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An Historic Opportunity in Education

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History News Service



President George W. Bush has put forth an ambitious education plan that would significantly boost the federal government's role in public education. If his plan is enacted, schools receiving federal dollars through the Title I program will

have to test their students and show the federal government that they are improving. If they don't, Bush's policy would allow the children in these failing schools to take their federal dollars and use them at another school.

Congress should enact this substantial change to Title I. This 35-year-old compensatory education legislation has failed to reach its goal of closing the achievement gap between poor and minority students and other pupils. States should receive more federal education dollars to help them better educate these children but need to be held accountable for improved educational achievement. Connecting federal funding to educational results only makes sense.

This is a rare moment when both Republicans and Democrats are calling for more federal aid to public education. Traditionally, at least one of the two major political parties has adhered to an anti-federal government or states' rights line with regard to education.

In the 1870s and 1880s, Democrats, especially Southerners, fought proposals that would have given federal dollars for building public schools

in poor districts. They warned of federal control over local institutions, the proposals were defeated, and poor and black children were denied good schools.

By the 1920s, the parties had switched positions. Republicans, led by President Warren G. Harding and his immediate successors, then advocated small government and local control of schools. Over the next 60 years they and their conservative allies in the South vigorously fought nearly every effort to expand federal education policy that would improve public schools. Rep. Caleb R. Layton's comments during a debate in 1922 on a proposal to combat illiteracy are typical of his era's anti-government hyperbole: "The plan is plainly unconstitutional, and in direct conflict with the reserved rights of the people under our national organic law. If put into effect, it will destroy the liberty of the people."

This past decade has been anomalous. Both presidents Bush (the first) and Clinton fought for the development of national education standards, a policy that would have been unthinkable in previous years. President Clinton also pumped up federal education spending.

The cause of the recent ebbing of the "leave it to the states" position on education policy is clear. For almost two decades America has known that its schools are not doing as well as they could or should. Though student test scores have risen in recent years, they remain, generally speaking, at low levels. This national problem has provoked the public to demand a national -- that is, federal -- response.

Ironically, we have President Ronald Reagan to thank for this pro-government mood. During his first term, Reagan repeatedly promised to abolish the Department of Education and reduce the federal role in education. To this end, he cut a third of the department's staff and charged Terrel Bell, secretary of education, with undertaking a study of the state of American education and creating state-level policy

