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# Get the Federal Government Out of Education? That Wasn't the Founding Fathers' Vision

Last fall on the campaign trail, Mike Lee, Utah's new Tea-Party-backed senator, boldly asserted that: "...Congress has no business regulating our nation's public education system, and has created problems whenever it has attempted to do so." Other Tea Party candidates picked up this popular refrain. And increasingly other conservatives are raising the question: What -- if any -- should be the federal role in education?

The issue is sure to be debated in upcoming education hearings in Congress. But the answer isn't to eliminate federal involvement in education. That would be a wrong-headed move that ignores our country's history and would contribute to the decline of the United States. It's also a battle that has been fought and lost before because the stakes are simply too high.

Federal involvement began more than 225 years ago, even before George Washington was president, when Congress passed two laws -- the Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 -- to create and maintain public schools in the expanding United States.

Back then, educational opportunities for most children depended on churches, charities, and paid tutors -- and on gender, race and income levels. The founding fathers recognized this problem and emphasized the need for a more educated citizenry in the new democracy.

Over the next two centuries, these two ordinances led to establishing public schools in the 30 new states created out of the territories west of the original 13 colonies. The specifics of federal land grants were outlined in each of the federal acts for admitting these states.

The national government also encouraged the establishment of state institutions of higher education. During the Civil War, Congress passed the Morrill Act, resulting in the University of Illinois, the University of California, and 74 other institutions. Signed by Abraham Lincoln, this Act used the same land grant policy for higher education as was used for public schools.

But there are many other examples of how federal support has been essential for the expansion and improvement of public schooling over time. They include:

### Encouraging basic support for education

In the United States, local property taxes pay for about [48 percent of the costs of public elementary and secondary education in fiscal year 2008](#). State income and sale taxes covered about 44 percent. The federal government picked up the remaining 8 percent through direct grants. Federal support is much greater, however, when various indirect aids are considered.

Taxpayers deduct local and state taxes from their federal tax obligation, making local taxation more bearable and leading to greater financial support for public education.

In addition, local school districts and universities use tax-free bonds to finance construction and remodeling of school buildings. That work is more affordable because those bonds are attractive to taxpayers seeking tax-free income.

These indirect subsidies of education through the federal tax code [total at least \\$21 billion for post-secondary education, and at least \\$17 billion for elementary and secondary education](#). These amounts are almost as significant as the direct grants made by the federal government to support education.

If the federal government were to "get out of education," local taxpayers would pay more in total taxes, school districts would struggle to finance themselves, and college costs would be even greater.

### **Making college more affordable**

At the same time, as parents and students worry about escalating college costs, about three-fourths of all college student aid comes from federal sources, whether through the tax code, direct grants or subsidized loans. Many students would not participate in college or post-secondary training without that federal aid.

But, all this would vanish if the feds "got out of education."

### **Equity and civil rights**

Throughout history, the United States has broadened educational opportunities for the less fortunate. After the Civil War, the federal government helped create public schools for freed slaves. After great waves of immigration of the early 20th century, vocational programs provided job training for newcomers.

In the 1950s, federal courts moved to expand educational opportunity, and in the 1960s, Congress broadened civil rights, economic opportunities, and improvements in schooling. African-American adults and children benefited as did women and girls who gained from Title IX, which opened up educational and sports opportunities.

As a result, the achievement gap narrowed between adolescent white and black students. And the percentage of children with disabilities who attended public school rose [from only 20 percent in 1970 to 95 percent in 2007](#).

"Getting the federal government out of education" would endanger the progress made by -- among others -- children with disabilities, African-American children, and women and girls.

### **"We're (NOT) Number 1!"**

Other countries are overtaking the United States in terms of schooling. [As President Obama said](#):

"In the race for the future, America is in danger of falling behind. ...In a generation we have fallen from 1st place to 9th place in the proportion of young people with college degrees. When it comes to high school graduation rates, we're ranked 18th out of 24 industrialized nations -- 18th."

The achievement gap between U.S. students and their international peers deprived the national economy of as much as \$2.3 trillion in 2008, according to the [McKinsey Quarterly](#).

How can the country raise academic achievement if 14,000 local school districts are each making their own decisions on most key aspects of education?

Four Presidents, numerous state governors of both parties, business leaders, and others have advocated for high state academic standards to bring about broad improvement. Currently, 43 states have adopted common standards and now are collaborating on creating assessments.

Federal assistance has helped this movement, but a flash point has been George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act enacted in 2002. Nearly a decade of experience under that law has shown its flaws. Obama, congressional leaders and others have proposed solutions for its defects, while still maintaining the core concept of encouraging states to raise their academic standards. Congressional leaders have signaled that they want to move on that legislation.

"Getting the federal government out of education" would undercut these two decades of efforts to raise academic standards.

To argue for no federal support for public schooling might play well with some voters, but it is foolhardy. Over the course of American history, the national government has aimed to better educate the citizenry as a basis for democracy and economic prosperity. Today, our nation must act with greater, not less, unity to improve schools.

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