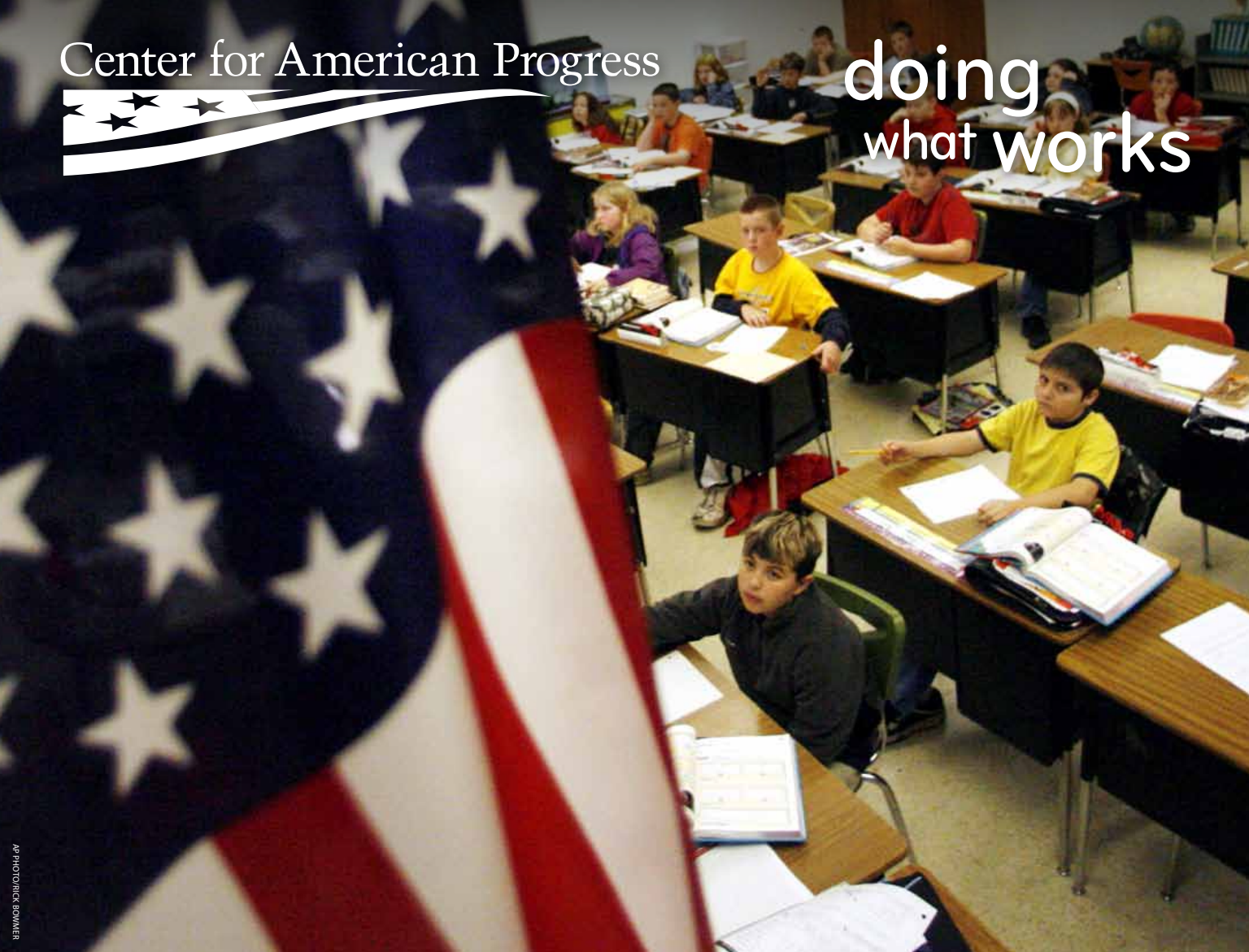


Center for American Progress

doing
what works



Education Transformation

Doing What Works in Education Reform

Glenda L. Partee April 2010

Introduction and summary

All of America's children need a high-quality education to prepare them for the changing needs of our workforce and increasingly intense global economic competition. To ensure they receive an excellent public education that meets our increased expectations requires that local, state, and federal policymakers and educators invest in effective programs, personnel, schools, and services. It requires support for strategies known to work and delivery mechanisms that ensure these reforms reach the neediest and those who can most benefit. It requires strict alignment of funds spent with the policies designed to support federal, state, and local education goals.

The federal government is a critical and vested partner in improving public education opportunities and outcomes. As the Obama administration and Congress pursue an ambitious education reform agenda to establish the right course for education, savings can be generated to boost educational results by eliminating or reforming education programs that are ineffective, duplicative, or outdated.

The administration and Congress must use taxpayer resources wisely and to the maximum benefit for all. Every dollar spent must address current or emerging needs and provide results. Federal education funds must support national needs and interests and drive change as well as complement state and local efforts. Where programming is effective and critical needs go unmet, greater federal investments and new initiatives may be necessary. Where needs are met through other sources, or programming is ineffective, or funding has little impact, federal leadership requires new approaches, redesign, defunding, or jettisoning of old strategies. This is the new results-focused approach being adopted at the U.S. Department of Education.

This report analyzes federal education programs that are candidates for elimination, consolidation, or restructuring, and discusses lessons derived from program funding and implementation. It reviews discretionary project grant programs and pre-college education programs administered by the U.S. Department of Education.

Elementary and Secondary Education Act Title I, Part A formula grants to local schools and districts with large numbers of poor children were not reviewed here because of their programmatic complexity. These grants support critical accountability elements of current federal education policy such as academic assessment, school improvement, and parental choice.¹ For similar reasons, ESEA Title III that supports programs for English language learners is not reviewed.

Although the focus was on pre-college programs, some programs outside ESEA were reviewed, such as adult education in the context of intergenerational literacy, and postsecondary career and technical education in the context of high school reform and student achievement. Additionally, programs in the Department of Education's Offices of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Federal Student Aid, and Postsecondary Education were not a part of this review.

The recommendations offered in this report wed budgetary priorities to a new vision of education policy embraced by the Obama administration that focuses on targeting funds to support schools and districts with the neediest students and those with extra education needs. This vision supports flexibility, experimentation and innovation, and accountability for results that boost student achievement for all and close persistent achievement gaps between disadvantaged and minority students and their more advantaged peers. This vision also includes the development of a highly effective education workforce and other priorities such as common academic standards and better tests.

Increased flexibility is a means to an end, not an end itself. We want state leaders, local decision makers, and educators to try different approaches. But these approaches must be rigorously evaluated to determine what produces the greatest benefits and educational outcomes. The Department of Education should use this information to publicly spotlight both exceptional and poor performers, actively promote strategies that work, and eliminate funding for those that do not. Flexibility should happen within the context of what we know works. That is why support for evaluation, research and development, and for dissemination of positive interventions is so critical.

Within this framework, Department of Education grant programs are identified that support ineffective approaches, often at greater costs than other documented practices, or programs that allow for such a wide range of activities so that it is difficult to evaluate their impact. The Department of Education also supports small, low-impact programs with narrow purposes (such as teaching history, fostering civic responsibility, and arts education). Many represent noncompetitive earmarks to specific recipients. These programs are inconsistent with the Department of Education's new results-focused approach and should be eliminated.

Some programs are clearly outdated and should be eliminated or updated to explicitly reflect current priorities. These include the Women's Education Equity Act and the 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs, to name a few. Funding should also be aligned with the goal of increasing student academic achievement and closing achievement gaps. Yet, some older programs, such as the Magnet Schools Assistance Program, were not designed with the primary goal of closing achievement gaps, but rather to limit racial isolation and desegregate public schools. Meanwhile, the newer Voluntary Public School Choice Program was established to boost achievement gains. It might make sense to consolidate these programs—which overlap in their efforts to expand educational options—and in the process, refocus the magnet school program on the goal of closing achievement gaps.

Opportunities exist to consolidate other programs as well. Related education programs are sometimes spread over multiple agencies and within the Department of Education. The Head Start program is located within the Department of Health and Human Services. Yet it overlaps significantly with Department of Education programs focused on school readiness, including Even Start and Reading First. Teacher recruitment and professional development programs are similarly diffuse. Consolidating related programs would help eliminate duplication, ensure coordination, and achieve cost savings.

The goal of improving student achievement demands that funding be distributed based on student needs—something that currently does not always happen. A number of programs continue to be formula funded (see box for definitions of different education programs) and result in spreading dollars too thin to make much of an impact. They also fail to target schools with the greatest needs and/or the most effective solutions. The recently defunded Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities-State Grants program is an example. Awarding larger, competitive grants to a smaller number of vulnerable school districts would provide more bang for the buck.

Explanation of Grant Terminology

The following defines grant terms that are used throughout this report.

- **Formula grants** are allocations of funds to states or their subdivisions in accordance with distribution formulas prescribed by law or administrative regulation, for activities of a continuing nature not confined to a specific project. Examples include: ESEA Title I, Part A to local education agencies and schools with large numbers of poor children to ensure that they meet challenging state standards; Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities State Program; Even Start; and Migrant Education.
- **Project grants** represent funding for fixed or known periods of specific projects, including fellowships, scholarships, research grants, training grants, traineeships, experimental and demonstration grants, evaluation grants, planning grants, technical assistance grants, survey grants, and construction grants.
- **Competitive grants** are project grants for which multiple applicants submit bids and compete for funding. Examples include: Race to the Top, in which states must compete for funding based on rigorous criteria that includes comprehensive plans to reform their schools; Mentoring Grants; Advanced Placement Incentive Program; and Academies for American History and Civics.
- **Sole-source grants** are required to be unique, innovative and highly cost effective. Sole source grants are typically used only when one entity is reasonably able to meet a grant or intended purpose. Examples include the noncompetitive awards authorized by direction of Congress through the Arts in Education Program to VSA arts, which fosters awareness of the need for arts programs for persons with disabilities and the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts for its arts education programs for children and youth.
- **Earmarks** are funds provided by Congress for projects or programs that circumvent the competitive allocation process of the executive branch or specify the location or grant recipient, according to the definition provided by the White House Office of Management and Budget.

The cuts and reforms recommended by this report are not intended to address the federal budget deficit. Indeed, the amount of money involved is minuscule in the context of the deficit. But they are offered in recognition that resources are scarce. Despite additional funding requests in the fiscal year 2011 budget, the Department of Education may have to undertake its ambitious reform agenda without a significant infusion of new resources. This reality creates an imperative to ensure that every dollar is well spent and every investment is calculated to produce a positive return. These recommendations are intended as a point of beginning, not a final answer. More assessment will be needed to identify further opportunities to achieve savings and boost results. What is clear, however, is that business cannot continue as usual.

Key findings and recommendations

Budgetary priorities should reflect the new education policy priorities

The Center for American Progress believes that a new federal education policy should rest on the following principles:

- **Education funds should be distributed based on student need and focused on closing educational achievement disparities.** It seems obvious to say that education funds should be directed where they are needed most. But this is often not the case. Federal funding should increase assistance to students with extra needs, including low-income pre-schoolers and students in K-12 schools, students with disabilities, English language learners, students in high schools with elevated dropout rates, and financially needy college students, among others. These funds should be used to close vast disparities in educational achievement between low-income and minority students and their more affluent peers.
- **State and local officials and educators should have flexibility in determining how best to spend federal education funds.** Education policy is moving to a performance-based model that gives recipients of federal funds flexibility to develop strategies to boost student achievement and meet other educational priorities. This approach encourages more dynamic experimentation and innovation that focuses on results.
- **In return for flexibility, fund recipients and educators should be held accountable for boosting student achievement and meeting other educational priorities.** Accountability depends on rigorous measurement of educational outcomes. Such measurement should reveal what strategies work, what strategies fail, and where changes are necessary. The Department of Education should use this information to publicly spotlight both exceptional and poor performers, actively promote strategies that work, and eliminate funding for those that do not.

- **A highly effective education workforce is essential to boost student achievement.**

Research shows that high-quality teachers and principals can deliver significant gains in student achievement. Federal education funding should reflect this research by providing incentives to adopt proven strategies to improve workforce quality and effectiveness.

The Obama administration, led by Education Secretary Arne Duncan, embraces these policy principles. Now the challenge is bringing budgetary priorities in line. This report identifies a number of programs that should be eliminated or reformed as part of this effort.

Narrow, low-impact programs should be eliminated

The Department of Education supports numerous, mostly small grant programs that serve niche purposes. Many of these programs should be eliminated, including:

- **Academies for American History and Civics.** This program, which provides workshops for teachers of American history, is not coordinated with other professional development programs within the Department of Education and is not based on the needs of states and localities.
- **We the People.** This program is an earmark grant to the Center for Civic Education to instruct a small number of students on the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights.
- **Cooperative Education Exchange.** This program is another noncompetitive grant to the Center for Civic Education to support curricula and teacher training programs in civics.
- **Close Up Fellowship Program.** This is a small noncompetitive grant to the Close Up Foundation of Washington, D.C., for financial assistance to economically disadvantaged students who participate in Close Up programs.
- **Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Education.** This program supports research and demonstration efforts to enhance the ability of elementary and secondary schools to meet the needs of gifted students. Elimination of this funding will have limited impact on gifted and talented programs, which will continue as part of state and local educational programming.
- **Exchanges with Historic Whaling and Trading Partners.** This program is earmarked for culturally based educational activities targeted at Alaska Natives, native Hawaiians, children and families of these groups living in Massachusetts, and members of any federally recognized Indian tribe in Mississippi.
- **Excellence in Economic Education.** This is a small grant program designed to promote economic and financial literacy among K-12 students.

- **Arts in Education.** This program provides grants for arts education, including two non-competitive grants that should be eliminated.

These programs may serve deserving groups of students and educators, but they represent narrow, prescribed funding streams with limited reach. This is inconsistent with the new flexible, results-oriented approach to education funding that seeks to maximize bang for the buck.

Outdated programs should be eliminated or updated

There are a number of outdated education programs that should be eliminated or redesigned. These programs include:

- **Women's Education Equity Act.** Federal funds should be focused on closing disparities in educational achievement, yet on most indicators of academic achievement, girls perform as well or better than boys. In most cases, large gaps that once existed between males and females have been eliminated and have significantly decreased in other cases. Women are still underrepresented in some fields of study, as well as more generally in doctoral and first-professional degree programs, although they have made substantial gains in the past 30 years.² The Women's Education Equity Act is a victim of this success. It is a small program that is no longer needed.
- **21st Century Community Learning Centers.** The 21st Century Community Learning Centers program is a voluntary out-of-school time program (before- and after-school time, weekends, and summer) for needy students. There is a movement, supported by the Obama administration, to expand formal learning time and enrichment activities by lengthening the school day and/or year, which research suggests can produce far greater benefits in student achievement.³ This program should be redesigned to bring it in line with this vision for expanded formal learning time as is proposed by the Obama administration in its recent blue print for reauthorization of ESEA and the proposed FY 2011 budget.
- **Magnet Schools Assistance Program.** The Magnet Schools Assistance Program is designed to assist in the desegregation of public schools. But education policy is currently focused on closing achievement disparities. Research suggests that the Magnet School program does not appreciably boost minority student achievement. This may not be surprising given that the program's original mission was aimed at integration, not closing achievement gaps. The magnet school program should be rethought to better align its mission with current priorities.

Programs should be better coordinated and sometimes consolidated

There are education programs with similar purposes spread over multiple government agencies and within different parts of the Department of Education. Some of these programs should be eliminated. Others could benefit from better coordination and possibly consolidation. These programs include:

- **Childhood mental health programs.** The Department of Education's childhood mental health programs suffer from redundancy. Specifically, the Mental Health Integration in Schools program and Grants to Improve the Mental Health of Children program (also known as Foundations for Learning) duplicate other efforts, including programs in the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities and National Activities program. They should be eliminated.
- **Teacher recruitment programs.** Teacher recruitment programs would benefit from consolidation into a single new "Transition to Teaching" program. This program would bring together Troops for Teachers, which is run out of the Department of Defense, with the National Teacher Recruitment Campaign and Teach for America, which now operate as separate programs within the Department of Education. A consolidated program would bring focus and free resources in the effort to deliver quality teachers to high-poverty and low-performing schools. The Obama administration recently offered a similar proposal in its blueprint for reauthorizing ESEA and its FY 2011 budget with the Teacher and Leader Pathways program.
- **Early childhood readiness programs.** The Head Start program is located within the Department of Health and Human Services. Yet it overlaps significantly with Department of Education programs focused on school readiness, including Even Start and Reading First. This structural separation impedes strategic coordination of resources to ensure that disadvantaged children enter school ready and prepared. Head Start should be better coordinated with related programs at the very least. But it might make more sense to co-locate Head Start with these programs in the Department of Education. Even Start should be eliminated or restructured as part of a more comprehensive program of school readiness and literacy for low-income children. The Obama administration offers a more comprehensive approach with its Pre-K-12 literacy fund proposed in the blueprint for reauthorizing ESEA and the FY 2011 budget.
- **Employment programs for the disabled.** There are also some Department of Education programs that seem to fit better elsewhere. Many programs in the Department of Education's Rehabilitation Services Administration are focused on helping those with disabilities prepare for gainful employment (including the State Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program, Migrant and Seasonal Farm Workers Program, Projects With Industry, Rehabilitation Training, and Supported Employment State Grants). These programs more logically fit within the Department of Labor, which operates similar programs and is focused on employment.

Programs should have clear goals

The Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities-State Grants program provided support to state education agencies for both drug-abuse and violence prevention. This divided attention clouded the program's purpose and diluted funds across a large number of small efforts that showed little evidence of reducing drug abuse or violence. Moreover, funds were not targeted at schools with the greatest needs. Congress consequently ended funding for the program in FY 2010, consistent with President Obama's budget request.

Among other programs that would benefit from clearer, more focused goals is the:

- **Perkins Vocational-Technical Education (Career and Technical Education) program.** This program was reauthorized in 2006 after a number of studies found the program lacked clarity of purpose. The reauthorization sought to address this criticism by increasing the focus on academic achievement, strengthening connections between secondary and postsecondary education, and improving state and local accountability. These reforms should be monitored and evaluated to see whether they have effectively addressed the program's underlying problems.

Results should drive funding decisions

Decisions about whether to eliminate or reform programs should be based on performance. President Obama proposed and Congress acted to eliminate FY 2010 funding for the Education Department's Mentoring Grants program, which sought to provide mentors for needy children in grades 4 through 8, after a recent evaluation found the program did not produce statistically significant results.⁴

Funds are also going to other programs that are not as effective as available alternatives. These include:

- **Title II of the Elementary-Secondary Education Act.** Title II of ESEA supports a wide range of state and district-level activities that are meant to improve teacher and principal quality. Some of these activities are worthwhile, but funding is not targeted at proven strategies. Indeed, school districts use the bulk of their Title II funding to support professional development and class-size reduction, both of which have shown limited benefits for boosting student achievement when implemented on a large scale. These funds should be redirected and targeted at efforts that actually improve teacher quality.
- **Teaching American History.** This program, which was appropriated almost \$119 million in FY 2010, provides grants to local education agencies to improve teachers' knowledge of traditional U.S. history. A 2005 evaluation found the program may not target teachers

most in need of professional development, training provided did not always employ proven strategies, and the program lacked demonstrated effectiveness.⁵ This program should be eliminated.

Performance evaluation and transparency should be strengthened

It is not easy to determine which education programs are effective, efficient, targeted at current priorities, and thus deserving of continued support. A dearth of studies and objective tools exist to assess program success. This limited research seeks to identify program implementation and impact evaluations as well as program performance reports, but in many cases programs have not been evaluated, or evaluations are just getting underway or are still ongoing.

Moreover, performance information that does exist is often not current, does not address outcomes related to program impact, and may be of questionable objectivity. These limitations are reflected in performance information reported by the Department of Education (and other federal agencies) under the Government Performance and Results Act and the Bush administration's Program Assessment Rating Tool, or PART.⁶ The movement toward more data-driven, evidence-based approaches in education promises to close these knowledge gaps. In the meantime, decisions about education spending will be somewhat clouded.

In the pages that follow, this report will detail the analysis that underpins all of our recommendations presented here. Doing What Works, in the case of the education program reforms presented in this paper, is largely supported on Capitol Hill and embraced by the Obama administration. But getting the program details right is a complex task. This paper provides a start.

The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

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