

# The Future of the Federal Role in Elementary & Secondary Education

A Collection of Papers Published  
by the Center on Education Policy



The Center on Education Policy is the national independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. We do not represent any special interests. Instead, we help citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.

Working at the national, state, and local levels, the Center achieves its mission by producing publications, writing articles, convening meetings, making presentations, and, upon request, providing expert advice. The Center also works jointly with many other education, business, government, and civic organizations.

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# Introduction

On December 4, 2000, the Center on Education Policy sponsored a day-long meeting to discuss what the federal role should be in elementary and secondary education and how that role might be improved and reshaped. The purpose of the meeting was to share ideas and proposals that could be helpful to the Congress and the Administration as they address education policy in 2001. A related goal was to identify suggestions that seemed to have broad appeal among people from various sectors and with different political views.

Forty-two people attended the meeting. Participants included professors of education, researchers, think tank representatives, congressional staff, U.S. Department of Education officials, representatives of teacher associations and parents, representatives of state and local education organizations, advocates for private schools, business and foundation officials, consultants, test developers, and the media. Appendix A includes the full list of participants.

As a starting point for discussion at the meeting, the Center on Education Policy asked several scholars and practitioners to write papers on various aspects of the federal role in education. These papers, which are published in this volume, were circulated in advance to all the meeting invitees and formed a basis for organizing the conversation.

Discussion at the December 4 meeting ranged across several topics. Among the many intriguing issues explored were the following:

- What are the fundamental interests of the federal government in elementary and secondary education that should be preserved?
- What lessons can be learned from the past 35 years of experience with federal education programs?
- What is the appropriate role of the federal government in standards-based reform?
- What could the federal government do to raise academic achievement for all students, especially low-performing students?
- What could the federal government do to promote equity of opportunity for all students and to improve education in poor schools?
- What is the right balance between flexibility and accountability in federal programs?
- Are there too many federal programs? If so, how should they be reduced or grouped?
- How should federal aid be distributed?
- What should the federal role be with respect to private schools?
- What could the federal government do to improve the capacity of schools and teachers to deliver effective curriculum and instruction?

This volume opens with an essay by Jack Jennings, which emphasizes the opportunities for a bipartisan consensus on the federal education role and lays out the Center's recommendations for what that role

should include. Although this essay was shaped in many helpful ways by the December 4 conversation, it represents the ideas of the Center alone. It is not meant to either summarize the meeting discussion or imply agreement by any of the meeting participants.

The remainder of this volume consists of papers by Carl Kaestle, Richard Rothstein, Margaret Goertz, Paul Barton, Elizabeth Pinkerton, David Cohen and Susan Moffitt, and Paul Hill (who could not attend the meeting but submitted an advance paper). We extend our appreciation to these authors for stimulating a productive discussion and our thanks to all of the meeting participants for contributing to an engrossing and important conversation that we hope will continue in the coming months.