

# **FEDERAL COMPENSATORY EDUCATION POLICIES FROM RONALD REAGAN TO GEORGE W. BUSH**

**By**

**Maris A. Vinovskis**

Department of History,  
Institute for Social Research,  
and the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy  
University of Michigan

**T**his afternoon, I will briefly discuss some of the federal compensatory education policies from the administration of Ronald Reagan to the present. This talk is based upon my experiences in Washington as well as on my research. Given our schedule, I will simplify and condense a rather complex, but very important issue facing our society today: how to raise student achievement. The recent focus on raising the achievement of all students and setting high academic standards and goals will be explored. I will also make some observations about education reforms in general, and a few remarks directed more locally, all of which I hope will help us to achieve this goal.

Prior to the 1960s, the federal government played only a small part in helping states and local communities to improve K-12 education. But the federal role in education expanded considerably after the 1960s. A heightened interest in issues concerning poverty in America as well as the election of Lyndon Johnson as president in 1964 set the stage for a series of federal programs designed to assist disadvantaged Americans.

Among the most important was the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act which provided federal funding, through a program referred to as Title I, to help disadvantaged children succeed in school. Another key innovation was the Head

Start program for early childhood education. With these initiatives, policymakers in the mid-1960s pledged that our nation would eliminate poverty within a decade and provide equal educational opportunities for everyone.

There was considerable bipartisan support for Title I and Head Start and very high hopes for their success, but the results from the initial evaluations of these programs in the late 1960s and early 1970s were disappointing. For example, although there were modest academic gains for Head Start students, these proved temporary and faded once children entered regular classrooms.

The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 initiated Republican efforts to reduce federal involvement in education. But opposition to Reagan's plans led to a stalemate on Capitol Hill. Many of the existing federal compensatory education programs survived, but the funding for these programs was drastically cut.

Reflecting state and national concerns about the inadequacy of American schools, the Reagan Administration appointed a special panel to assess the state of education in America. In 1983 the panel issued its widely-publicized report, *A Nation at Risk*. In language, that has now become classic, the report complained that "if an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves."

The publication of a *Nation at Risk* signaled the longest education reform effort in our history—one that has now lasted for more than two decades and still has considerable strength. Three major changes were introduced. First, there was a focus on student achievement rather than on resources provided for the schools.

Second, there was an expectation that all children can and should be able to reach high academic standards. And, finally, there were efforts at the national and state levels to set ambitious education goals; and to hold educators and policymakers accountable for reaching those objectives.

The first president Bush, Reagan's successor in 1988, emphasized education during his election campaign. And early in his term, President H.W. Bush and the nation's governors, led by Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton, held an unprecedented education summit. The participants set six national education goals which they pledged to

reach in ten years. These were very ambitious goals. Two examples: by the year 2000: (1) all children in America would start school ready to learn; and (2) U.S. students would be the first in the world in science and mathematics achievement.

While policymakers agreed on the need for improving American education, they continued to disagree on how to achieve these objectives. Most congressional Democrats, and even some Republicans, were satisfied with Title I and did not see the need for new programs. But President Bush in the early 1990s was not happy with the old programs. He announced a new package of education initiatives, called “America 2000.” Although most of the America 2000 proposals were not enacted, the legislation did create a framework for many subsequent Republican and Democratic education reforms.

America 2000 called for developing world class content standards for five core subjects—math, science, English, history, and geography; creating voluntary national tests for the 4th, 8th, and 12th grades in the five core subjects; and establishing America 2000 states and communities. But America 2000 also called for funding parental-choice programs for both private and public schools. This was the most controversial part of the package and doomed the initiative among Democrats.

In the early 1990s, congressional Democrats opposed America 2000 and insisted that the current Title I approach was sufficient—it only needed more federal monies for existing programs. Yet with the 1992 presidential election coming, Democrats decided to assemble their own reform package which, like the Republicans stressed high academic standards aligned to the accompanying curriculum and related assessments.

After the election of President Bill Clinton along with a Democratic Congress, policymakers and educators expected a quick reauthorization of Title I. The Clinton administration, however, wanted a new approach to education reforms. It called for standards-based or systemic reforms—and they named the initiative Goals 2000. In seeking support for Goals 2000, the Clinton administration emphasized Title I’s shortcomings. This was a profound change—just 4 years earlier there had been a consensus among many legislators on the seemingly proven effectiveness of Title I.

But while Republicans and Democrats agreed upon much of the Goals 2000 package, they disagreed over the role of the federal government. The Republicans now called for even more state and local involvement and less federal control. The biggest

battles were over the opportunity-to-learn standards; liberal Democrats in the House insisted that in addition to holding students and educators accountable for improving academic achievement, children needed adequate school resources in order to have an opportunity to learn. The Republicans, worried about even more federal intrusion into local education, opposed these opportunity-to-learn standards. They threatened to scuttle the Goals 2000 legislation and the reauthorization of Title I.

Goals 2000 passed in April 1994 and Title I was reauthorized six months later. Key provisions of the new legislation, such as the development by states of a rigorous accountability system, however, were not scheduled to be completed until the year 2001—just after Clinton would have left office.

Unexpected Republican victories in the 1994 midterm congressional elections derailed the Clinton education reforms. House Republican now tried to repeal Goals 2000, dismantle the Department of Education, and drastically reduce federal funding for education.

At first, it appeared that House Speaker Newt Gingrich and his allies might succeed in reversing federal involvement in education. But President Clinton and the congressional Democrats, with some support from the moderate Senate Republicans, rallied to save the Department of Education, protect Goals 2000, and minimize the proposed education cuts.

Clinton's Goals 2000 program was saved, but the strong GOP opposition persuaded the administration to stop providing federal leadership on issues such as systemic reform. As part of Clinton's successful 1996 re-election strategy, he quietly abandoned Goals 2000. Clinton now focused his attention on specific, small-scale federal education initiatives such as hiring 100,000 new teachers, creating after-school programs, and mandating class-size reductions.

Before the Title I program was scheduled to expire in 1999, the Clinton administration released several preliminary studies which suggested that the standards-based reforms were working. Therefore, the Democrats called upon the nation to "stay the course" and renew the current education reforms.

The Republicans, on the other hand, pointed to the discouraging trends in student achievement scores in the 1990s. The GOP claimed that standards-based reforms by

themselves were not sufficient to help disadvantaged youth. Instead, Republican legislators called for more flexibility in how federal funds distributed and used at the state and local levels.

Earlier, the first President Bush and the nation's governors had agreed to reach specific national education goals by the year 2000 and they promised to hold policymakers accountable for reaching them. Indeed, the sponsors of both America 2000 and Goals 2000 pledged to reach those targets.

So what happened when the year 2000 arrived? Of course, no one would expect all of the goals to be achieved. After all, these were very ambitious and it is hard to predict the timing of this kind of progress. However, none of the national education goals were reached by the year 2000—a very disappointing and largely unacknowledged result.

Both Democrats and Republicans had promised to achieve these goals and had pledged to hold themselves accountable. Yet Democrats and Republicans alike were now silent about the failure to reach the goals—lest they themselves and their parties be held responsible for not reaching them.

As the GOP readied itself for the 2000 elections, it faced an uphill fight for the presidency. Clinton had soundly defeated Senator Bob Dole in 1996; and with the domestic economy showing strength, it seemed that Vice President Al Gore would replace Clinton as president.

The Republicans therefore turned to a candidate who seemed to be able to attract both conservatives and moderates—Texas Governor George W. Bush. Bush retained his core conservative supporters based on his “pro-life” stance on abortion and a promise to reduce taxes; but he also wanted to be seen as a “compassionate conservative.” Calling for dramatic improvements in K–12 education provided him with a justification for this claim.

Stressing the need to improve early reading instruction, Bush called for a revised Title I program that would “leave no child behind.” Lest the Democrats once again outflank the GOP on the education issue, candidate Bush and the Republicans in Congress supported large increases in federal spending. As a result, Republicans neutralized much of the Democrats' normal electoral advantage on the education issue; to do this, however, they jettisoned, at least temporarily, some of the conservative policies

previously advocated by GOP House members.

Once in office, President Bush made education one of his top domestic priorities. Less than two weeks after his inauguration, Bush announced his “No Child Left Behind” initiative. During the protracted negotiations over the “No Child Left Behind” legislation, Bush was forced to make several compromises. He abandoned traditional GOP issues such as private school vouchers. And he continued to accept an even higher federal education budget than he had originally wanted.

The No Child Left Behind Act was enacted in January 2002. It has several features. States receiving Title I money must develop rigorous academic standards and all students have to be at least proficient with regard to those standards in reading and math within 12 years. Students must be tested in reading and math every year from grades three through eight, and again in high school. Test results are to be reported in the aggregate, but also broken down by categories such as race and economic status in order to identify schools where high overall averages may hide pockets of failing students. Schools must make adequate yearly progress toward the 12-year deadline of universal proficiency. And the legislation imposes a series of corrective actions on schools and districts which fail to make adequate yearly progress for two or more consecutive years.

The Bush administration is also trying to change Head Start. They want to alter Head Start’s long-term focus on health and social services to bring greater attention to early childhood learning. Republicans acknowledge that the academic performance of Head Start children is improved slightly; but not enough to eliminate the large achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Therefore, Republicans have called for more early literacy training in Head Start programs—making school readiness their top goal. They have also proposed to transfer the operation of Head Start to the states—so that local Head Start projects can be coordinated with other early childhood education programs (such as the Early Reading Program).

The National Head Start Organization and many Democrats, however, oppose the GOP proposals. They maintain that Head Start, as constituted, is an immensely successful program that should not be altered. They argue that there is little evidence that states can do a better job than Head Start of improving children’s school readiness. And they fear that states, especially in the current budget environment, may try to reduce spending on

Head Start in order to use the money for other purposes.

Forced to compromise, the administration scaled back its broad Head Start proposal to a pilot program for 8 states. The bill passed the House by one vote and now awaits action in the Senate. Given the continued divisions in the Senate and the upcoming election, it is doubtful that any measure will pass this year.

Now, as the 2004 presidential campaign is underway, Democratic challengers to President Bush have questioned the White House's education reforms. Indeed, some Democrats have abandoned their earlier, bipartisan support for the No Child Left Behind Act—attacking the inflexibility of the new regulations as well as the GOP's refusal to provide significantly more federal funding.

### **Conclusion**

This brief overview of attempts at education reform is very disheartening. A great deal of effort has gone into trying to devise solutions for the very serious problem of educational underachievement. Yet the results seem to be: many ambitious programs, not too many achievements. What can we learn from this? What approaches might yield better results?

I don't claim to have any easy answers, but there are **nine observations** which I will make, based on my historical and policy work, which may be helpful.

**First, we tend to set unrealistic expectations for achieving results, and then become frustrated when we cannot reach them as promised.** George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and the governors all pledged to achieve major improvements over a wide range of educational weakness by the year 2000.

While those were certainly worthwhile goals, most policymakers at that time, knew that we would not reach them in ten years. Unrealistic goals encourage educators and policymakers to cut corners or even to cheat in order to try to meet those objectives.

Unattainable goals also mean that politicians will usually ignore or downplay these objectives once they realize they cannot be reached. The result is that the public becomes cynical toward the promises of our educators and elected officials and less willing to support additional educational spending or new educational initiatives.

**Second, improving the educational performance of children will not happen quickly.** Analysis of past efforts suggests that reforming education requires more time

and effort than most policymakers acknowledge.

There is no single strategy that will suddenly overcome the years of disadvantage and inadequate preparation of at-risk children. And no one educational intervention will work equally well in all settings or at all stages of a child's development. As it stands now, reforms that are actually put into practice are modest and build upon current educational practices. This is the normal way for any changes to be introduced into an educational setting. Reforms which try to jettison the old and start anew, the implicit strategy of many Washington policymakers, are unrealistic. While we need high standards, we also need flexibility in how we reach our objectives in order to take into consideration the diverse conditions and challenges facing our schools.

**Third, we need to hold everyone responsible for making improvements and maintaining realistic and more flexible standards.** It has been difficult for the public to hold political leaders accountable for failing to reach promised national and state goals. The goals were usually set sufficiently far into the future so that those who developed them were no longer in office when the target date arrived.

In practice, the focus of responsibility has been placed mainly on students through high-stakes testing. Because the impact on students is more immediate and potentially more damaging, extra care must be taken to ensure that tests are reliable and fair. Key decisions such as tracking, promotion, and graduation should utilize other sources of information in addition to test scores—such as teacher reports and classroom performance information.

And students alone should not be held accountable for meeting the high standards and expectations set for them. Parents, teachers, schools, and public officials need to share that accountability.

**Fourth, large education packages such as America 2000, Goals 2000, and No Child Left Behind are appealing and can be useful, but they often suffer from inadequate implementation and coordination.**

These broad programs properly acknowledge the need for integrating a variety of individual programs into a more comprehensive whole. At the same time, however, these overarching packages often assemble loosely related, categorical programs without sufficient attention to the immense problems of implementing and coordinating these

programs at the state and local levels. Moreover, there has been too much focus on the federal government—even though federal funds provide less than 10 percent of K-12 monies. While we need to improve federal assistance, we cannot lose sight of the fact that most educational funding and direction occurs at the state and local levels.

**Fifth, we should applaud the new emphasis on measuring success in school by looking at student outcomes rather than at just the resources we provide to school systems.** While money is essential for providing a good education, money alone is not sufficient for improving achievement. It is also a question of how wisely are we spending that money in terms of helping disadvantaged children. Inflated and wasteful administrative costs, for example, do not help students in the classroom.

**Sixth, parents play a key role in education of their children. They have the primary responsibility for helping their children develop, but they also need assistance from others, such as school teachers.** While everyone acknowledges the importance of parents, we should be more specific about what roles parents should play. We need to continue to applaud parents who belong to the PTA [Parent-Teacher Association] and are active participants in a child's school; but it is even more important that parents pay close attention to how their children use their time: homework and academics must be the primary focus.

Buying children computers or other learning tools is fine, but it is no substitute for reading aloud to young children and personally demonstrating to them that books and education are important in our own lives.

**Seventh, after parents, teachers are the most important factor in children getting a good education.** Too often, policymakers are so concerned with other aspects of school reforms that they neglect the importance of recruiting, training, and retaining first-class teachers.

We need to make K–12 teachers the center of our educational reforms by providing them with the salaries and respect that they deserve. We need to reward those that are doing a good job and help those that are not succeeding. Occasionally, however, there may be some teachers who do not belong in the classroom, and they should be encouraged to seek employment elsewhere.

Our best and brightest college students should be encouraged to teach. And we

need to recruit more of them from our best schools. Some faculty members here at the University of Michigan forget that many of our undergraduates are interested in elementary and secondary teaching careers. For the past two years, I have surveyed many students in our introductory U.S. history course about their career goals. Forty percent of these students say that they are considering teaching in K–12 schools. We faculty focus most of our attention on the undergraduates who want to become professors and researchers like ourselves. We also need to communicate to our undergraduates how important K–12 teaching is for our nation and why many of them might find teaching a good career choice.

Fortunately, the School of Education provides our undergraduates an opportunity to receive a teaching certificate. And the School of Education is working with LS&A faculty in order to recruit high quality student teachers to work in nearby communities, such as Willow Run.

Educators and policymakers need to insist on highly qualified teachers in classrooms—it has been wrong to allow untrained and poorly qualified teacher aides and instructors in Title I schools and Head Start programs. The Clinton administration should be praised for trying to remedy this, despite considerable pressure to retain unqualified teacher aides. And the No Child Left Behind legislation now mandates well-trained teachers, but we need to ensure that the teacher quality provisions are enforced.

Our best teachers should be in locations where they are needed most. We should pay premium salaries and improve working conditions for teachers who serve economically disadvantaged communities.

Finally, Schools of Education need to focus more on the content of what is taught as well as improve pedagogical practices. In the late 19th century, the University of Michigan was a national leader in involving LS&A faculty in teacher preparation. We lost that close relationship in the 1920s and 1930s—it is now time to recapture that partnership.

Recently, our deans of LS&A and the School of Education have met and agreed to set up a task force to address some of these important concerns.

**Eighth, inadequate research and development is a major obstacle to providing effective federal educational assistance to states and local communities.**

Despite the considerable sums of public and private money spent on education research and program development over the decades, we still lack scientific documentation regarding which programs are effective in helping disadvantaged children—especially as agencies try to scale-up existing small, experimental programs into larger and more diverse settings.

Universities need to play a larger role in making such improvements. We should encourage more research that is scientifically-rigorous and educationally-useful. Steps in this direction are being made at the University of Michigan. For example, faculty members David Cohen, Susan Neuman, and Stephen Raudenbush, at the Ford School of Public Policy, the School of Education, and ISR, are playing key roles in Ann Arbor and in Washington in making these improvements.

**Finally, while education is essential to helping disadvantaged students, we also need to deal with the larger issue of poverty in America.** Economic class differences make a big difference in student achievements. For example, a recent study concluded that by the 1980s economic class mattered as much as race or ethnicity in determining who attended a four-year college and who was admitted to the most selective colleges.

Therefore, we need to address the structural problems in our economy and society which have acted as barriers to social and economic mobility. We must provide low-income families with adequate health care and better job opportunities.

Disadvantaged children learn better if those from poor and middle-class families are in the same classrooms; de facto residential segregation by race and income in so many of our communities is not desirable.

Children, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, benefit from additional summer learning and a longer school year. In setting up school calendars, we need to focus more on the needs of our children and less on the desire for longer vacations.

And top-ranked universities and colleges, like the University of Michigan, need to do more to attract and educate disadvantaged Americans. Two weeks ago, Harvard President Lawrence Summers pointed out that “when only 10 percent of the students in elite higher education come from families in the lower half of the income distribution, we are not doing enough.” He complained that rather than being an engine of social mobility,

elite schools may be inhibiting social mobility because of the wide gaps in college attendance for students from different income groups.

Harvard announced that it will stop asking parents who earn less than \$40,000 to contribute to the cost of their child's education; and Harvard will reduce the tuition costs for parents earning between forty and sixty thousand dollars (this will cost Harvard about \$2 million a year to help about 1000 of their 6600 undergraduates).

The University of Michigan does not have the funds, at this time, to duplicate what well-endowed private schools are doing. But in the next two months, the University will be launching a new, long-term Capital Development campaign. As part of that initiative, perhaps we can challenge our alumni and friends to endow more support for students from low-income families.

Additionally, the State of Michigan needs to provide more support for low-income students. The State should increase overall funding for our schools of higher education; but it also needs to bolster the amount of aid targeted for low-income students. For example, the Michigan Merit Awards program provides a total of \$2500 to graduating seniors who do well on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) tests. This is a good program and should be continued for all students. When state revenues recover, we should consider making differential awards by doubling the amount we provide to seniors from low-income families.

All of us are proud to be part of the University of Michigan which has been a national leader in providing educational opportunities for underserved minorities; it is now time that we also do the same for under-served children from low-income families.

This brief outline of the history of and faults with federal programs to help disadvantaged students calls for exploring new solutions. In the wake of many failures in federal compensatory education programs since the 1960s, some argue that the White House and Congress should reduce expenditures in this area and return money to taxpayers.

I am sympathetic to the need to eliminate government waste, but I still believe that the federal government can play a very important role in helping disadvantaged students—by providing scientifically-sound and well-tested information, appropriate guidance, and adequate funding for states and local districts. But in order to do so, federal

strategies for producing rigorously researched, useful programs and for delivering that information and assistance needs to be reconsidered and restructured.

When existing federal education programs—well-intentioned though they may be—are ineffective, the problem is not just wasted tax dollars, but missed opportunities to help those most in need. The promises of compensatory education programs have raised the expectations of those who have the least to look forward to; yet the programs themselves have failed to deliver the improvements necessary to help them escape from poverty.

The overall experiences with federal compensatory education programs, such as Title I and Head Start, have disappointed many Americans who now are discovering that only limited progress has been made in helping at-risk children during the past 40 years.

For the many at-risk students, who pass through these programs and are not significantly helped, however, the results are more than just frustrating—they are precious opportunities lost forever.

Therefore, we must rededicate ourselves to work together in order to ensure that everyone in our country has the same opportunity for receiving the high quality education they deserve.

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### **Maris Vinovskis**

**Maris Vinovskis** holds the titles of A.M. and H.P. Bentley Professor of History in the Department of History in the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts and Professor of Public Policy in the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy. He has been a member of the history department faculty for thirty years and joined the Ford School faculty in 1998. Throughout his tenure at the University, he has served as a model for the integration of research, teaching, and public service.

Professor Vinovskis is a leading specialist on the history of education in the United States, an area in which he has not only provided us with exemplary research, but has taken his expertise into the public sector to inform public policy. He has been an advisor to Congress and the U.S. Department of Education on questions of educational research and policy, in both Republican and Democratic administrations. He has also provided service to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services on the issues of

demographics and family planning.

in the specialized field of demographic history, Professor Vinovskis has focused on the concept of the “life course,” analyzing data not according to cross-sectional information, but on the basis of the progression of the life cycle. The quantity and the quality of his work has impressed his fellow researchers, as well as those who work in federal agencies, who have made good use of the data and recommendations he has assembled.

His many books reflect his development as a scholar, from his early study titled *Fertility in Massachusetts from the Revolution to the Civil War (1981)* to the more recent *History and Education Policy Making (1999)*. His books have been described by leaders in the field as path-breaking, and as models of quantitative analysis in the field of the history of education.

In addition to his substantial contributions in publishing and in public service, Professor Vinovskis has provided outstanding teaching to students for decades, even while serving as chair of the Department of History. His students express gratitude for his attentive consideration of their work and the high standards to which he holds them. One former student noted that in addition to being a brilliant scholar and teacher, he is “a wonderful human being.”

For his sustained and distinguished contributions to the University of Michigan, to the larger community of scholars, and to public agencies, the University is delighted to appoint Professor Vinovskis to the high honor of the Henry Russel Lectureship.

American Presidential Rhetoric from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush: Another Look at Civil Religion. Article. May 2009. I argue that Bush employed this rhetorical frame to politically and morally cloak the war in Iraq under a larger war on terror and, in this way, produced a hegemonic expression, test, and affirmation of conservative morality. Although John Kerry successfully questioned the validity of Bush's policy framing of the Iraq war as part of the war on terror, he continued to reason within the orthodox moral frame created by Bush in the wake of September 11, 2001. Consequently, Kerry did not critique the conservative moral foundations upon which Bush's policy frame rested nor did he affix an