in 2003 [see Figure II]:

- Federal funding for elementary and secondary education more than doubled from \$15 billion in 1995 to \$35 billion in 2003, and education initiative funding more than doubled from \$2 billion in 2001 to \$7 billion in 2003.
- Total federal education funding increased from \$42 billion a year in 2001 to \$63 billion in 2003.³
- Education initiative spending peaked at 20 percent of total federal spending on elementary and secondary education and dropped to 10 percent by 2015.

Both overall funding for elementary and secondary education, as well as spending on education initiatives, began to drop after 2005 due to factors such as the Great Recession of 2007.

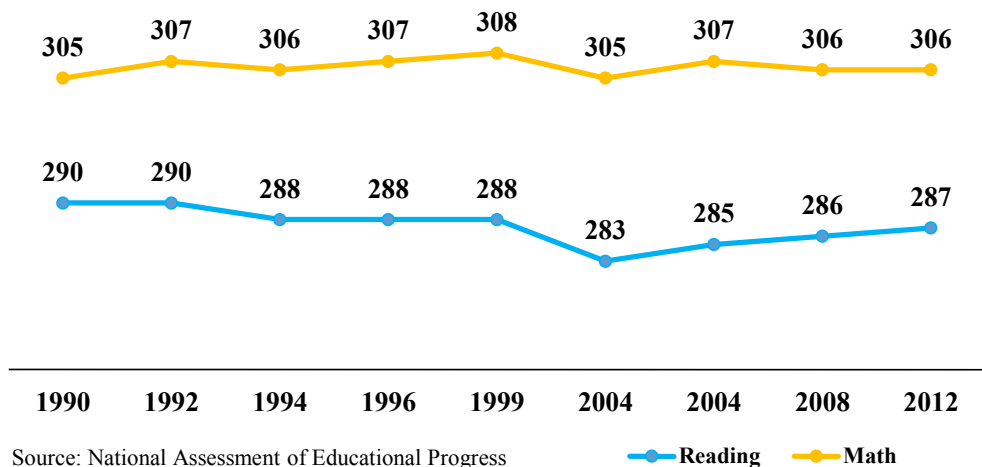
Four Federal Initiatives

The four most recent federal education reform initiatives include “Goals 2000” of the Clinton administration, “No Child Left Behind” of the Bush administration, and “Race to the Top” and “Common Core” of the Obama administration.

Goals 2000. Though Goals 2000 was presented to the states as a program in which they could “voluntarily” participate, opting out meant passing up

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Figure I
High School Reading and Math NAEP Scores
 (Scale range: 0 to 500)



states lost ground on a couple of goals, including teacher quality and school safety. The program was scrapped by Congress and essentially replaced by No Child Left Behind (NCLB).⁵

No Child Left Behind. The 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, No Child Left Behind, expanded the federal role in public education through further emphasis on annual testing, annual academic progress, report cards and teacher qualifications, as well as significant increases in funding.

No Child Left Behind assumed that boosting test scores should be the primary goal of schools,

significant federal funds. The federal government invested over \$500 million into the program before funding was cut off.

Some of the overly ambitious goals included that by the year 2000:

- All children in America will start school ready to learn.
- The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.
- American students will be first in the world in science and mathematics achievement.
- Every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
- Every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.

However, the states found quite a few mandates hidden in the small print, including such requirements as: submitting grant proposals and “improvement plans” for the U.S. Secretary of Education’s approval; penalties for failing to comply with their own improvement plans; and coordinating their Goals 2000 efforts with School-to-Work and other social reform programs.⁴

None of the goals were met by the year 2000 and the

an approach that has not improved education when implemented by individual states. Widespread school “failure” was an inevitable outcome of NCLB’s one-size-fits-all design because of rigid “adequate yearly progress” provisions, which set unrealistic goals for academic gains, punished diversity and ignored measurement error.

The NCLB requirement that limited English proficient students score “proficient” on English exams was self-contradictory, as was the provision that most children with special needs demonstrate competency in the same manner as other students. Education was damaged as students were coached to pass tests rather than taught a rich curriculum to prepare them for life in the 21st century. NCLB severely damaged educational quality and equity, with its narrowing and limiting effects falling most severely on the poor. NCLB failed to significantly increase average academic performance or narrow demographic achievement gaps.⁶

No Child Left Behind’s reliance on one-size-fits-all testing, labeling and sanctioning schools undermined many education reform efforts. As a result, many schools, particularly those serving low-income students, have become little more than test-preparation programs.

Race to the Top. The federal government has offered grants through Race to the Top (RTTT) or so-called Flexibility Waivers under NCLB, School Improvement Grants and various other programs to push states, districts

and schools to line up behind policies that use these same test scores in high-stakes evaluations of teachers and principals, in addition to the NCLB focus on schools.⁷

President Obama's 2009 Race to the Top initiative dedicated over \$4 billion to 19 states that created robust plans to address four key areas of K-12 education reform, including:⁸

- Adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy;
- Building data systems that measure student growth and success, and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction;
- Recruiting, developing, rewarding and retaining effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most; and
- Turning around the lowest-achieving schools.

States have focused heavily on developing teacher evaluation systems based on student test scores, but not nearly as much on using the evaluations to improve instruction. By 2012, states were largely behind schedule in meeting goals for improving instruction and school and educational outcomes. Many states were experiencing substantial setbacks due to unrealistic promises and unexpected challenges.⁹

Common Core's relationship with the federal government is a result of President Obama's Race to the Top initiative.¹⁰

Common Core. Common Core math and English standards were released in 2010 and implemented by many states in 2014. However, of the states that adopted and have been implementing the standards, 14 are downgrading their participation or withdrawing from national tests designed around the standards. Texas, Alaska, Nebraska and Virginia outright rejected the

Figure II
Federal Spending on Elementary and Secondary Education
(in billions of dollars)



standards from the beginning. Indiana, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Louisiana and Ohio have withdrawn. Since adopting the standards, Massachusetts has suspended implementation of the standards and other states are also taking steps to withdraw.¹¹

Two multistate testing groups — the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) — received \$360 million in taxpayer funds to create Common-Core-compliant tests.¹² But there are growing concerns over the program, such as the cost and classroom time consumed by state tests.

Several states recently decided to use alternative tests and withdraw from the Smarter Balanced and PARCC programs.¹³ Kansas withdrew from the Smarter Balanced group and plans to use tests from the University of Kansas instead and in 2014 Alaska announced that it will do the same. Florida has also withdrawn from PARCC and is looking at alternative testing options. Alabama, Georgia and Oklahoma withdrew from the program in the summer of 2013 and Pennsylvania plans to use its own state tests instead.¹⁴

Originally, 31 states were members of SBAC; now it only has 18 member states. PARCC started out with 25 states and the District of Columbia. It is now down to 11 and D.C. — with Arkansas, Mississippi and Ohio officially set to leave even that small group in 2016. PARCC is also possibly on the ropes in Massachusetts.¹⁵ Adding to the testing woes are massive opt-outs (students

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refusing to take the test) in New York and, to a lesser extent in other states, and states falsely inflating testing results and school performance.

The backlash against Common Core has grown steadily since states first implemented the initiative, and now even teachers' unions are withdrawing their support. Common Core is also losing public support, according to the latest *Education Next* poll, which found public support dropping from 65 percent in 2013 to 49 percent in 2015. Among teachers, support for Common Core fell from 76 percent to 40 percent, with 50 percent now opposing.¹⁶

Conclusion

Federal education reforms have failed to achieve their goals and failed to have a positive impact on education performance. Perhaps their failure was due to lack of funding or poor execution, but the fact remains that these excuses are made over and over again on both the federal and state level without significant improvement. Despite the federal government's valiant attempts, a universal national curriculum leaves too many students behind.

A single, unachievable standard ends up making struggling students a problem that ultimately the economy inherits. No matter how well the government makes plans to properly fund and operate an education program, it will never meet the standard and success of a private, free market system of education.

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Notes

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