



# Building a 21st Century U.S. Education System

*Executive Editor*  
*Bob Wehling*

*Associate Editor*  
*Carri Schneider*

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## Ensuring Access to a World-Class Education

*Diane Ravitch*

What do we have to do, above and beyond current efforts, to ensure that every child in the United States has reasonable and realistic access to a truly world class educational opportunity?

There are three steps that should be taken to assure that every child in the United States has reasonable and realistic access to a truly world class educational opportunity. However, two of them are impossible.

The first step would be to find a magic wand and make sure that every child is born into a two-parent family with income sufficient to provide a good, middle-class life. If we knew how to make this happen, then every child would have a good chance to receive the care, nurturing, love, and physical security that they need to develop and be well-prepared for schooling. I mention this because it is well-known to every social scientist that family background is very important in predisposing children to succeed in school, and that it plays a large role in determining whether children have good housing, good health care, and a myriad of other important factors that affect their chances in life and in school. Not having a magic wand, I don't know how to make this miracle happen.

The second step would be to have a popular culture that supports and reinforces the value of learning and the character traits necessary for success in school. By that, I mean a popular culture that makes heroes of scientists, engineers, scholars, thinkers, artists, and others who are engaged in occupations that require study, practice, planning, delayed gratification, and dedication to self-development and communal progress. Instead, we have a popular culture that celebrates celebrity; that lavishes attention on people who are famous for being famous; on "stars" who lead dissolute and empty lives; on athletes, movie stars, rock musicians, and others whose lives owe nothing to education and everything to looks and glitter. But I don't know how to change the popular culture, so I assume we are stuck with one that will continue to tout the significance of hollow people.

The third step, which seems fairly simple compared to the others, would be to have a national education policy, one that is designed to maximize the educational opportunities of all children in the United States. This would mean that we collectively would have to develop national academic standards, a national curriculum, and national testing, supported by national financing of schools. By a national curriculum, I refer not only to reading and mathematics, but to science, history, civics, and the arts as well. It is not necessary to administer tests in all of these areas, such as the arts, but it is important that all of these studies be considered an integral, essential part of the national curriculum. My guess is that a national curriculum would consume about 50 percent of the school day, and the rest of the time would be left to state, local, and teacher discretion.

Teacher-training programs would prepare teachers to teach the national curriculum. States would be relieved of the costs and burdens of state testing. Publishers would compete to prepare the best texts to support the national curriculum. In light of the mobility of the population, parents could be assured that their children's education would not be disrupted

by their move, and the stability of the child's educational program could be assured, no matter whether the students were in New York or Illinois or California.

There are obvious problems with this proposal, but they do not seem impossible. The first problem is, who is "we," who would do these things? I believe that the federal government would have to take the lead and provide the financing; no one else would have the credibility or the resources to do it. The goal would be to make sure that every child has access to the program of studies that would prepare them to go as far as they are able and to have the same quality of education that is available to the most advantaged communities. No child would have an inferior education simply because of where he or she was born.

I also suggest that we need a realignment of state and federal responsibilities, as defined in federal law. Presently, under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, the federal law defines a list of sanctions for schools that do not make adequate yearly progress toward an unreachable goal of 100 percent proficiency, and the states decide on their own standards and tests. We now know, based on the extreme variability in state test scores, that the states have widely divergent definitions of "proficiency." A few states have high standards, like Massachusetts, South Carolina, and Wyoming. Most have much, much lower standards. What is proficient in some states with low standards would be considered failing in the states with high standards.

I suggest that the first iteration of NCLB has not only produced this extreme variability but violates the principles of Federalism, by assigning a role to the federal government that it lacks the capacity to discharge and that, under our constitution, it should not discharge. None of the remedies specified in NCLB is based on research, and none has proved to be effective in turning a low-performing school into a high-performing school in the first five years of the law.

Thus, my recommendation is to reverse the role of the federal government and the states. Let the federal government set standards (based on international standards) and administer the tests. The federal government would bear the burden and cost of test development and make this information available to every state and jurisdiction. This is in keeping with the federal government's capacity for gathering data, as well as its legislative warrant to report to the American people on "the condition and progress" of education.

The federal government would report the results, but would have no power to mandate any actions based on them. There would be no remedies, sanctions, or rewards from the federal government. Once the information was provided to the states, each state would have the responsibility to decide what to do with it, how to act on it, and how to help schools improve.

Such a scheme, I suggest, would restore the proper relationship between the federal government, the state, and localities. It would place responsibility for action with those who are closest to the schools. It would give the federal government responsibility to do what it does best: assemble and distribute accurate data based on common standards.

I can think of many objections to my proposal, but none of them seem as compelling as the goal of assuring equal educational opportunity and a high quality education for every child.

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