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Federal Aid to the Schools -- Wasteful or Helpful?

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Federal funding for schools has not been effective, asserted some conservative members of Congress at a recent hearing on extending the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the main national law aiding public education. Soon, it is safe to bet, some members of Congress will propose eliminating such aid.

Are they right? Is federal aid not achieving its purpose? What do we have to show for such aid?

Federal grants to local school districts dramatically expanded nearly half a century ago with the passage of ESEA in 1965. President Lyndon Johnson, who signed that law, said: "Education is the key to opportunity in our society, and the equality of educational opportunity must be the birthright of every citizen."

That equity principle underlying ESEA was reaffirmed in the 1970s with the passage of major legislation aiding disabled students, later named the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Similar laws providing aid for other students with special needs also were enacted. During the same period, federal courts and federal civil rights agencies broadened opportunities for African American and Latino students, students with disabilities, and women and girls.

During the 1990s and 2000s, a new purpose was grafted onto ESEA -- to encourage states and school districts to raise their academic standards for all students. This new purpose also incorporated an equity goal by demanding accountability for racial, ethnic, and economic subgroups, students learning English, and those who have disabilities. The equity objective was symbolized by the goal that every student has to be proficient in reading and math by 2014 as required under the No Child Left Behind Act, the 2002 amendments to ESEA.

What have been the results of these policies to bring about greater educational opportunity?

Academic achievement. Over the last four decades, there has been substantial progress across the board in reading and math, especially for African American and Latino students.

From 1971 through 2008, reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress were up for students ages 9, 13 and 17. Test scores for white students were up at each of those ages by 14, 7 and 4 points respectively. African American students were up 34, 25 and 28 points, while Latinos were up 25, 10 and 17 points.

The mathematics gains were even more dramatic during the same time period. White students at those ages were up 25, 16 and 4 points respectively. African American students were up 34, 34 and 17 points, and Latinos were up 32, 29 and 16 points.

Access for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities have opportunities today that similar children in earlier times never experienced.

In 1970, only a fifth of students with disabilities were educated in public schools. As of 2007, 95 percent attended regular public schools. Between 1987 and 2003, such students more than doubled their participation in post-secondary education.

Gains by girls and young women. Title IX, the federal law promoting equality of opportunity for females, opened more doors for women that were formerly closed, or -- at best -- ajar.

In 1970, 55 percent of girls graduated from high school, compared to 87 percent in 2009. More young women also are going to college: in 1970, 48 percent of females who completed high school enrolled in college. By 2008, it was 72 percent.

This has led to a nearly quadrupling of women with college degrees: in 1970, 8 percent of females 25 and over had bachelor's degrees or higher; and by 2009, it was 29 percent.

Federal aid to education usually has amounted to about 7 to 8 percent of the total funds provided by all levels of government for public elementary and secondary education. Over the decades, limits have been placed on receiving these funds due to fears of undue federal influence over education. In addition, opposition to efforts by the federal courts and civil rights agencies to promote greater equity has circumscribed the impact of their actions.

Nonetheless, greater equity in schooling has undoubtedly been achieved by federal involvement in education. The students the laws were most meant to assist -- students of color, students with disabilities, girls and women -- have shown great improvement, proof that the intent of federal involvement is achieving its purpose.

Students who are the focus of such efforts -- especially children of color and poor children -- are growing as a portion of the American student body. Thus, we should reconfirm our nation's commitment to bringing about greater equity in education.

This Congress is supposed to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. That action ought to recommit the nation to the goal of equality of educational opportunity. Much has been achieved in the last nearly half a century of federal aid to education, but we still have a long way to go.