

2007

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Recommended Citation

Kessinger, Thomas A. (2007) "Efforts Toward National Educational Reform: An Essentialist Political Agenda," *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*. Vol. 20: Iss. 2, Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/mwer/vol20/iss2/4>

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Efforts Toward National Educational Reform: An Essentialist Political Agenda

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Abstract

The purpose of this manuscript is to summarize the major provisions of four salient national government initiatives and relate each one to an “essentialist” political agenda that is based on the essentialist philosophy or theory of education. The National Assessment of Educational Progress, A Nation at Risk, America 2000/Goals 2000, and No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 are reviewed to denote a trend that projects the national government as a dominant player in public educational reform. Evidence is offered, by way of primary source documents, to establish a link between the four aforementioned actions and the essentialist way of thinking. Readers should note that although education is traditionally and primarily a function of the states by way of the 10th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the national government exerts significant influence in deciding what should constitute that “education” for school-age children in the U.S. today. Furthermore, most states are following the national government’s lead in advocating educational reform.

Introduction

This exploratory paper attempts to summarize the key provisions of four important initiatives or actions of the legislative and executive branches of the national government of the United States. The initiatives have roots in four decades of philosophy and are represented in The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), *A Nation at Risk, America 2000/Goals 2000*, and the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001. Although Pre-K through 12 public education is primarily a matter of state interest, responsibility, and control, the national government has embarked on a steady and continuous path toward approximating, reflecting, and articulating an essentialist philosophical or educational orientation (Dunn, 2005; Knight, 1998; Ornstein & Levine, 2006). As a result of its efforts, the national government is steadily exercising, or perhaps gaining, greater control of public education in the United States.

Viewed and stated another way, the purpose of the paper is to: (1) summarize the four initiatives, and (2) relate each action to the philosophical perspective or educational theory of essentialism. A review of primary and other source documents are included in this paper to establish the revolutionary emphasis placed on public education by the national government. This topic is timely and of significant interest to academics and policymakers—state *and* national—who are trying to effect greater educational improvements in our nation’s public schools.

Throughout the twentieth century, as progressive ideas made their way into schools, various groups reacted. In the 1930s, one major group, the essentialists—as well as some others—argued that progressive educational ways were too soft and had placed less emphasis on dealing with the so-called educational basics such as mastery of the three R’s and established facts (Knight, 1998, p. 113; Webb, Mehta & Jordan, 2003, pp. 101-102). Essentialism is an educational theory grounded

in both idealism and realism; and, according to Ornstein and Levine (2006), its overarching aim is “to educate the useful and competent person” (p. 113). Its content emphasis includes “the three Rs, liberal arts and science, academic disciplines, and academic excellence” (p. 426). The essentialist tradition contains a large number of concerned citizens who feel that the schools have declined and that they need to return to stricter discipline and to a study of the “basics.” Since the 1930s, the essentialists have advanced efforts to warn the American public of “life-adjustment education,” child-centered education, and the continuing erosion of education or learning in the United States (Webb, Mehta & Jordan, 2003, p. 101).

In the 1950s, essentialists returned in force and again exerted anti-progressive sentiments via the Council for Basic Education under the leadership of Arthur Bestor and others. Bestor had written *The Retreat from Learning in Our Public Schools*, and this work was truly an essentialist manifesto. Assisting Bestor in the attack on progressive ideas in public schools was Admiral Hyman G. Rickover who deplored the lack of developed minds in the United States. He favored a European-type of education that focused on the basics and would lead students to be better prepared to enter an intensive and rigorous professional or technological program of study. Of course, the launching of Sputnik I added fuel and force to the debate of essentialist versus progressive ways of thinking.

The telling or watershed event that brought the national government directly and openly into the present discussion on public education was the issuance of *A Nation at Risk* (1983). This seminal government report noted that the “Federal Government has *the primary responsibility* to identify the national interest in education” (p. 33). As many can recall, the report warned “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people” (p. 5). Essentialists believe the essentials or “core” of education should be the “basics” of education. This report

highlighted both higher standards and improved content. It called for *renewed* emphasis (that is, a *neo-essentialist* perspective) on the “Five New Basics” which would include as a minimum standard for high school graduation four years of English; three years each of mathematics, science and social studies; and one-half year of computer science. Two years of a foreign language for college-bound students (p. 24) is also recommended. Webb, Mehta, and Jordan (2003) define essentialism as a “theory that focuses on an essential set of learnings that prepare individuals for life by concentration on the cultural and traditions of the past” (p. 530). According to Ornstein and Levine (2006), the *neo-essentialist* movement began in the 1980s, and advocates of this position are often associated with “political and cultural conservatives” (p. 123). Consequently, neo-essentialism can be defined as essentialism with a political thrust.

Even before *A Nation at Risk* (1983) was issued by President Reagan, the U.S. Congress had mandated the use of national tests by establishing the National Assessment Governing Board that set-up the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in the late 1960s. It is noteworthy that the NAEP continues as “the only nationally, representative, continuing assessment of what America’s students know and can do in school” (refer to the Overview of NAEP 2004). Epstein (2005) offers an extended discussion on the genesis and evolution of the NAEP.

As noted in the *Digest for Educational Statistics* (2004), “NAEP long-term assessments are designed to inform the nation of changes in the basic achievement of America’s youth” (p. 527). The NAEP provides four major dimensions of data: (a) state and national student performance results in reading, mathematics, science and writing, (b) trends in national student performance in reading, mathematics, and sciences for the past thirty years, (c) national student performance results in US history, geography, civics, the arts, foreign language, world history, and economics (beginning in 2006), and (d) comparisons in student performance based on such factors as race/ethnicity, gender, public and private schools, level of parental education, prior course-taking, and classroom and school conditions and practices (Overview of NAEP 2004). For example, according to Ornstein and Levine (2006), “mathematics and reading proficiency scores of groups of students vary directly with their social class” (p. 321). NAEP data reflects, “students with well-educated parents (one primary measure of social class) score much higher than students whose parents have less education” (p. 321).

Furthermore, the NAEP provides a variety of publications and other information tools in varied formats. These include: national and state reports cards on student performance; sample questions from tests, sample student answers, and scoring guides; assessment subject-area frameworks; and an online data tool that allows users to analyze and download data from NAEP assessments. Finally, NAEP publishes a schedule of regular test dates (by year, type of assessment, and subject area or discipline).

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a revival of basic education by political conservatives, and the new or *neo-essentialist* movement developed. The neo-essentialists offered a critique of existing schools and proposed a program to remedy perceived deficiencies in the educational system. They contended that new and sometimes experimental approaches to teaching had resulted in a neglect of systematic direct instruction in basic skills or reading, writing, and computation; this also reflected a decline of literacy and computational standards. For example, social promotion policies had eroded academic standards.

Stimulated by *A Nation at Risk* (1983), a national standards movement developed. The *essential* theme of movement is that American education will be improved by creating high academic standards for students’ achievement and by measuring progress toward achievement by means of standardized tests. *A Nation at Risk* effectively continued the earlier NAEP emphasis on testing.

Since the advent of NAEP and *A Nation at Risk*, other national actions affecting education occurred. For example, then President G.H.W. Bush endorsed the agenda of the nation’s governors in supporting *America 2000*, and later President W.J. (Bill) Clinton expanded it to *Goals 2000 (Educate America Act, 1994)*. Both presidential initiatives attempted to address particular weaknesses in the public schools by focusing on national targets that would be attained by the end of the decade. According to Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin (2005), “[a] national focus on standards originally came to fruition via the National Governors Association, which advocated for America 2000 and Goals 2000, [and] national-level policies that emphasized the need for national standards” (p. 182).

According to Urban and Wagoner (2004), then President George H.W. Bush had much in common with the nation’s governors in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

This commonality was reflected in the joint adoption by the president and the governors of an educational platform for the nation. As the outcome of the ‘Presidential Summit on Education,’...the *America 2000* program was pushed vigorously by the Bush administration. It consisted of a series of goals, published in pamphlet form, which the political leaders had agreed constituted a needed educational agenda for the nation. (p. 361)

The thrust of *America 2000* (1991) essentially reiterated several earlier educational pronouncements: “the schools were in need of a revolution, school people would have to be held accountable for their results, the schools were destined to become learning communities, and students within them should prepare for ‘lifelong learning’” (pp. 8 and 13). Hirsch (1996, p. 258) also offers a discussion of “lifelong learning” from an essentialist perspective.

The *America 2000* pamphlet also echoed notions found earlier in *A Nation at Risk* (1983) regarding international competitiveness. The focus of *America 2000* program was found in its six educational goals:

1. All children in America will start school ready to learn.
2. The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.
3. American students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography; and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so that they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.
4. U.S. students will be the first in the world in science and math achievement.
5. Every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
6. Every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning. (*America 2000*, p. 19)

Recalling the general aim of essentialism to educate “the useful and competent person,” there are clearly stated essentialist notions in the above goals. For example, the graduation rate will increase, students will exude competency in selected subjects and will excel in math and science, and students will use their minds well to become more responsible citizens and able to compete in the international arena. Inherent in each of the six goals is an increase in standards; this is at the heart of essentialism.

According to Urban and Wagoner (2004), President Clinton in his *Goals 2000* added two notions to Bush’s six national goals: namely, “parental involvement in education...and programs for improving the professional education of teachers” (p. 363).

In 1994, the U.S. Congress passed the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* consisting of the eight aforementioned goals and published them as The National Education Goals. Kasper (2005) notes that with this act “an educational standards-based school reform concept achieved acceptance at the national level” (p. 175). The target or objective of the goals was an educated citizenry, well trained and responsible, capable of adapting to a changing world, knowledgeable of its cultural heritage and the world community, and willing to accept and maintain America’s leadership in the twenty-first century” (Ornstein & Levine, 2006, pp. 408-409).

According to Ornstein and Levine (2006), in 2001 the National Education Goals Panel made its final and major report on the progress of the eight goals. The panel noted that although the nation did not meet the national goals by 2000, “many states made remarkable progress” (p. 409). In 2002, the panel was suspended after *No Child Left Behind* was signed into law by President George W. Bush.

Finally, the recent legislation of *No Child Left Behind* (2001) has continued the impetus for reform by the national government. Secretary of Education Paige (2002) stated

“[t]he No Child Left Behind law heralds a major change in direction for American schools” and “...helps us look at schools, governance, and the federal role in education in the right way” (p. 710). In spite of the ongoing debate on the merits and demerits of this legislative enactment, the national government has increased its requirements on the states and therefore has continued its role as a major influence on public education policies. As a result of this law, states are obligated to increase standards, insure achievement by means of tests, expect higher qualified teachers, and give evidence of greater accountability through annual yearly progress reports. These obligations are essentialist in design. In other words, states are the major conduits through which this national essentialist agenda is effected.

Specifically, a legal endorsement of standards came with the enactment of *No Child Left Behind*. Its major features reinforce an essentialist or basic education approach to education. It identifies the key basics as reading and mathematics. The act is also based on the essentialist premise found in the standards movement that students’ academic achievement can be measured by standardized tests. Because essentialism is grounded in idealist and realist philosophy, tests are held to be a valid and reliable means of evaluating students’ performance and achievement. Pulliam and Van Patten (2003) explain both essay and objectives examinations are encouraged (pp. 32-26).

Especially in the 1980s and 1990s, the national government sought to reduce monetary outlays and shift program fiscal responsibility to state and local governments. With *No Child Left Behind*, more federal influence is in evidence. Accountability pressures at both the state and local levels have school officials focused on improved test scores in reading and mathematics and on ensuring that every child has a “highly qualified teacher” in the classroom.

Conclusion

The intent of this paper is to demonstrate the significant role played by the national government or its agencies in advancing an “essentialist” educational agenda since the late 1960s. Evidence was offered by way of primary and other source documents to underscore an essentialist way of thinking. This paper should enable the reader to see connections between the four initiatives highlighted and the essentialist movement in education. Readers should also note that although education is primarily a function of the states by way of the Tenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the national government has become a major player in deciding what should constitute “the education” or the content and process for school-age children in the United States today.

The success of the national government-led essentialist position is manifest by the number of states that have set higher standards, strengthened graduation requirements, mandated curricula, and increased testing for both students and teachers—especially since *A Nation at Risk* (1983). Still there are educational historians and policymakers who would

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like to see more national and less “state or local” control—or at least emphasis on—of public education in the United States today. For example, in a recent article Ravitch (2006) articulates a sentiment that expressly highlights the limitations of fifty different sets of standards, preferring instead one set of national standards. In effect she and others are pushing an essentialist agenda to another level. Standards are better and preferred if they are national as opposed to a myriad of state-oriented standards. This sentiment is indeed reflective of the essentialist trend in American education today.

On the other hand, there are those who would prefer less national government influence and more state and local control of education. In fact, according to Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin (2005),

[w]hile each of the three presidents that succeeded Reagan focused on national standards, they also continued to emphasize the need for local control over schools. So although the federal role is seen as guiding the nation in school reform, it also acknowledges the importance of local decision-making. (p. 183)

The new era of educational reform represents a sea change. The emphases today are on higher standards, more testing, and greater accountability at both the local and state levels. Driving this change is a national government that is articulating an essentialist philosophy of education. Beginning in the late 1960s, the pendulum shifted to the highest level of government articulating control, setting the stage for top-down change. This has a number of policy implications because the decisions made by officials will be initiated and mandated at the national level and executed by individual states who annually report to the national government. Several questions remain unanswered. Among these are:

- How much leeway will the states be given in following the provisions of *No Child Left Behind*?
- How much money will be provided by each level of government to execute these provisions?
- How much state and local control will be sacrificed in the process?

It remains to be seen whether or not progressive educational practices can be maintained in the neo-essentialist era of national reform.

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