

Foreword

FOR INSPIRATION ABOUT the historical and contemporary struggles of American education, a good place to look is on the back of a one-dollar bill. Although no longer the official motto of the United States, the original dictum, *e pluribus unum*, is still relevant enough to be on our Great Seal, and in just three easily translatable Latin words summarizes two and a half centuries of the American experiment in divided democracy. The tension between the many and the one, between the pluribus and the unum, has no simple or obvious resolution, and certainly not when it comes to education. As Jack Jennings so eloquently explains in this book, simplistic arguments that federal involvement in education has been either its savior or its curse are rhetorically extravagant, ahistorical, and empirically dubious. The story is more complicated, and more interesting.

One might think, for example, that a “system” of 14,000 independent school districts operating in fifty states, all with their own authority for what gets taught, to whom, and how, is a recipe for disaster. How to reconcile this “chaos,” as a former Harvard president called it, with its remarkable accomplishments is a puzzle that has attracted considerable attention by scholars, policy makers, and journalists. On the one hand, we have (at least until recently) led the world in opening education to the masses, an investment in human capital that deserves much of the credit for the unparalleled gains in economic productivity and quality of life through much of the twentieth century. And a large part of this success is due to the

agility and innovative capacity of school districts and their communities, unencumbered by the logy machinery of centralized government. On the other hand, persistent and vexing inequalities in resources and educational attainment—by region, race, and socioeconomic status—gnaw at our national fabric and give rise, thankfully, to periodic calls for national action. We have understood, perhaps somewhat grudgingly, that some problems can't be solved without the visible hand of government.

The academic word for our political arrangement is “federalism,” loosely defined as the rules governing the diffusion of decision making between the federal government and the states. This concept is by no means easy to implement, and the federal role in education, perhaps more than in other sectors, has always been contested and constrained. To appreciate the difficulty of reconciling our pluribus with our unum, one need only recall that it took us 214 years to even try to write a set of national education goals!

As we approach the fiftieth anniversary of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA)—arguably the most significant federal legislative accomplishment in the history of education—and as the nation continues to debate the promise and peril of national standards, it is the ideal moment for a reasoned consideration of the future. What can or should the federal role be? With Jack Jennings to guide us through this process of national reflection, we are in good hands. As staff director and then general counsel for more than twenty-five years to the most influential House committee on education policy, and as founder of a nationally renowned nonpartisan center providing research on key educational policies, Jack is in the unique position to describe the influential role the federal government has played in education policies for the last fifty years, the development of the current standards movement as a natural outgrowth of these efforts, and the lessons from this history about how to go forward.

In the pages that follow, Jack expands the lectures he delivered at The George Washington University in spring 2014. He reviews the history and unravels some of the mystery of federal involvement since the passage of ESEA and offers a fresh set of ideas about where and how the federal government could now focus its efforts. The questions are complex: no doubt there is validity to the criticisms expressed about the woes of local and state

control of schools, the politics of school boards, and the damaging consequences of inconsistent state standards. But whether a system of national standards to guide teaching, learning, and resource allocation is a necessary or sufficient remedy is not obvious; and again, many people worry that the word “national” is code for federal, an affront to our history and a misguided response to the problems of fragmentation.

Jack’s treatment of these and related issues is gripping and is bound to shake many preconceived beliefs. Even the most faithful worshippers of free markets who dislike government intervention and distrust centralized authority concede that in education we are better off today than fifty years ago, and that the federal role—the combined (and often colliding) efforts of the Supreme Court, Congress, and the White House—deserves a good part of the credit. The passage of ESEA, just about a decade after the landmark Supreme Court case outlawing racial segregation in schools, was an instance of political adaptation to increasingly obvious and unacceptable inequities. How it was framed and how it evolved as the pains of implementation began to be felt is a story with many lessons. Anyone who thinks that large-scale educational change via federal legislation can “get it right” from the beginning should take a deep breath and study the facts summarized in this volume, along with the interpretations of its wise and experienced author.

Readers may marvel, for example, at how a system designed for fragmented governance nonetheless spawned an array of complex federal policies and, more amazingly, how often public programs were reengineered. Agility in government, especially in our system with its fetish for checks and balances and diffused authority, is more challenging than in the private sector, where different rules of innovation and accountability apply. And the tensions are palpable: some critics decry the slow pace of government bureaucracy and its potential to suffocate creative problem solving, while others play the “evidence card” to stall enactment of policies that haven’t been fully researched. Finding the sweet spot between inaction and irresponsible action is part of the art of governing. On balance, I would argue that the federal role in education should be complimented for its dexterity, made possible in large part by the tenacity of our public servants,

including Jack, in their pursuit of laws, policies, and programs aimed at enhancing the public good. One hopes they will have the resources and the will to continue.

But here, too, the road ahead is bumpy, and travelers are well advised to pack this book for the trip. Jennings is one of the best guides imaginable for a journey to the future of federal education policy. As a courageous defender of the virtues of bipartisan discourse (a seemingly lost art on Capitol Hill), and an incredibly lucid writer, he provides here a rich blend of personal reflection and research-informed analysis leading to provocative recommendations. He uses his knowledge of the history of education reform, his personal involvement for nearly the last half century, and current research to provide a clear roadmap to the future. You will see how some of his original beliefs about the role of the federal government have evolved, and how he candidly explains the need for national standards. He also takes on the notion that education is not a federal issue, and shows that it truly is a fundamental right compatible with our core culture, Constitution, and politics. He knows politicians well, and wants them—regardless of what side of the aisle they represent—to be held to their rhetoric that education is a civil right.

Surely readers will disagree with aspects of Jack's book, but I know that stimulating a vigorous debate is one of his highest priorities. The future of American education may be uncertain, but with people like Jack continuing to think and write and argue about it, the quality of debate and the possibility for progress are guaranteed.

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