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Put Department of Education in Timeout

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Congress should suspend programs that undermine private competition

The U.S. Department of Education was created with the primary stated goal of increasing students' test scores, but test scores for 17-year-old American students have remained essentially flat since 1970. The department's budget has grown to a whopping \$107 billion this year. Per pupil, taxpayer-financed education spending (adjusted for inflation) has risen by more than 200 percent since 1970 (and 150-plus percent since 1980). Clearly and unambiguously, the department deserves a grade of F.

The employees and bureaucrats at Education have been rewarded for failure each year by ever-increasing budgets, which give them more control of state education departments and local school boards. If you reward failure, you tend to get more of it, and if you reward success, you tend to get more successes. Thus, it is no surprise that test scores have not improved.

Many of the just-elected members of Congress have called for elimination of the Department of Education. The department was created under the Carter presidency in 1979. President Reagan subsequently tried to abolish it but was rebuffed by the Democratic Congress at that time. Despite the fact that the objective case is strong for abolishing the department, the National Education Association (NEA) and the other teachers unions that form the core of support for the department are probably still sufficiently strong to prevent that from happening, particularly as long as President Obama has his veto pen.

What the new Congress can and should do, however, is to greatly reduce the department's budget. Suppose Congress said to the department, "We are going to cut your budget and payroll by 20 percent per year until test scores start improving, and if they have not

substantially improved within five years, the department will be dust." What do you think would happen to test scores?

The Department of Education was essentially a creation of the NEA - the teachers union - so many think that cutting the department's budget would hurt teachers. The NEA claims to represent teachers, and it sucks compulsory dues money out of them, but in fact, the NEA serves mainly to protect the ever-increasing number of school administrators, Department of Education employees and, of course, officials of the NEA. The many dedicated classroom teachers who actually deliver education to students are at the bottom of the food chain, and their time increasingly is diverted from teaching to filling out an ever-increasing number of government-required forms.

The ratio of classroom teachers to pupils has grown very slowly over the past 40 years despite the huge increase in government spending on education. Most of the increase in spending has gone to education bureaucrats - including more and more layers of "administrators" (assistant principals, deputy assistant principals, and on and on) - and much of it is needless overhead. So, as those in Congress cut back the department's funding, they must be smart about it - both for the sake of the students and for their own political protection. They need to insist that the funds be reduced for the middlemen and not the classroom teachers.

Like any good monopolists, the NEA and its Education Department employee lackeys hate competition. So, the NEA and the department have been endlessly hostile to nongovernment schools and schooling, particularly to for-profit educational institutions.

Higher education has not suffered as much from the corrosive influence of the department because there is so much competition among colleges and so many of the leading schools, such as Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Princeton, the University of Chicago and Stanford, etc., are private institutions. In recent years, there has been a rapid rise in for-profit colleges - the University of Phoenix, perhaps, being the best known. Many of these for-profit schools have been more innovative and have delivered more cost-effective education than many of their government-run counterparts; yet the department and many of its big-government allies in the media have been running attacks on the whole industry because of the actions of a few bad operators. These attacks ignore the fact that many government schools run up huge taxpayer - and often student - costs for a very shoddy education.

Some in the department and its allies in the states have been using their power of the purse to try to influence the accrediting agencies not to approve for-profit institutions even though they achieve or exceed the same benchmarks as their public competitors. One attack on the for-profits has been the use of online education by some - while at the same time, many of the accredited state-run universities no longer require students to attend all of their classes as long as they view the professors' lectures online. Unfortunately, accreditation is being used increasingly as a political tool to keep out new competition and, particularly, the new, for-profit competitors that are finding important niches for serving many who do not have ready access to leading public schools.

The nation is best served by having a highly competitive mix of public, private, nonprofit and for-profit educational institutions. As the new Congress considers where to cut the Department of Education budget, it would do well to look at those areas where there has been hostility toward new and for-profit educational institutions. If you wanted to get the best education in finance for the money spent, do you think you would be better off taking the courses provided by those who run a public high school cafeteria or from those who run McDonald's?

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