

# The role of the federal government in education



Education is not referred to directly in the Constitution. However, there is a veiled reference in Article [X] of The Constitution of the United States of America, proposed by the First Congress on September 25, 1789, and ratified by the States, that does not give the federal government powers to govern public school education, but reserves the rights to the states respectively, or to the people (Kimmelman, 2006). However, included in his proposals for the War on Poverty, President Lyndon Johnson with support from Congress enacted the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) in 1965. ESEA 1965 became part of a long history of over forty federal acts related to education through to the present (Kimmelman, 2006). While all of these acts were designed to improve the delivery of education, to ensure equitable educational opportunities and standardization, the more recent of them (No Child Left Behind) have aroused controversy. In essence, NCLB, among others, has been interpreted as federal intervention in state affairs. As this brief reflection will argue, however, the said intervention has the potential to be highly constructive insofar as it centralises the accountability factor.

One of the fundamental roles of government is to provide for its citizenry, so that its citizens can provide for themselves and their families without being subsidized and risk becoming socially undesirable adults. In schools, principals and guidance counsellors tend to refer to this mission as preparing students, to become productive members of society. This focus continues to spawn various enactments of laws (Sunderman et al., 2005; Kimmelman, 2006). The Improving Americas Schools Act of 1994 (IASA) which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) had a renewed focus which was supposed to change the delivery of education, encourage comprehensive school reform, upgrade instructional and

professional development and promote accountability and coordinate resources to improve education to all children was not successful. Eight years after its reauthorization, on January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush, signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). This new law effectuates the Reauthorization of ESEA 1965 with a lifespan of six years. The federal government has now given states another six years to fix the damaged public school education system (Sunderman et al., 2005).

As evidenced from the preceding, the primary focus of the described Acts is testing results. As Hess (2007) explains, NCLB emphasises the imperatives of successful student testing as a predicator of the success or failure of the school in question. Schools pass if their students pass and attain academic success. The implementation of standardized testing, from this perspective, may be interpreted as a strategy for the nation-wide evaluation of the effectiveness of the education delivery paradigm in all schools (Hess, 2007). Not only is this a method for applying equitability and for ensuring that all public schools satisfy their responsibility towards society and their students but, importantly, is a method for identifying the shortcomings in the educational system.

Proceeding from the above stated, two things are clear. The first is that standardization, whether of student tests or of teacher qualifications and testing, are integral for the nation-wide evaluation of the performance of the public school system and for the identification of failing schools. The second is that the intervention of the federal government in education is not intervention in state authority as much as it is the imposition of accountability obligations on states and their schools.

## Bibliography

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