Discussion Questions

Book Title: *Presidents, Congress, and The Public Schools: The Politics of Education Reform*

**Introduction**

- The author contends that the United States faces two large challenges in elementary and secondary education: “All of our students need to learn more, and every student should receive the same high-quality education regardless of family income or the property wealth of his or her school district.” (Page 8)
- Do you agree that these are the greatest challenges facing education? What do you think are the greatest challenges facing education?

**Chapter 1**

- Prior to the 1960s, control of public education was almost exclusively local. Was that good for students? Why or why not?
- In the 1960s, federal aid to education came about with a slant to aiding those students who were from low-income families or who had other inhibiting factors. Instead of this equity focus, would it have been better to focus resources in other areas (e.g., teachers’ salaries or school construction)?

**Chapter 2**

- In the late 1960s and 1970s, the US Office of Education succeeded in making Title I a program providing separate funds for identifiable services for at-need students, instead of more general aid as envisioned by Congress. What does this say about the interplay between the congressional and the executive branches of government?
- In the same period, congressional support for federal aid became more bipartisan than at its creation. Is that a positive or a negative? Why?

**Chapter 3**

- In the late 1970s and 1980s, the US Office of Education regulated federal aid more than it did previously. Do you think there was a need to assure that funds aid those students identified federally for extra assistance, or should local administrators and teachers have been trusted to do that?
- This same period showed a shift at the national level to a more critical view of public education and of the effectiveness of federal aid. As a consequence, federal demands for local accountability became stronger. Was this shift justified?
Chapter 4

- In the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, research studies showed that the effects of federal programs on academic achievement were modest. During that period, federal aid shrunk and could not fully address inequities in funding and staffing at the local level. Were criticisms of federal aid justified or were the limitations of such aid so strong as to justify modest achievement gains?

Chapter 5

- In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the academic standards movement arose, was it helpful to define for the first time at the national or state level what students should know, or would it have been better to have no definitions or local standards?
- As the standards movement evolved, states instituted or expanded statewide student testing. Was that helpful to improve education and/or to get greater accountability from the schools?
- With No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the standards movement became more of an accountability reform with consequences for schools that did not attain state-prescribed student test scores. Did this assist in improving education?

Chapter 6

- The author contends that there has been no general increase in student academic achievement as a result of the changes in NCLB. In reviewing the test data, do you agree? (Pages 88-94) Is there data left out or improperly included in this analysis?
- The author contends that the Common Core State Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards will bring needed rigor to the schools. Do you agree or do the negative factors outweigh the positive factors?

Chapter 7

- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires the inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular classroom as far as possible. Was that a good requirement? Why or why not?
- IDEA has been criticized for being too bureaucratic and costing too much. Do the positive factors of the law outweigh the negative? Does support for IDEA from middle- and upper-income families frustrate any changes in the law?
- Bilingual education was very controversial during the last few decades. Is the approach that uses the native language and gradually moves to full English better than a program that puts a student in an all-English class? Which approach has a better research base, and which causes more popular opposition?
Chapter 8

- Was the busing of school children to achieve integration of the schools a good policy? Is it better socially and educationally to seek integration of the classroom, or is it preferable to let housing patterns or other factors determine the racial composition of schools?
- Has Title IX been fully successful in banning discrimination against girls and women in education programs? If yes, how? If no, why?
- When high schools have to provide space for student Bible study groups and for Gay-Straight Alliances, do students view these events as ways of achieving tolerance of diversity in a democracy?

Chapter 9

- The author lays out five lessons to be learned from the last fifty years of federal aid. Are these the lessons you would draw?
- The legal provisions barring federal control of education are described as limited in their effectiveness because states and school districts voluntarily ask for such aid. (Pages 142-143) Do you agree? Why or why not?

Chapter 10

- The author contends that federal aid has been too indirect in providing extra services and placing external pressure on schools to raise student test scores. Instead, he advocates for a focus directly on improving the quality of learning and instruction; that is, the relationship between the student and teacher. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Four elements are identified as helpful in improving classroom teaching and learning: high-quality pre-school preparation, the quality of the teaching force, the rigor of the curriculum, and the adequacy and distribution of funding. Does the research that is laid out validate these elements?

Chapter 11

- Do you agree with the proposition that states should receive greater and more flexible financial aid from the federal government if they change their systems of education in certain ways? Would it be preferable to continue with the approach of providing aid for schools with concentrations of poor students and for specified services, namely, categorical aid?
- The exact elements that could lead to improvement are described on pages 188-189. Do you believe that the case has been made that research justifies such changes to bring about improvement?

Chapter 12

- Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama have said that education is the civil rights issue of this era. If that idea is accepted as correct, what are the consequences? What do you suppose that the two presidents meant by this declaration?
• Should education be recognized as a fundamental right of every child? What would that mean?

Conclusion

• Is there a need for the federal government to provide aid to the schools? Has your opinion changed over the course of this reading?
• Is there a need for federal aid to change from the way it has been provided to a different way? If so, what should that be?
• Do you agree that most recent school reforms are the ideas of those outside of education, or at least not of most teachers? What should an agenda be that improves education based on what teachers and administrators—those in education—know from their experience?