

FEDERAL ACCOUNTABILITY



At the start of the Obama Administration, the federal government's role in demanding accountability from schools, principals, and teachers is a lot like the theatrical, even comic, blustering old man behind the curtain—the Wizard of Oz.

Just like the Wizard, the U.S. Department of Education's efforts to insist on accountability from state and local school officials generate lots of thunder and fury in the form of headlines and conferences about the poor performance of U.S. students. And just like the Wizard in the story, the big noise is intended to divert us from the truth. The truth is that the tired old man behind the curtain knows that the image of his power is far greater than its reality—and so does the federal government.

The federal role in education

This has been the story since President Carter—fulfilling a campaign promise to one faction of the teachers' unions—created a separate Department of Education in 1979 in the name of sounding an alarm over troubled schools, but also to get an infusion of federal money into teacher paychecks.

President Reagan used the same strategy of fury, angst, and crisis in calling attention to “A Nation at Risk,” the 1983 report on the failings of U.S. schools. The report used charged language to describe America's schools, saying the nation was threatened with a “rising tide of mediocrity” and there had been a steady decline in standardized test scores since 1963. There were proposals for longer school days, and requirements for increased study of English, math, science, and foreign languages. But the report was careful to say it was up to state and local officials to handle the problem and that the federal government's only role in fixing the problem was simply to “identify the national interest in education.”

President George W. Bush added some muscle to the rhetoric when in 2001 he signed “No Child Left Behind” into law. The legislation requires periodic tests of academic performance and that local governments force changes in schools that have a consistent record of producing failing students.

The Obama Administration has a chance to make history if it focuses the debate on how the national government can be held accountable for making sure that every American child gets a fair shot at a good education.

The heart of “No Child Left Behind” is an attempt to use the leverage of federal grants to force improvements in basic student performance. Reading and math scores for elementary school students are on the rise since the law took effect. Grades and test scores for minority students, especially in big cities, no longer are being hidden or ignored and that is forcing innovative approaches in how to inspire those young people to stay in school and how to best teach them. Given the otherwise barren landscape, these basic changes stand tall as achievements in the history of national government accountability for education reform.

But even President Bush’s limited success in using federal grant money to set some federal standards for achievement has sparked anger from unions and politicians about an intrusive federal government setting arbitrary standards for student achievement and forcing teachers to simply teach to the test. The result is that fearful national politicians chose not to reauthorize the “No Child Left Behind” law. They left it for the incoming Obama Administration to either embrace or reject.

The current state of affairs

Today, the opposition to federal government spurring reform is strong despite declining rates of graduation from high school—only 71 percent of the nation’s 9th grade students graduate from high school on time and it is worse for minority students: only about half of them graduate from high school in four years. It is incredible but true, according to several studies, that only one in five minority students who receive a high school diploma

today is ready to go to college. There are also flat rates of graduation from college and particularly poor outcomes in engineering and science, fields critical to U.S. success in future global economic competition.

So as President Obama comes to Washington, the federal government's effort at improving public schools remains only slightly better than the meek little man, the Wizard, hiding behind the curtains.

The fact is that as President Obama begins to offer leadership on education early in the 21st century he is still dealing with a 19th century idea, namely, that what happens inside the school house is under the control of the families and public officials closest to that school. There is no U.S. Constitutional mandate for a federal role in education and state and local political leaders jealously guard their prerogative to control their schools.

As a result, the actual power of the federal government to improve schools is slim. It is purposely starved by people opposed to the growth of the federal government and it is also starved by officials who fear dealing with real standards for schools. Polls show parents want national standards but politicians, unions, school officials, and even civil rights groups dilute the call to action with objections. They warn that giving the federal government real power over education will result in cancer-like growth with a Washington bureaucrat's hand reaching into every local school room.

Now the Obama Administration has the chance to make history if it shifts this fruitless, stalled debate from a focus on fear of an intrusive national government to the important discussion about how the national government can be held accountable for making sure that every American child gets a fair shot at a good education.

There is a precedent here. In the 1800s Horace Mann, a lawyer who did not have access to schools as a child, became the first head of education in the state of Massachusetts. With no role for the state over schools run by local governments, Mann created schools to prepare teachers, put in place standards for teacher credentials, set standards for the length of the school year and standards for graduation, all the while creating more public

high schools. He made the case that the state be held accountable for its role in public education, because good schools, he said, are a “ladder of opportunity” for children and improve the economy as well as morals.

“Education is our only political safety,” Mann said in the early 1800s.

“Outside of this ark all is deluge...education is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery.” Those words hold true today in an age with large-scale immigration, increasing numbers of children born to single women, and tragic levels of poverty among children, especially minority children who generally are caught in big city schools with the very worst records for academic achievement.

The cutting edge of this question is how far can the national government go in demanding accountability from schools it doesn't technically control?

The opportunity at hand

The baseline discussion for holding the federal government accountable for education at the start of the Obama Administration begins with the power of federal dollars to pump up state school budgets and the power of the federal government to insist on local schools being held accountable for giving all children the opportunity to get a good education. The

cutting edge of this question is how far can the national government go in demanding accountability from schools it doesn't technically control? At what point does the federal government's desire to ensure accountability for good schools amount to interference in educational decisions being made by a local school district?

Louis V. Gerstner Jr., the former head of IBM, recently wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* that it is time for the federal government to act on education and the first step is to simply abolish local school districts. Step two for a federal government that is willing to be held accountable on education, Gerstner wrote, is for Washington to establish national standards for curriculum, national tests to measure basic skills, and national standards for teacher certification.

Big city mayors, from Michael Bloomberg in New York to Adrian Fenty in Washington, D.C., have made school reform their hallmark and asked voters to see them as accountable for fixing troubled schools.

“We must make sure that as a country the results we are seeing are meaningful in terms of student results,” New York City school Chancellor Joel Klein told the U.S. House Committee on Education and Labor in the midst of the 2008 presidential campaign, suggesting the need for candidates from both parties to advocate strong federal action on education. “All schools, whether in New York or Kansas,” he added, “have to be held to high standards.”

Meanwhile, there is a movement of national reformers trying to use private dollars to spark change in public education. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has focused on creating national standards for high school achievement as well as spreading information nationally on proven techniques of successful teachers. Gates also has called for higher, national standards on salaries for teachers. “Not to pay teachers on the basis of their performance,” Gates said at a recent conference, is “almost like saying teacher performance doesn’t matter and that’s basically saying students don’t matter.”

The pressure for immediate national accountability on educating students is all around as President Obama takes office. As debate takes place on the future of “No Child Left Behind,” it is likely that federal accountability for ensuring that national standards of achievement are met will be part of the negotiations.

Without the national government holding itself accountable for educating American children, the drive to reform will stall. The central question is whether President Obama is willing to take the risk of being held accountable for such a challenge. Simply making thunderous noise about the problems of education—the Wizard of Oz strategy—simply fails the test this time around.

About the author

Juan Williams is the senior correspondent for National Public Radio, a political analyst for Fox Television, and a regular panelist for Fox News Sunday. In addition to prize-winning columns and editorial writing for *The Washington Post*, he also has authored six books.

With the release of his sixth book, *Enough—The Phony Leaders, Dead-End Movements and Culture of Failure That Are Undermining Black America—and What We Can Do About It*, Williams combines a bold, perceptive, solution-based look at African American life, culture, and politics with an impassioned call to do the right thing now and not lose sight of the true values of the Civil Rights Movement.

In 2000, NPR selected Williams to host their afternoon talk show, “Talk of The Nation,” and in two years he brought the show’s ratings to record heights. His daring perspectives on American politics, race, and culture are based on his historical understanding, political expertise, and knowledge of diversity.

Previously, Williams was a political columnist and national correspondent for *The Washington Post*. In a 21-year career at *The Post* he served as an editorial writer, op-ed columnist, and White House correspondent. He won several journalism awards for his writing and investigative reporting. He also has won an Emmy Award for TV documentary writing.