



A Serious Step Backward

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During last month's Republican primary debate in Orlando, something very significant -- and dangerous -- happened. All of the candidates agreed that education should not be a concern of the federal government.

Romney said the federal government should get out of education. Huntsman declared that to improve education we need to "localize, localize, localize." Bachmann asserted she would turn out the lights and shut the doors at the U.S. Department of Education.

These positions represent a sharp reversal from those of the last two Republican presidents. Both George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush supported a stronger federal presence in education than proposed by any president before or since -- the former by calling for national education standards and tests and the latter by proposing the No Child Left Behind Act, which President Obama is now trying to relax.

The Bushes put forth these vigorous national education efforts chiefly because the business community demanded improvements in American education to maintain U.S. economic competitiveness. Business leaders, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable and others, continue to make this case. The Chamber recently contended that "the Federal government has had a limited but important role in helping to ensure that poor, minority and disabled children are provided a quality education, and this role must continue."

Republican presidential candidates are ignoring their usual business allies and are pushing the federal government out of education because of pressures from the Tea Party and other very conservative Republicans. But they do so at peril to the country.

There is no way that the nation's 14,000 individual school districts -- which vary enormously in financial resources, quality of teachers, and interest in reform, will all improve enough on their own to make America competitive. Many districts are dealing with high rates of student mobility and homelessness, changing demographics and

increasing numbers of children in poverty, often on increasingly tight budgets. Our education system is already failing huge numbers of students each year -- over half a million dropped out of high school during school year 2008-2009 alone -- and is slipping in international rankings. Going back to a system of total local control of education will ensure that American schools are not good enough for tomorrow's world.

Some argue that states, rather than districts, could assume the roles now played by the federal government, but precedent suggests this will not bring about the national reforms needed to improve education for all. Under the No Child Left Behind Act, states were allowed to set their own targets for student achievement, and some set a low bar, putting their students at a disadvantage. The federal government can play an important part by encouraging states to set high standards or helping states collaborate to solve problems.

Both the state and the federal governments must adopt broad policies to improve *all* schools. If the Republican candidates succeed in eliminating the federal role in education, the pleas of business leaders to upgrade science and math courses and set higher education standards would go out the window. And much more would be lost:

É Nearly three-fourths of loans and grants for post-secondary education come directly or indirectly from the federal government.

É Thanks to federal legislation, nearly all children with disabilities are educated in public schools, often in regular classrooms.

É Women and girls have advanced greatly in educational attainment since a federal law, Title IX, forbade discrimination by gender.

É Poor children, children with limited English proficiency, children of migrant workers and other vulnerable students receive extra help in school, and many needy students receive free lunch, due to federal laws and funding.

It is unlikely that states would have the resources or will to do all of these things on their own. If all of these accomplishments are wiped away, will American schools really be better off? How will fewer students in college, less attention to under-served populations, and low academic standards make America better and more economically competitive? The stakes are simply too high to backtrack on reform.

The conservatives pushing the Republican candidates in this direction are ignoring the fact that the national government has been involved in education for more than two centuries. During the early years of the nation, Congress required territories that wanted to become states to lay the foundation for a network of public schools. During the Civil War, Congress passed the Morrill Act, which created the great state public colleges. After World War II, the GI Bill of Rights helped to create a middle class by providing many veterans with a chance to go to college.

The Republican candidates who are pandering to a fringe group at the expense of the country do not deserve to be their party's nominee -- or to be elected president. The country's future cannot be placed in jeopardy in this way.