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Correcting the Record: Understanding the History of Federal Intervention and Failure in Securing U.S. Educational Reform

MATTHEW J. HIRSCHLAND
and SVEN STEINMO

The authors show here that contrary to popular rhetoric, at an early stage the American federal government demonstrated remarkable influence over national education policy. This occurred in spite of the fact that the political institutions of the national government were fragmented and poorly organized to accomplish such goals. In this light, the authors' focus is on how late-19th-century developments set the tone and impediments for meaningful educational reform that carry over through today. The historical development of American education detailed here traces the roots of the ongoing policy tug-of-war between localism and national progressive goals that characterize contemporary reform efforts. Ironically, it is its early roots as the premier educational resource provider that has ultimately contributed to the greatly diminished role of the U.S. federal government in education today. This is a legacy that policy makers, parents, and educators are wise to understand but often neglect as they craft reform.

Keywords: *education policy; education reform; education finance*

THE U.S. GOVERNMENT'S contemporary approach to education policy is often awkward and incoherent. Examples drawn from the headlines provide rich evidence of this fact: "Our goal is nothing less than a renaissance in

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American education. . . We will *abolish* the Department of Education, end Federal meddling in our schools, and promote family choice at all levels of learning” (excerpt from the 1996 Republican Party Platform). “The new role of the federal government is to set high standards, provide resources, hold people accountable, and liberate school districts to meet the standards” (President George W. Bush at the signing of the “No Child Left Behind” Education Reform Act, January 8, 2002).

In this article, we demonstrate that this struggle over the appropriate federal role in educational provision has been with us since the founding of the American republic. From the time of the Founding Fathers, America has witnessed waves of reform efforts in which political elites at the national level have attempted to improve the quality and delivery of education across the country. We argue that the waves are the product of the compromise found in America between the country’s basic democratic and egalitarian principles on one hand, and its localist and republican institutions on the other. The result is that American education policy at the national level ends up characterized by a type of national schizophrenia rather than a coherent and stable public policy. With this in mind, the work here seeks to provide a better, historical understanding of when policy windows for meaningful national reform arise and to provide a realistic, albeit pessimistic, assessment of the prospects for federally mandated educational policy change in the United States.

CORRECTING THE RECORD

It is rather clichéd to suggest that education plays a prominent role in “The American Dream,” but one would find few sentiments suggesting the contrary. At its very core, this public philosophy holds that everyone should be offered the chance to “get ahead.” Virtually everyone in America agrees that a good education is an essential foundation for success in terms of the material, social, and civic aspects of American life. Even though Americans appear to be somewhat uncomfortable with this idea’s outwardly redistributive public policies, they very strongly support policies that help foster a society of “equal opportunity.” No single domain of public authority is more closely tied to this concept.¹ On one hand, this country has some of the best educational institutions found anywhere in the world. At the same time, many of our schools are grossly inadequate, underfunded, and seemingly hopeless institutions.² As such, in account after account, America fails to fulfill this dream for many of its citizens.

Rather than simply the product of culture, class, or racial divisions, these contradictory and often disheartening educational outcomes occur as a

product of the basic institutional fragmentation of American politics in its federalized form. Throughout U.S. history, this fragmentation has often resulted in the empowerment of localist and reactionary interests who fear reform efforts because they correctly understand them as attempts to challenge and change existing structures of American society (Potter, 1972; Quadagno, 1988; Smith, 1993). Failure to understand this fundamental aspect of American educational politics as a product of American governing institutions often dooms education reform efforts—like the most recent legislation by the current administration—before they even begin.

The work here also seeks to correct an important myth embedded in much of the contemporary and popular rhetoric surrounding educational policy. This is the notion that characterizes education as always having been a strictly “local issue.” There is little doubt that localism as a fixture of American education has been a strength, providing a multitude of educational approaches and policy innovations crucial to the nation’s dynamism. Yet at times, strong national policies on behalf of educational provision and reform have been required to make right the great inefficiencies and inequities promulgated by this very localism. In fact, we find that early on, the country’s enormous resource wealth (specifically land) concentrated in the hands of the central government offered national progressive elites a powerful means of shaping the development of American educational policy and provision at all levels. This occurred in such a way that reformers could achieve many of their goals *despite* this country’s federally structured system of governance that gives tremendous control to localities.

It was only after the depletion of this unique federal resource was complete that the central government’s role in educational policy truly became enfeebled, allowing more reactionary, localist tendencies to dominate and often veto educational policy change thrust on them from above. In sum, we demonstrate how the U.S. central government has been active from early on in education policy for relatively short periods and in times of crisis, but nonetheless involved in powerful ways. For reform entrepreneurs to act effectively, a better understanding of this history is necessary. Most important, the findings here call into serious doubt the most recent educational reforms that emanate solely from the federal government in the form of legislation as well as the hopes for any meaningful impact without dramatic attendant increases in resource provision that also emanate from the American federal government.

To accomplish these tasks, this article is organized in the following manner: In Part I, we briefly examine the historical roots of early American thinking on the subject of education. We demonstrate that although not explicitly codified in the structure of the new government, many early American

statesmen argued for a special state role for education in securing the success of the new republic. We then chronicle some of the early failures but especially the increasing successes that characterized a powerful federal intervention in educational provision throughout much of the 19th century.

In Part 2, we focus specifically on those late-19th-century developments that set the tone for the system of education inherited today and that herald in a greatly diminished federal role. It is during the period of the American Civil War that earlier regional differences are exacerbated in such a way that they come to force a change in both federal policy and states' attitudes toward intervention in their educational affairs.

Each aspect of the development of American education detailed herein illustrates the ongoing tug-of-war between localism and national progressive goals that continue to define the schizophrenic nature of this country's educational system. Ironically, it is its early roots as the premier educational resource provider that has ultimately contributed to the greatly diminished role of the U.S. central state in educational matters in later periods. Failing to recognize and understand the federal government's profound and early role in shaping and extending mass public education in America disadvantages modern day reformers who would seek to reextend the national agenda into this policy arena.

PART 1

Creating Americans and Men of Commerce

At the conclusion of the American Revolution, education was certainly not the first item of business for those who wished to construct a unified nation and the Constitution by which to guide it. As has often been noted, the U.S. Constitution was a compromise between a wide set of interests and ideals (Bailyn, 1968; Jillson, 1992; McDonald, 1963; Wood, 1969). In many ways, the United States itself can be seen as a compromise between two competing ideas: the notion of an egalitarian democratic republic versus the idea of a commercially advancing empire. But it is important to note that many of America's Founding Fathers were critically concerned with education and its role in helping them build a new nation and a new people. Although education was more widespread in many parts of North America than in Europe at this time, there were massive disparities in the character, quality, and distribution of educational resources across the ex-colonies (a situation not dramatically different than the predicament we find ourselves in today).

As a result, many of the founders themselves took an early and active role in pushing education as crucial to the success of the new nation. Their

arguments were both practical and philosophical. For example, very early on, Benjamin Franklin believed that the study of commerce, invention, manufacturers, and trade would be not only complimentary to the learning of citizen virtue and duty but would also “be of great Use to them whether they are Merchants, Handicrafts, or Divines” (Pangle & Pangle, 1993, pp. 85-86). It was also widely argued that this new kind of policy required a type of active citizenry that, in Aristotle’s mold, were able to rule and be ruled.

As a result, both Franklin and James Madison were early and vocal supporters of some form of public funding for the purpose of education (Good, 1960; Pangle & Pangle, 1993). These and other prominent American leaders attempted to push their reform ideas during the Constitutional Convention but their ideas fell flat against the fear that the national government was already gaining too much power. Indeed, it now seems apparent that the federal government’s meddling in the social affairs of the various states was precisely the kind of intervention that some of the more hesitant members of the Convention were most concerned about. Thus, the Constitution itself does not explicitly mention education, save through the perhaps oblique reference found in the 10th Amendment which dictates that all powers not specifically granted to the national government should remain under the domain of the states.

The failure to establish a national system of education at the founding did not, however, convince the early American leadership to let the issue die out. On the contrary, a number of America’s most prominent leaders continued to propagandize actively. In 1790, the publication of Noah Webster’s famous essay, “On the Education of Youth in America” reminded the new leadership,

You have an empire to raise and support by your exertions and a national character to establish and extend by your wisdom and virtues. To effect these great objects, it is necessary to frame a liberal plan of policy and build it upon a broad system of education. (Cremin, 1980, p. 3)³

According to Bailyn (1968), many leaders of the day held the conviction that “only an informed, alert, intelligent, and uncorrupted electorate would preserve the freedoms of a republican state” (p. 379). Still, in the absence of a constitutional mandate, these leaders were forced to focus their attention at the state level where they could more likely gain successes.

Of course, the U.S. national Constitution was not the only basic law penned during and immediately after the Revolutionary War. Many state constitutions, especially in the North, contained language *mandating* the establishment of schools in each town. As noted, much of the leadership in the country at this time saw the value of expanding education and helped to

facilitate it during this period. Some in the South, on the other hand, had a quite different attitude toward mass education. Indeed, most southern state constitutions provided only vague or tepid language urging the creation of a formal system of schooling in their founding documents.⁴ Many states were especially hostile to any educational plan or design that might, in any way or form, contribute to the education of Blacks. In 1823, for example, a White reverend by the name of Dougherty had his Sunday call for the creation of Black schools rewarded by a mob that set on him. On finding the reverend, he was “dragged from his pulpit, down to the pump where he was thrown in the trough” (Bowen, 1981, p. 280).

In fact, in most southern states the educating of Blacks was a crime punishable by fines, jail, or both. Even in Virginia—despite the early leadership of Thomas Jefferson—teaching a Black to read or write yielded a \$50 fine and/or 2 months in jail.⁵ Perhaps this was because, as Monroe (1940) noted, “the aristocratic character of society prevailing throughout the early United States was more influential in the South because of large land holdings, the dominance of the landed aristocracy in politics, and the system of slavery” (p. 217). At any rate, it is clear that southern hostility to these progressive ideals and indeed their fear of northern “meddling” in their “internal affairs” generally were key components of the “states’ rights” arguments that nearly undermined the federal project at its very inception. One should not be surprised, then, that because educational mandates were left to localities, the South quickly fell far behind the North in terms of educational provision for Whites as well as Blacks.

Land and the Politics of Education

Although education is scarcely mentioned in the federalist papers and although Madison and his allies quickly dropped their arguments for a national educational system during the constitutional debates, one should not conclude that a national education policy was therefore off the agenda. Quite the contrary, even before the Constitution was signed, America’s nascent central government, the Continental Congress, made its first foray into the provision of education. Although this institution was a weak government by any measure, it did manage to agree to policies that would promote and support public education for many generations to come. The Northwest Ordinance (May 20, 1785) mandated that “there shall be reserved the lot No. 16 of every township, for the maintenance of public schools, within the said township” (Tyack, James, & Benavot, 1987, p. 31).⁶ The ordinance marked the beginning of a pattern in which the U.S. central state supported the provision and finance of public education in a way that is at once decisive and at the same time hidden. This pattern of land transfer from federal to state

governments in support of public education would later be expanded again and again in response for more resources in support of education to total more than 77 million acres of land by the end of the 19th century.⁷ By 1854 alone and according to government records, these transfers for educational purposes totaled much more than 52 million acres (Tyack et al., 1987).

Although still a few years before successful ratification of the Constitution, the groundwork provided by the ordinance clearly demonstrates the commitment of the founding elite in favor of supporting education. Although a widespread system of free education did not commence on a large scale for some years to come, the seeds for its growth were most certainly planted along with a commitment and recognition by the central state of the important role that such an institution would play in the successful development of the nation.

Shortcomings of the State Experience and the First Crises

By 1820, 10 new states had been added to the original 13. Each, to varying degrees, had incorporated language in their constitutions paying at least some attention to the provision of education.⁸ Some of the larger cities, particularly in the Northeast, had also begun the establishment of school districts headed by school boards but struggled continuously with the funding for these institutions. To fund their schools, states appropriated funds from their own treasuries, but funding was erratic and public education was by no means widespread. Rural education was still largely provided by church organizations.

Much like today, the battles over school funds that came directly from state coffers were contentious and provided inconsistent funding both in annual terms and cross-regionally. In most cases, it would be the land given over by the federal government that provided the monies used to establish or maintain permanent school funds.⁹ It is during this period that we begin to see the first real use and dependence on federally granted lands for the provision of education and, therefore, the expansion of the role of the federal government in education.

As a result of this wrangling over educational funds in the state-guided system, educational provision during the end of the 1700s and early decades of the 1800s tended to be spotty and fragile. The United States, however, was *not* in educational dire straits. Although measures of literacy for this period do not exist, proxy measures for the degree of education can be employed. For example, the United States led the world in terms of printed periodicals per capita. The population of the United States in 1810 was 7,224,000 and was served by nearly 360 periodicals with a circulation of more than 22 million. It was not until 1827 that Great Britain, with a population of more than

Table 1
Comparative Illiteracy 1850

<i>Country</i>	<i>Total Population^a</i>	<i>Illiteracy Rate (%)</i>
United States	23,191,876	10-15 ^b
Germany	35,409,000	20
Sweden	3,483,000	10
France	34,907,000	40-45
England and Wales	17,773,000	30-33
Italy	23,900,000	75-80
Spain	14,500,000	75
Russian Empire	56,882,000	90-95

a. All figures taken from Cipolla (1969, p. 115), except U.S. figures taken from Cremin (1980).

b. This number represents the U.S. White population only.

23 million, saw 438 newspapers and other periodicals. By 1828, with a population of only 12 million, the United States was served by more than 850 newspapers and periodicals.¹⁰ These numbers strongly suggest that even at this early time, the United States possessed a more literate population vis-à-vis other nations—a trend that would come to characterize the educational attainment of the United States more and more as the century wore on (see Table 1 for a comparison of illiteracy rates among other “great powers” in 1850).

Commercialization, Continental Expansion, and Immigration

The 1830s were witness to fundamental and powerful social and economic changes in the young nation. With these changes, demands for a greater role of public education reemerged. The rise of the factory in the northern states and the shift of workers from the farm to the city were under way. In 1810, less than a score of cotton mills dotted the landscape of the North. By 1830, the number had grown to about 800, and by 1840 the number was closer to 1,300 (Meyer, 1967).

As Bowles and Gintis (1976) and Barrow (1992) have shown, a more educated workforce was thought necessary to help the nation face the demands of industrial commercialization and continental expansion. In 1830, only about 7% of the U.S. population of 12.8 million lived in the country’s urban centers. However, conditions were beginning to grow worse for these nearly 1 million individuals living in the cities. In particular, the condition of the uneducated under these circumstances was particularly dire, and many came to view westward migration as the best escape from their conditions in the East. This exodus toward the West raised the concerns of the establishment¹¹ that clearly understood the need for workers in the booming commercial centers.

In response to these pressures and demands, this period saw the beginning of the so-called common school movement. *Common school* is the name given to the establishment of the system of public schools, funded by the collection of local taxes specifically for that purpose—the more formal roots of the system inherited today. The movement for common schools was largely a response to ensure greater equity and consistency in the quality of education that sporadic funding and the varying efforts of private education could not guarantee (Messerli, 1972). The movement received its greatest push from the demands for more workers with basic skills to fill factory jobs as a means to assimilate newcomers to the cities and a way to provide continued opportunity for growth (on the eastern seaboard) through education to stem the population flow to the West.¹²

By 1837, the complaints over education from local and state authorities reached the point that Congress moved to distribute the surplus monies taken in by the federal government back to the states. Although the money was not expressly earmarked for education, it was well understood that it would play a large role in its provision. Congress eventually turned over \$28 million to the states in the form of loans, which were never recalled and where “all but four of the states used this income from part or all of this ‘loan’ to support common schools, indicating the high priority which states placed on education” (Tyack et al., 1987, p. 36). The role of the American central state as benefactor of education, couched within its policy of land management and the distribution of the proceeds from the sales of federal lands and fiscal surplus, was once again gaining steam. This occurred in spite of the fact that no constitutional provision had been made for our “weak” federal government to act on its behalf.

Immigrants and the Making of Americans

In addition to the early commercialization of the 1820s and 1830s and to staff the ever-growing numbers of enterprises this era gave rise to, America encouraged its first great immigration.¹³ In just a 30-year period (1820 to 1850), the population of the United States grew from 9.6 million to more than 23 million people, much of this number being made up of immigrants and their children (DeBow, 1970). Given vast areas of open land in the expanding United States, this population growth was easily absorbed. However, the cities again felt the initial brunt of this tremendous immigrant influx. The call arose for an increase in the role of education to help assimilate and Americanize these masses. The sentiments of Calvin Stowe of Ohio were typical. He warned teachers that, “It is altogether essential to our national strength and peace, if not even to our national existence, that the foreigners who settle on our

soil, should cease to be Europeans and become Americans“ (Tyack et al., 1987, p. 36).

Yet even with the rise of the local, tax-supported school, the funding supplied by the American government's gifting of land still formed a large part of the funding for education. As subsequent congressional actions would prove, the central state would again assert its leadership role in addressing the social and economic dislocation of a rapidly expanding republic. Among these central state moves was the gifting in 1841 of 500,000 acres to *each* of 8 states, later extended to a total of 19 states. These lands were to be used for "internal improvements," but, as Senator McRoberts of Illinois commented on the floor of the U.S. Senate during the debates over this land grant (*The Congressional Globe*, of the First Session of the Twenty-Seventh Congress),

The greatest privation in the new Territories is the want of schools. A sparse population cannot provide the means of education. It is in the infancy of society . . . that public aid in providing means to educate the children of the country is most needed. (p. 309)

In their survey of land and its role in educational provision, Tyack et al. (1987) noted of this 1841 gift that again, "a majority of these states devoted part or all of the income from these lands to schools" (p. 34).

In 1848, Congress mandated that Land Section 36 (in addition to the earlier earmarked Section 16) be added to the federal survey allotment of land to the states provided in the Ordinance of 1785 for the sole support of education. As a result, California, the first state to benefit under this provision, received what amounted to a staggering 5.5% of the public domain in the state from the federal government solely for the support of education! The states of the American Southwest (Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico) each received a total of *four* sections per survey plot, making their relative take even greater (Tyack et al., 1987).

Even with the mismanagement of these lands by the various states acknowledged (Swift, 1911), the federal government's contribution to and direction of the provision of education and its funding can scarcely be underemphasized. With these lands, the federal government inserted itself into the process of educational provision and funding in a massive way. This funding came especially during those times of social and economic strain when individual state action alone could simply not cope. As noted earlier, by 1854, more than 52 million acres of federal land passed to the states. Valuations of this land peg it at between \$1.25 and \$8.00 per acre (Tyack et al., 1987, p. 41). Erring on the conservative side and splitting the difference by using the mean per acre valuation of \$4.63 at the time, these 52 million acres

Table 2
Whole Amount of Lands Appropriated by the Federal Government for Educational Purposes, to January 1, 1854

<i>State and Territory</i>	<i>For Schools</i>	<i>For Universities</i>
State		
Ohio	704,488	23,040
Iowa	905,144	46,080
Indiana	650,317	23,040
Wisconsin	958,648	46,080
Illinois	978,755	23,040
California	6,719,324	46,080
Alabama	902,774	23,040
Tennessee	—	3,553,824 ^a
Mississippi	837,584	23,040
Territory		
Michigan	1,067,397	46,080
Minnesota	5,089,224	—
Arkansas	886,460	46,080
Oregon	12,140,907	46,080
Florida	908,503	46,080
New Mexico	7,493,120	—
Missouri	1,199,139	23,040
Utah	6,681,707	—
Louisiana	786,044	46,080
Total acres	48,909,535	4,060,704

Source. DeBow (1854, p. 146). Reprinted in DeBow (1970).

a. The vacant lands in Tennessee, amounting to 3,553,824 acres, were granted to the state provided that \$40,000 of the proceeds, if they amounted to so much, be applied to establish and support a college.

that the federal government had turned over by 1854 alone equated to more than \$240,760,000 gifted to the states in support of education by 1854.¹⁴ See Table 2 for land granted by state.

These numbers in both raw dollar terms and land acres are undeniably impressive when compared to estimates made by scholars on what have been identified as remarkably high U.S. contributions to other state-building activities compared to its European counterparts. Dobbin (1998, p. 17) identified federal government contributions to railroad building in the United States at \$504 million by 1872. The total end-of-the-century figure of 77 million acres of land gifted by the U.S. central state to the several states in support of education can be valued using the same criteria from above at more than \$356 million; other measures have this total valuation up to much more than \$763 million in federal support.¹⁵ Although we know that not all funds went directly to education, it is clear that this remarkable transfer of wealth most certainly

funded the growth of education when the states were unable to effectively do so by themselves.

We have not been able to find any evidence suggesting that educational progressives favored these massive transfers of wealth as the *best* means for promoting American education. Indeed, the critiques of the inequities in American education as a product of regional differences and their focus on the needs of the urban poor were problems clearly not well handled through the land grant system. But a more coherent and targeted national strategy ran afoul of the states' rights arguments, which were increasingly potent in the years leading up to the Civil War. Yet in a pattern seen repeatedly in American educational policy history, national reform advocates adapted their strategies to the constitutional system they lived within. Unable to win a national plan, reformers made the best of the resources they had available. And as we have demonstrated, a tremendous amount of land was available and put to use in support of education.

PART 2

The Waning of the Great Land Grant Era: The Morrill Land Grant Colleges and the Civil War

The onset of the American Civil War has been characterized as the beginning of accelerated growth in the power of the American federal government (Bensel, 1990; Skowronek, 1982). This period also represents the era of the last great grants of land to the states on behalf of education by the federal government. In the years leading up to the war, the southern states had turned increasingly hostile to the continued influence and perceived intrusion exerted by Washington, DC in issuing land even for the seemingly benevolent use of education. Thus, the last great transfer of federal lands on behalf of higher education came shortly *after* the secession of the southern states, when their approval was no longer necessary for such a provision to pass in the Congress. This land transfer came in the form of the 1862 Morrill Act. The act gave 30,000 acres of land to each state for each senator and representative in Congress as provided by the 1860 census (*The Congressional Globe*, June 17, 1862, p. 2770). According to Williams (1991), the land provided by the act was to be used to establish colleges whose curriculum focused on the teaching of military tactics (in the wake of the lessons of the first Battle of Bull Run), agriculture, and engineering (in response to heightened European competition in these arenas).

Support for the act was generated by a number of factors, some of which concerned the war. Others were political and economic and concerned the

continued maintenance and growth of a knowledgeable industrial class that could effectively allow America to compete in both agriculture and industry with a quickly rising Europe. Williams (1991), quoting Eddy (1957) in his comprehensive study of the Morrill Act, noted,

Certainly the urge to provide a practical and, especially liberal education for the industrial classes was salient, as this constituency comprised 80 percent of the population. . . . But other factors entered the picture: the inability of the newer states to provide such colleges without federal help . . . concern over the rapid dissipation of public lands to private interests, such as railroads; concern over soil deterioration and waste; the competition from Europe's agricultural and industrial movements, and the fear that the United States should not fall behind. (p. 39)

With the initial opposition from the southern states that had helped to defeat similar earlier efforts removed by their secession, the bill passed the Senate by a vote of 32 to 7 and was followed by passage in the House with a margin of 90 to 25. It was signed into law by President Lincoln on July 2, 1862 (Williams, 1991).

Reconstruction and Education Policy Redirection

One might have expected, in the wake of the Civil War and the clear needs for financial assistance on the part of the war-torn states, that the federal government would redouble its aid for education in America. But on the contrary, the federal role in education during Reconstruction was largely rebuked. Whereas in previous times of crisis the central state responded by supporting education with large tracts of land, in the post-Civil War era such efforts were stymied. Why? With only minor successes to note, this period begins a states' rights backlash that, predicated on the strength of the earlier endowments to education, has come to largely signify the federal-to-state relationship over education ever since. At bottom, the American central government had little to give in the way of educational resources. This was coupled with the fact that in most cases, states simply did not want or need federal intervention or support on this front. We see here also how antiegalitarian and reactionary forces of the south used their reinstated power at the national level as a barricade against the social and political reform agenda of the progressive reformers from the North and East.

The war had freed more than 4 million Blacks, and, for progressives, the task of assimilating and educating these people was of paramount importance. But for southern elites, the very idea of educating former slaves was an anathema. Some successful federal interventions on behalf of education during the immediate postwar period do, however, stand out. These successes,

like the Morrill Act before them, can be largely explained by the suspension of the southern congressional vote in the wake of the war. The first of these is the establishment in 1865 of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (BRFAL).

Under the command of the War Department, the mission of the BRFAL was to aid in the reconstruction of the South and contribute to the betterment of the millions of freed slaves. Before its 5 years of funding ran dry (the funding was not renewed), it managed to deploy more than \$6 million on behalf of education. This money opened and staffed more than 2,500 schools and introduced more than 150,000 children to education for the first time (Meyer, 1967). But rather than liberate southern Blacks, these efforts instead contributed to the anticarpetbagger, antigovernment (federal) sentiment among the southern elite. This is noted in a later report filed by the U.S. Bureau of Education (Cubberley, 1934) that indicated just how unwelcome efforts by “friends” from the North were:

Strangers came to show them the way; kind and generous guides undoubtedly, but strangers nevertheless; and coming from communities unlike theirs, with usages and ways such as they had never known. . . . And how was it possible for these teachers, bent on their message of enlightenment to a people brought out of bondage, to appreciate the better and gentler aspects of the hard system that had gone down in fire and blood? (pp. 364-365)

The other action that signifies a partial success of the federal government’s role in the provision of education at this time was the formation of the Department of Education itself in 1867.¹⁶ The rhetoric surrounding the creation of the department spanned from those who viewed its creation as a federal hijacking of education to those who welcomed its express and codified purpose of “collecting such statistics and facts as shall aid the people of the United States in the establishment and maintenance of efficient school systems, and otherwise promote the cause of education throughout the country” (Butts & Cremin, 1953). Hostilities toward the establishment of the department were regionally diverse, but in the absence of the southern block at this time, opponents could not muster enough votes to stop its creation (Lee, 1949).¹⁷

It is with the reentry of the southern states into full voting rights in Congress that efforts to expand the provision and quality of educational provision floundered. The Department of Education was the source of much controversy and, consequently, became underfunded and understaffed in response to intensifying state hostility (from all regions) toward its mission and especially resentment of the increased specter of central control. By 1869, the

department had been downgraded to the status of a bureau assuming the name Bureau of Education and was housed under the auspices of the Department of the Interior with its budget greatly diminished.

This period thus marks a crucial juncture in direct federal involvement in education: a turning point away from the path of federal influence over the provision of education that had run out of steam (or more accurately land). As the following section demonstrates, it was not the case that national progressive elites and/or the federal government simply withdrew from education policy or funding at this time. Rather, their repeated efforts in this direction were defeated by localists from the South and North who did not want the federal government telling them whom to educate or how to do so.

Setting the Tone: Legislative Log Jam

The period between 1872 and 1880 saw 11 bills for direct federal aid to education introduced in Congress. Only 4 came to the floor and only 2 received consideration, each finally failing (Lee, 1949). This log jam was in large measure the product of the bitter battle in 1870 over the Hoar Bill whose intent was to establish a federal system of educational *oversight* that could “compel by national authority the establishment of a thorough and efficient system of public instruction throughout the whole country, [that] is not to supercede, but to stimulate, compel, and supplement action by the State” (Lee, 1949, p. 42). Antireformers appeared to believe that all subsequent proposals that came after Hoar were in fact efforts to introduce the principles invoked in the earlier Hoar Bill. In this context, antireformers saw virtually every effort to expand federal involvement in education as attempts by the federal government to step in and provide education where *it* felt education was lacking. This is a situation not far removed from the type of resistance seen to federal policy efforts even today.

Despite localist hostility, however, education reformers continued to press for national education reform in Congress. Senator Henry W. Blair of New Hampshire, for example, waged a tireless, decade-long effort to provide funds from the national treasury to education. The so-called Blair Bill was submitted five times between 1882 to 1890 and was more limited than the Hoar Bill. Instead of mandating federal direction in areas of substandard education, it provided funding to states in support of education with *limited* strings attached.¹⁸ Even this, localists feared, would set a poor precedent and ultimately failed.

The Blair Bill provides an especially clear window through which one can view the politics of education in the post-Civil War years. The bill’s intent was to provide federal monies over 8 years to those states that maintained minimum educational provisions and standards. Among these standards

were free common schools to *all children* without distinction of race or color, timely reports submitted by each state to the Secretary of the Interior detailing these efforts, prohibitions on these funds in supporting denominational schools, and various other stipulations targeted at keeping the money in the classrooms rather than spending it on other “educational related” items like school buildings (except in the first year of the plan).¹⁹

The bill repeatedly made it out of the Senate, but each time this bill went to the House, it met its doom. Lee (1949) noted in his comprehensive study of this era’s federal educational efforts that this can best be explained by the powerful veto points²⁰ that reinstated southern legislators held in the Congress:

During the three Congresses in which the Senate passed the Blair bill, the House of Representatives contained a Democratic majority. Senator Blair claimed that, although two-thirds of the members of the House were sympathetic to his proposal, an organized minority under Speaker John G. Carlisle of Kentucky continually blocked consideration of the bill by that body. The speaker was accused, by Blair and others, of “fixing” the House Committee on Education, of packing it with representatives unfavorable to the idea. (p. 58)

The southern leader J. L. M. Curry agreed with this assessment suspecting that “fear of the difficulty of controlling more educated Negroes and the potential of upsetting of the traditional patterns of race relationships was the major cause of Southern opposition” (Curti, 1935, quoted in Lee, 1949, p. 159). In the end, the debate over Blair was the last bill of its type to be considered on the floor of either house for nearly 30 years.

Ultimately, with the supply of large tracts of land greatly diminished, the federal government was forced to reevaluate its methods of providing for widespread education. As Canfield (1949), in his examination of the repeated and failed end-of-the-century initiatives notes, “the historic precedents of land grants for education [just did] not hold,” therefore precluding virtually all central state measures to assist education (Canfield, in Butts & Cremin, 1953, p. 375).

As with many treatments involving American regionalism, this explanation of the inadequate central state response to educational provision points again to the truly exceptional regional (especially southern) political power over the national agenda. This power, once again, was neither derived from high moral principles nor even the number of citizens represented. Instead, the power that these regressive, antiegalitarian elites held over the national political agenda derives from the peculiar power offered them by America’s unique institutional structure. Thus, the failure of federal consolidation in

education during this period in the face of unrepaired race relations would come to form the legacy of our system of education that was characterized by the following: a decreasing federal role in educational funding and therefore direction setting, and a separate and most certainly *not equal* system that would not begin to be corrected until nearly a century later—and then largely by the courts.

In the years to follow, developments in U.S. educational policy illustrate the further evolution of the federal role in American education along the historical path already established. Clearly, there continued to be significant pressure to equalize education opportunities across regions (and increasingly across races) that continues through today. But absent significant resources that could be used to lure local policies toward national agendas, the powers of the federal executive and legislative branches of government have proven inadequate to these lofty goals. The national government clearly plays a role in shaping educational policy (especially via the courts), but the gross inequities throughout the system of U.S. education cannot be adequately addressed due to institutional protection of local authority embedded in the U.S. Constitution. Although the national government does intervene from time to time, it continues to do so in clumsy, incoherent, and generally inconsistent ways that ironically result directly from an early and powerful support of education that effectively eclipsed a subsequent and equally influential role.

CONCLUSION

Little doubt exists that the American experience with state building was largely influenced by its access to a readily available resource base (especially land) and strong natural endowment. Equally, however, America's unique economic and political development was profoundly influenced by the fragmentation of political power in Madison's system of "checks and balances." This fragmentation has often allowed antidemocratic and antiegalitarian interests to sit in important "veto points" within American political institutions and thus stifle progressive- and egalitarian-minded educational reforms. But as we demonstrate, the existence of these veto points and thus the awkwardness of national public action on educational policy did not mean that the central government could or would do nothing. Although the central government was institutionally inhibited, it was still resource rich. The result was an internationally unique policy outcome where the federal government ended up providing the greatest of foundations for education throughout the United States, all the while appearing to be out of the way.²¹ It is this type of development that contributes to the myth that education is strictly a local issue.

In light of the constitutional limitations on governmental tax authority (Steinmo, 1995), it was *land* that was available to influence educational policy across the states. As a result of this, the federal role in educational provision was much more effective in the period *before* what is touted as the great consolidation of national administrative capacities than after. Paradoxically, it is these early, successful efforts by the central state on behalf of education that seem to have undermined a subsequent federal role in education during the most intense period of state consolidation at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The federal government may have run out of land to help finance and shape educational policy in the United States, but there is little doubt that, by the turn of the century, it had effectively “primed the pump.” In a set of outcomes analogous to the history of mineral extraction in late-19th-century America, federal investment in education set in motion a series of increasing returns that encouraged further private investment as well as state and local commitment to continued educational opportunity for average American citizens (Arthur, 1994; Pierson, 2000).²²

Again, the American central state seeks a stepped-up role in directing the provision of education. Today, it is again local interests that face off with a federal government whose newest administration seeks to influence and transform the system of education in the United States. Both political parties agree on the basic point that reform is necessary, and the American people seem eager for some change along these lines to occur. However, the awkward and institutionally challenged federal machinery is still not up to the task. Flying in the face of entrenched localist interests and (often racist) attitudes—including socioeconomic disparities as they impact educational funding—hopes for meaningful change should *not* be high.

In addition, contributing to, as it now does, only 10% of the educational funding in this country leaves the federal government holding far too little in the way of resources to affect fundamental change. This fact makes it difficult, if not impossible, to overcome the inherent inequalities of contemporary education rooted in the political development that has empowered local over egalitarian interests. Regardless of political persuasion, the politics of the left and the right are equally challenged by this reality and face the same hurdles to meaningful reform. Whether it be securing a system of educational vouchers or mandating more equal or targeted spending for all children regardless of where they live, change that emanates from the center will prove to be difficult if not impossible.

Any work on behalf of educational reform must be undertaken with a conscious and realistic eye toward the profound effects that the historically rooted institutional fragmentation of power in the United States has had on education and its implications for meaningful national reform plans. Failure

to do so will not yield the intended reforming results and will instead maintain the status quo. This is a status quo characterized by an often unequal system of education in a country whose many hopes and aspirations are tied to the very faltering system of public education from which it expects so much.

NOTES

1. Indeed, some have argued that education has been the equivalent of America's welfare state. Dougherty (1992) found that, "In times of trouble, Americans first think of revamping their schools, whereas Europeans turn to reforming their social-welfare programs" (p. 446).

2. Noted by *The Economist* (April 1, 2000), America lags behind only Denmark and Canada in terms of overall educational spending. See also *The Economist* (March 31, 2000) and the National Commission on Excellence in Education Report (1983), "A Nation at Risk."

3. Some other supporters of a federal involvement in education included Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, James Madison, Benjamin Rush, John Adams, Noah Webster, Robert Coram, John Knox, and John Smith (Bowen, 1981, p. 266; Good, 1960, pp. 404-405).

4. One notable exception is Virginia at the time under the leadership of the then governor, Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson did seek the creation of a publicly funded system of education, a plan that later failed (Dabney, 1937).

5. In South Carolina, Blacks were prohibited from even preaching the Bible. In North Carolina, this offense was punishable by 39 lashes (Dabney, 1937).

6. Text of the Ordinance can be found in Fitzpatrick (1933).

7. Others argue for a century-end figure approaching 165 million total gifted acres in support of education (Allen, 1950).

8. The State Constitution of Indiana (1816), for example, specifies "a general system of education ascending in regular graduations from township schools to a State University, wherein tuition shall be gratis and equally open to all" (noted in Turner, 1996, p. 282).

9. For example, in 1805 the state of New York was forced to sell 500,000 acres of land to bolster its permanent school fund that had its funding revoked when earlier grants were not renewed by lawmakers (Edwards & Richey, 1963, p. 223).

10. Comparative figures on periodicals and circulation have been taken from DeBow (1970, p. 154).

11. Taken to mean here governmental, educational, and industry elite.

12. For more on the rise of the Common School, see Cremin's definitive volume *The American Common School* (1951).

13. See King (2000) for a thorough treatment of "Americanization" and its role in American political development. See pp. 88-91 for an examination of education's role in this process.

14. By way of further illustration, the average cost of educating one student in the United States in 1850 was \$2.50 (ranging from \$9.14 in the District of Columbia to \$0.86 in Iowa). Total nationwide educational expenditure for the year was \$9.5 million (DeBow, 1970, pp. 142-143). Thus, even by conservative estimates, the funds raised by the transfer of federal lands provided the most significant boost to education throughout the first half of the century, even by the standards of educational cost as measured at 1850 levels.

15. For some perspective, *all* public spending in the United States on education in 1850 was less than \$10 million a year (DeBow, 1970, p. 142). This higher figure incorporates Allen's (1950) inclusion of Alaskan grants and those grants in support of education dating back to 1785 that he totals at more than 165 million acres.

16. It is interesting to note that the Department of Education was one of only five federal departments at the time, the others being Interior, War, State, and Navy (Checklist of United States Public Documents 1789-1909, 1911).

17. Of the dissenters, some New England congressmen were against it for they felt their well-developed systems of schooling in no way required federal oversight. Some midwestern congressmen opposed it on strict constructionist grounds that the Constitution simply did not permit it.

18. Similar earlier bills like the Perce (1872) and Burnside (1880) had each received passage in their house of origination but had gone down to defeat over regional squabbling in the other house—mostly at the hands of Democrats and through the clever use of congressional committee rules and parliamentary procedures (Lee, 1949, p. 86).

19. It should be noted that this sounds very much like the contemporary discussions over federal funds to states on behalf of education (Lee, 1949, chapter 5).

20. See Immergut (1992) for a broad institutional analysis of the role of “veto points” in shaping political outcomes.

21. For a similar analysis of the U.S. role in railroad policy, see Dobbin and Dowd (1999).

22. Except, of course, for Americans of color.

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