

Introduction

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On December 10, 2015, as he signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) into law, President Barack Obama hailed the rewrite of federal law governing K–12 education as a “Christmas miracle.” ESSA had sailed through the US Senate, 85–12, and the US House, 359–64, supported by a broad bipartisan coalition that thought Washington’s efforts on schooling during the Bush–Obama years had gone too far and needed to be reined in. The new law pruned the federal government’s authority, especially on hot-button questions like accountability, school improvement, and teacher quality. Two years later, the dawn of the Trump presidency was accompanied by the ardent insistence that the Bush–Obama reforms had failed, and that expanding school choice and reducing the federal footprint was the more promising path.

Even a few years earlier, the reversal embodied by ESSA and embraced by Trump would have been hard to imagine. In 2009, Obama’s election had ignited a burst of federal educational activism. Jumping off from the Bush administration’s earlier, ambitious efforts to expand Washington’s role in K–12 schooling, Obama’s efforts enjoyed lots of early success. Obama’s nominee for secretary of education, Arne Duncan, was feted with bipartisan hurrahs. Senator Lamar Alexander, a former Republican US secretary of education, told Duncan, “President-elect Obama has made several distinguished Cabinet appointments. From my view of it all, I think you’re best.”¹

In 2009, as part of that year’s massive economic stimulus bill, Congress authorized new programs that would capture the imagination of the educational world. The \$4.35 billion Race to the Top program, in particular, would

be celebrated as a signature Obama policy. Former Republican Florida governor Jeb Bush, the brother of Obama's predecessor, opined, "I think Secretary Duncan and President Obama deserve credit for putting pressure on states to change, particularly the states that haven't changed at all."²

Notably, the burst of enthusiasm for Race to the Top reprised the similarly upbeat early days of the George W. Bush administration that preceded it. In 2001, taking office after a hard-fought campaign and a contested recount, Bush confronted Democratic anger and skepticism. Against that backdrop, his education efforts became a celebrated bipartisan bright spot. Bush's campaign pledge to "leave no child behind" resonated across party lines, and Bush made it a point to cultivate influential Democratic partners like Senator Ted Kennedy and Representative George Miller. Together they negotiated the No Child Left Behind Act, which passed in late 2001—with overwhelming bipartisan majorities in Congress—to a host of cheers.

However, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) proved far more popular in Washington and with editorial writers than in schools and communities. NCLB required states to administer regular tests in reading and math, use those results to develop accountability systems for schools, intervene in schools deemed to be "in need of improvement," and set the goal that 100 percent of students would test "proficient" in reading and math by 2014. While the elements were all easy to like in principle, they would prove vastly more problematic and controversial in practice. The workings of NCLB and the backlash against it would, in time, come to fundamentally alter the nation's educational landscape. Indeed, by 2008, public opinion on NCLB had turned broadly negative and NCLB itself had become something of a poisoned brand—in fact, by that point, polling showed that simply mentioning "No Child Left Behind" served to sharply reduce support for school accountability.³

Given what had transpired with NCLB, the dawn of the Obama presidency served as something of a post-Bush reset on school reform. It brought new energy to the cause, replaced a divisive and unpopular president with a charismatic young icon, and gave Democrats a chance to lead the parade. Building on the upsized federal role pioneered under Bush, the Obama team moved to extend the education agenda far beyond accountability—to things like teacher evaluation, academic standards, and school discipline. Initially, these efforts seemed to soften the edges of reform and rekindle support.

Within a few years, though, those Obama efforts would themselves turn controversial, breeding backlash that rivaled the dissatisfaction with No

Child Left Behind. Obama's reforms would also get mired in bitter debates about their emphasis on test scores and whether they constituted federal overreach. What happened? Why did each of these initially promising, seemingly popular efforts at federal leadership ultimately lose its luster?

While we can offer no simple answers to these questions, exploring them can be extraordinarily useful. Indeed, this book was inspired by extended conversations and lively disagreements about how to best make sense of high-profile initiatives from the Bush-Obama years. Were these ambitious efforts a much-needed kick start that forced America to get serious about school improvement, or a recipe for slipshod policy making and rushed implementation that ultimately undermined reform? Did these major reforms reflect a gutsy commitment to putting students first, or political gamesmanship that yielded a counterproductive series of distracting mandates? Though the answers to these questions are complex and perhaps unsatisfying, they just may help us inform and improve our efforts in the years to come.

After all, the twenty-first century has been a remarkable time in American schooling. The universalization of testing and accountability has come to shape our visions of and beliefs about schooling. Charter schooling and other choice-based reforms moved from the margins to the middle of the education discourse. Federal efforts to promote teacher quality, standards, and school turnarounds were tried on a scale that would have been unimaginable a few years earlier. The creation of the Institute of Education Sciences launched a new and ambitious chapter in federally supported education research, while the Obama-era efforts at the Office of Civil Rights thrust that agency into a newly combative and assertive role. Many have opined about what reformers got right and wrong. But a more useful path may be to begin by asking what actually happened and what we've learned along the way.

HOW WE GOT HERE

Before we dive into the particulars of the Bush-Obama years, it's worth taking a moment to recall the history of the federal government's role in K-12 education. While there are isolated, earlier instances of federal activity regarding schools, a sensible starting point is with the US response to the Soviet Union's 1957 launch of its *Sputnik* satellite. In 1958, alarmed that the United States was losing the Space Race to its Cold War rival, Congress enacted the National Defense Education Act (NDEA), with the goal of improving math

and science instruction. The NDEA represented the first substantial federal foray into education funding and policy.

Less than a decade later, President Lyndon Johnson made expanding the federal role in education a key part of his War on Poverty. In 1965, Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) into law, providing federal funding for low-income students, the professional development of teachers, and instructional materials in schools and libraries. ESEA's Title I remains, a half-century later, the single largest federal outlay for K–12 education. Almost immediately after the passage of ESEA, Washington began to wrestle with just how it should ensure that federal dollars for schooling were being spent wisely and well.

In practice, Washington had no real means to guarantee that dollars were making a difference for students, even as concerns about school performance increasingly became a national concern. The result was a growing chorus of critics insisting that more should be done to ensure that funds were being spent effectively and were enhancing equity. Meanwhile, the rules and regulations written to govern the use of federal funds were denounced as a frustrating, bureaucratic morass. Those concerns—about accountability, equity, and ineffective regulation—would become themes of the Bush-Obama years.

During the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, a number of other major federal education laws were enacted. Special education funding evolved from the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, first passed in 1975, to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), passed in 1990. IDEA put terms like *individualized education plan* and *free and appropriate public education* into the educational lexicon. Concerns from parents about their children's privacy were addressed in the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974. That same year, the Equal Educational Opportunities Act was enacted to address discrimination against minority faculty members and racial segregation in school districts.

Presidents emphatically used the bully pulpit to advance education reform. In 1983, President Reagan's administration released *A Nation at Risk*, the report that famously argued that "a rising tide of mediocrity" was swallowing the nation's schools and that "if an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war." In 1989, President George H. W. Bush, after having pledged to be the "education president," convened the nation's governors for an extraordinary meeting

in Charlottesville, Virginia, where they sketched a set of goals for America's schools to achieve by the year 2000.

In 1994 President Bill Clinton incorporated "Goals 2000" into statute, codifying the remarkably ambitious goals that he and other then-governors had settled upon with then-President Bush a few years earlier. By the year 2000, the goals called for every school in America to be drug free; every adult to be literate; every child in grades 4, 8, and 12 to demonstrate competency in subjects ranging from English to math to world languages to civics; and the high school graduation rate to hit 90 percent.

As 2000 approached, the nation remained dishearteningly far away from those targets. Meanwhile, the end of the Cold War had given Washington policy makers more room to focus intensely on domestic policy. In that environment, calls for dramatic education reform gathered momentum. When George W. Bush narrowly won the 2000 presidential contest while emphasizing education, denouncing the "soft bigotry of low expectations," and pledging to "leave no child behind," the scene was set for the passage of No Child Left Behind and the grand educational experiments of the Bush-Obama years.

A BRIEF RECAP OF TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY EDUCATION REFORM

For those who did not follow education during the Bush-Obama years, or who may be young enough that much of the period is a bit hazy, it may be useful to talk a bit more fully about the developments that got us from NCLB to where we are today. In 2001, as noted earlier, Congress enacted NCLB. This upsizing of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act dramatically expanded the federal role in K–12 schooling. In order to receive their Title I funding, states would henceforth have to regularly test students in reading and math, use those results to design accountability systems, and intervene in schools that failed to make "Adequate Yearly Progress" toward the goal of 100 percent student proficiency in reading and math by the year 2014.

While it was perhaps the signature domestic policy of the Republican Bush administration, NCLB also enjoyed crucial support from many influential Democrats. These political leaders and advocates saw NCLB as a landmark victory for educational equity and regarded NCLB as the education bill they wished the Clinton administration could have passed in the 1990s.

In 2007, a handful of those “reform Democrats” came together to launch a new organization called Democrats for Education Reform (DFER). Mounting a direct challenge to the teacher unions, a core Democratic constituency, DFER would prove instrumental in helping to shape the Obama administration’s educational efforts.

In 2008, as Illinois Democrat Barack Obama was battling Republican senator John McCain for the presidency, the global economy was wracked by a financial crisis. Triggered by financial shenanigans that fueled a speculative bubble, the housing market suffered an unprecedented, devastating collapse. The resulting financial crisis led to a stock market crash, put major banks on the verge of failing, and plunged the global economy into the “Great Recession.” In Washington, the crisis spurred calls for bold action.

The Great Recession profoundly affected the nation’s schools and colleges. At the local level, cratering housing prices meant declines in property taxes, a key revenue source for school districts. At the state level, the tightening of household purse strings meant less sales tax revenue flowing into state coffers, affecting another key revenue source for education funding. But the Great Recession ultimately created big opportunities for federal policy makers.

When Obama won the 2008 election, with coattails that gave Democrats firm control of the US Congress, he rapidly moved to address the crisis. With unemployment climbing and states starved for funds, in early 2009, Congress enacted a \$787 billion stimulus bill (formally known as the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act). The financial crunch would provide the backdrop for Obama’s first term, a period during which state governments and school systems were struggling with revenue shortfalls and painful budget cuts. That environment amplified the impact of federal spending on schools and colleges, which was turbocharged (to the tune of more than \$100 billion) as part of the stimulus.

The most celebrated and influential component of that education funding was the \$4.35 billion allocated to a new competitive grant program known as Race to the Top. The stimulus bill itself offered only a vague sketch of how the program should run, requiring simply that Race to the Top funds be directed to states that were taking steps to improve teaching and school leadership, data systems, struggling schools, and academic standards and assessments. Because the stimulus was intended to spur economic recovery and mitigate budget cuts, the Department of Education committed to awarding the full \$4.35 billion in less than two years.

The Department of Education then developed a program that laid out nineteen priorities that states would need to address. Those priorities were refined into a five-hundred-point grading rubric, against which applications were judged by panels of Education Department–selected judges. The exercise’s grand ambitions, catchy title, and rapid pace served to capture the education world’s imagination and became Obama’s education signature. Over time, however, Race to the Top’s tight timelines and political coloration would complicate some of the very reform efforts that it had sought to boost—especially those relating to teacher evaluation and the Common Core State Standards.

After Republicans claimed control of the US House in 2010 and the final Race to the Top winners were named in 2011, the Obama administration’s K–12 agenda was increasingly framed by the Department of Education’s ability to issue “waivers” from NCLB and provide “guidance” to school districts through the Office of Civil Rights. In issuing the waivers, the administration promised to release states from some of the most headache-inducing provisions of NCLB so long as the US secretary of education decided they were complying with the spirit of the law. In practice, waivers were issued conditional on states agreeing to adopt the same general policies—like “rigorous” standards and revamped teacher evaluation—that the administration had cited as priorities in Race to the Top.

Concerns about overtesting, federal overreach, the use of waivers, and the substance of the Obama reform agenda slowly stirred opposition—among the teacher unions on the left and the Tea Party movement on the right. That backlash ultimately came to a boil in a clash over Common Core State Standards. Initially launched under the auspices of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Common Core sketched uniform K–12 standards for math and English language arts. In its early stages, the Common Core drew support from an impressively broad coalition—spanning from the major teacher unions to the US Chamber of Commerce. It was championed by Democratic and Republican governors and enjoyed deep-pocketed support from major foundations.

States pursuing Race to the Top funds were strongly encouraged to embrace Common Core and the new Common Core–aligned tests. As a result, within months of its release, the Common Core had been adopted in more than forty states. The speed of that early success elicited skepticism among Tea Partiers distrustful of Obama and intent on shrinking federal influence. Conservative opponents took to calling Common Core

“ObamaCore” (linking it to Obama’s massive health care law, which was hugely unpopular on the right). The Common Core got caught up in debates about excessive testing and turned into a partisan football that merited routine campaign trail denunciations from Donald Trump, the Republican who would follow Obama into the presidency.

By 2015, the pushback on testing and on Washington’s efforts in K–12 schooling yielded the Every Student Succeeds Act, softening or even erasing much of NCLB’s accountability framework. ESSA also put an end to the Obama administration’s waivers and made it very clear that the federal government could no longer encourage states to adopt particular academic standards (like the Common Core). By the end of Obama’s term, and the beginning of the Trump presidency, a sea change was evident in the federal role. Meanwhile, the ranks of foundations, advocacy groups, and reformers focused on K–12 seemed intent on moving on from much of their agenda during the Bush-Obama years in favor of a newfound emphasis on social and emotional learning, early childhood education, and career and technical education.

THE BOOK AHEAD

In tackling this volume, we parceled the key reform strategies of the Bush-Obama years into nine topics, and then enlisted an array of talented scholars to take on the various parts. In doing so, we asked that they make a particular effort to highlight specific lessons and practical advice for policy makers, practitioners, and reformers. As you will see, the contributors more than delivered on their end of the deal.

In chapter 1, the University of Oklahoma’s Deven Carlson tackles perhaps the signature education policy of the Bush and Obama years: testing and accountability. Carlson reviews the evolution of testing and accountability policy and how small-scale experiments in a handful of states ultimately fueled a seismic shift in federal policy. He outlines the progression of federal efforts and explores what we have learned about the effects of accountability on achievement, as well as its unintended consequences. Carlson closes by reflecting on whether or not we can ever get testing and accountability “right,” and just what the answer means for policy and practice.

In chapter 2, Ashley Jochim of the University of Washington examines what we’ve learned about school “turnarounds.” Interventions designed to turn around struggling schools gained new urgency and visibility during the

Bush and Obama years due to NCLB-style accountability and the Obama-era School Improvement Grant program. These initiatives were designed to transform “persistently low-performing” schools. Yet, concluding that these efforts led to little obvious improvement, Jochim considers just how difficult it is to translate federal mandates into street-level change.

In chapter 3, Drew University’s Patrick McGuinn examines how Bush and Obama used incentives and sanctions to shape education policy. More specifically, he explores the seeming contradiction that while federal carrots and sticks can spur policy changes, circumventing local decision making and debate can ultimately undermine their viability. McGuinn surveys federal mandates, programs, and waivers to examine what happened and what those efforts teach us about the potential of these approaches—and their potential limits.

In chapter 4, Brown University’s Matthew A. Kraft takes up the array of efforts intended to improve teacher quality. He notes that improving teacher quality moved into the center of policy debates in the Bush and Obama years and was a central goal of both Bush’s NCLB and Obama’s Race to the Top competition. While these efforts were highly visible and had real effects on state and district data systems and practices, they failed to produce the significant impacts that many had hoped for. Kraft explores what to make of that mixed legacy and offers insights to guide those who will tackle teacher quality in years to come.

In chapter 5, Robert Pianta and Tara Hofkens of the University of Virginia assess the attempts by the Bush and Obama administrations to enhance educational research and fuel educational innovation. In particular, the Bush-era creation of the Institute of Education Sciences transformed the infrastructure of federal education research, with the What Works Clearinghouse designed to serve as a portal to implementation and practice. But did those changes help us better understand the most important issues regarding educational improvement? Did methodological biases cause researchers to ignore important questions? The story is complicated, and Pianta and Hofkens consider what all this has taught us about how to improve educational research and how that research can be used to improve schools.

In chapter 6, the Brookings Institution’s Tom Loveless takes a look at the Bush- and Obama-era emphasis on standards-based reform and the impact it had on schooling. Academic standards, first required of every state by NCLB and then made into a quasi-national campaign by the Common Core, define what students will learn and when they will learn it. After nearly two

decades of bipartisan political support, the advent of the Common Core frayed this bipartisan comity. Loveless sketches the practical and the political missteps of the Common Core movement and offers a deeply skeptical look at the role that “raising standards” plays in educational improvement.

In chapter 7, Anna J. Egalite of North Carolina State University explores what we learned about school choice during the Bush and Obama years. While both presidents offered clear rhetorical support for charter schooling, in particular, their support never became as definitive or programmatic as it did in areas like standards, turnarounds, or accountability. Almost all federal action took place at arm’s length. Egalite explores whether this was an unexpected boon, how it shaped reaction at the state and local levels, and whether it can or should provide a roadmap for future federal forays into state policy.

Ultimately, of course, the American system dictates that the responsibility for making system reform work inevitably falls heavily on the states. Under both Bush and Obama, Washington pushed state education agencies to play a much larger role in shaping and implementing reform. In chapter 8, Sara E. Dahill-Brown of Wake Forest University considers how states were equipped to handle the challenges posed by the Bush-Obama era, how states responded, and what it teaches us about the dynamics of federalism and the capacities of states.

In chapter 9, Joshua Dunn of the University of Colorado Colorado Springs looks at the expansive Bush-Obama efforts to approach school reform as a civil rights issue and the Obama administration’s efforts to markedly extend the reach of civil rights enforcement to reshape policies governing school discipline, school finance, and the rights of transgender students. Dunn considers the political and practical consequences of Washington wielding its newly asserted authority in this way.

Finally, in the volume’s conclusion, we will try to distill some larger themes and insights from all of the foregoing. We approached this project with a simple question in mind: What do we know now about school improvement that we didn’t know in 2000? By summarizing key lessons from the preceding chapters, we will try to offer some answers to that question.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

We see the Bush-Obama era of school reform as remarkable, if only because so much was going on. The role played by Washington was unprecedented. No Child Left Behind massively ratcheted up Washington’s involvement in

every public school in America, while both Race to the Top and the Department of Education's waivers to NCLB expanded the elements of schooling under federal purview.

In contemplating the chapters that follow, we have been struck time and again by the lesson that initial success and rapid adoption of a reform may actually complicate long-term success in unexpected ways. Why that may be and what it means is one of the big questions we hope readers will better understand when they set this volume down.

Ultimately, we do not try here to provide a thumbs-up or thumbs-down verdict on the Bush-Obama reform efforts or to make the case for the efforts of one administration or the other. Rather, we have sought to tease out some of the lessons we might draw from the ambitious experiment that dominated American education in the first decades of the twenty-first century. With that goal in mind, we hope readers will find this project as illuminating and useful as we do.