

# The Federal Government: 21st Century Standard Bearer for Education

Mercedes M. Viana<sup>†</sup>

Mercedes Viana is a first-year graduate student in the master of public administration program with a concentration in policy analysis and evaluation. Ms. Viana graduated *summa cum laude* from Florida International University in 1994 with a bachelor of arts in political science and a minor in international relations.

In 1979, U.S. Commissioner of Education Ernest Boyer stated that "education should have full partnership at the highest levels of government where the Nation's priorities are shaped."<sup>1</sup> This statement set off an avalanche of reports such as "The Nation at Risk," which advocated the need for transforming the nation's educational system. States and localities introduced a variety of proposed education reforms but the implementation of these plans produced mixed and inconsistent results. President George Bush and the National Governors' Association responded to this crisis by creating a set of national standards for education and proposing a blueprint, known as Goals 2000, for state and federal collaboration to improve education. As a continuation of this pilot project, the federal government, through the Department of Education, must continue to lead the nation in transforming the rhetoric of "education reform" into action-oriented policies that truly establish a world-class system of education.

The ongoing debate among educators and public officials about a legitimate role for the federal government in education is not new. However, social and economic factors in the last half of the 20th century have given the debate an increasing urgency. This article will describe both the historic place of the federal government in education and a proposed future role. The article uses Goals 2000 as a model for federal government involvement, advocates increasing partnerships among all levels of government in order to improve our nation's system of education, and concludes by endorsing a strong role for the federal government as the developer of national standards and the supporter of state implementation of these goals.

## Historic Review of Federal Government Involvement in Education

The Founding Fathers firmly believed that education was crucial for the success of democracy and the economic and social well-being of the nation. President Thomas Jefferson noted that no republic can remain strong without "general education, to enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom."<sup>2</sup>

Early national leaders established the foundation for public education, while the state and local governments were responsible for implementing the system. Thomas Jefferson advocated a public education system based on state and local control. Additionally, the federal government, through the enactment of the Northwest Ordinance in 1787, allowed federal land to be sold and the proceeds used by states for education. Thus, local control of schools, with minimal state oversight and without federal interference, became the primary form of school governance.

As early as 1870, the federal government demonstrated leadership in improving national literacy. Representative George Hoar introduced a bill that "sought to compel by national authority the establishment of a thorough and efficient system of public instruction throughout the whole country" that would be operated by the states in accordance with federal standards.<sup>3</sup> Although the Hoar bill did not become law, the legislation resulted from a desire to eliminate the massive illiteracy that plagued the South. Even in modern times, the federal government continued to be involved in efforts to curb illiteracy. Most recently, Barbara Bush addressed illiteracy through her work as First Lady.<sup>4</sup>

Industrialization and urbanization in the early 20th century brought a new wave of federal education initiatives. By 1900, an industrial model of education had evolved which

"mass produced" students with the basic skills necessary to meet the economic needs of the emerging industrial society. In particular, the educational system was designed to produce skilled workers capable of competing with workers from Germany and Great Britain. Toward this end, the federal government passed the Smith-Hughes Act which gave the federal government the authority to appropriate funds to states for vocational programs to be implemented at local levels.<sup>5</sup> Even at the beginning of the century, international competitiveness was viewed as a national issue, and the federal government responded by passing legislation that would assist the states in achieving a national goal.

The federal government was again called to action at the dawn of the space age. The National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 grew out of a national panic spurred by the successful orbit of the Soviet Sputnik satellite during the Cold War.<sup>6</sup> The NDEA established a new federal mission in education by providing financial assistance to education programs which focused on increasing the number of graduates in math and science. As a result, federal spending sharply increased for elementary and secondary education.<sup>7</sup>

As the federal government relied on education to further the nation's economic growth, the schools were instrumental in implementing national priorities during the social revolution of the 1960s. During President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty, the federal government made assisting educationally disadvantaged children a national priority by enacting the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA).<sup>8</sup> Passage of this act was the culmination of more than 90 years of active struggle to achieve large-scale federal involvement in education.<sup>9</sup> Through ESEA, federal funds allocated to local school districts were dramatically increased.

Over time, ESEA expanded to include programs for children with disabilities, bilingual education, and Indian education. Such programs targeted populations which were previously underserved in the educational system. In addition, the federal government took a leading role in promoting desegregation in schools through the implementation of ESEA and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.<sup>10</sup> By distributing federal funds based on nondiscrimination requirements, the federal government directed school assignment policies that eventually reduced segregation, yet another example of federal government activism in addressing social and economic concerns through education.

Through the 1970s, the federal role in education was

episodic but nonetheless responsive to national issues related to education. However, a consistent voice for education was increasingly necessary at the federal level. Strong popular support existed for the creation of the U.S. Department of Education because of increasing problems in the educational system such as declining enrollment, low achievement and college entrance test scores, and increasing costs. President Jimmy Carter believed that creating a Cabinet-level department in education would encourage a national discussion of critical education concerns.<sup>11</sup> In his 1979 State of the Union Address, President Carter declared: "the new department would enable the federal government to be a more responsive partner with States, localities and private institutions that have primary responsibility for education."<sup>12</sup>

Today, the United States has significantly improved access to education for all students and is admired for its success in graduating three out of every four students in high school.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the creation of the Department of Education has also brought greater national visibility to education issues. However, access alone is not enough to meet the challenges this nation faces.

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In the late 20th century, the United States is moving rapidly toward a technological and service-driven economy; unfortunately, the 19th-century education system that prepares workers for this post-industrial economy is woefully inadequate to the task at hand. Perhaps at no time since the founding of the nation has the demand for a federal role in education been so compelling.

### **Social And Economic Factors that Require the Involvement of the Federal Government in Education**

Education permeates all aspects of life—and a lack of education can have a devastating effect on the course of an individual's life. Lack of an education has been linked to an increase in crime, a decrease in the level of personal income, limited job opportunities, and a restricted ability to compete in international markets.

Increasingly, defects in the nation's education system are

being blamed for weaknesses in other sectors of society. For example, a lack of education is linked to crime and delinquency. More than half the adult prison population is functionally illiterate and nearly 40 percent of adjudicated juvenile delinquents have treatable learning disabilities that are not diagnosed in schools.<sup>14</sup> As Paul Barton, co-author of a recent study released by the Educational Testing Service, states:

We have solid information now about how low the literacy level of prisoners is in relation to what the job market needs. And yet, over the last five years, as the prison population has expanded dramatically, more than half the states have cut back their training and education budgets. This is not a prudent approach. Education may not be the sole answer to cutting recidivism, but the evidence shows it helps.<sup>15</sup>

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Educational achievement has also been linked to the level of income attainment. Families with heads of households who went no further than elementary school had median incomes only one-fourth of those families with heads of households who completed four or more years of college.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the hourly wages of young males with twelve or fewer years of school dropped by 20 percent from 1979 to 1989.<sup>17</sup> To make matters worse, achieving economic security without a strong, skill-based education will be increasingly difficult in the future.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond the increasing inability of individuals to compete in the national workforce, the nation's ability to compete internationally is in question. The United States falls behind most industrialized nations in the system of education available to students and in translating those educational opportunities into economic opportunities.<sup>19</sup>

In European nations, students enter into a comprehensive system of education that ensures job preparedness appropriate to the individual's level of educational achievement. The educational systems of European countries are closely tied to their economic systems; for example, in Germany part of the hiring process is an evaluation of how potential

employees fared while in school.<sup>20</sup> In addition, about 85 percent of German youth not bound for college get an additional three to four years of apprenticeship training beyond high school.<sup>21</sup>

Increasingly, members of the business community in the United States have become aware of, and have advocated, the need to ensure the same occupational readiness for American students. For the first time, U.S. business leaders from Eastman Kodak and Boeing Company plan to implement a new hiring strategy that emphasizes grades, a process which, if widely practiced, could ultimately raise high school standards nationwide.<sup>22</sup>

Educators support business leaders in the drive to ensure that the nation's schools produce qualified workers. At a 1993 hearing of the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources, Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley discussed the need to improve national education standards and job training opportunities:

A new generation of workers prepared for high-skill, high-wage jobs will primarily come from a restructured American education system that produces students with a firm grounding in core academic subjects and are equipped with skills that have currency in the labor market.<sup>23</sup>

The need to upgrade and standardize educational opportunities is so important, and of such scope, that no one state could possibly accomplish the desired goals. As a result, a role for the federal government—as the entity that could ensure nationwide conformity to nationally derived standards—is obvious. Accordingly, this article proposes three goals:

- establish a new mission for the Department of Education that emphasizes the achievement of certain stated goals for school children at all levels;
- refocus on the broad objectives delineated in Goals 2000, a set of national education standards, and establish tests that accurately measure students' abilities to meet stated goals;
- expand public-private partnerships that emphasize the importance of education as a national priority.

## A New Mission for the Department of Education

The current mission of the Department of Education is "to ensure equal access to education and promote educational excellence."<sup>24</sup> However, access to education alone cannot ensure that students obtain the skills required to compete

in the global economy; additionally, promoting excellence in education is not defined. In order to achieve the ambitious goals outlined in this article, the Department of Education would take on a new mission: establishing the importance of education as a national priority that specifically provides all students with the skills and knowledge necessary to compete in a national and international work force. Currently, education is seen as a basic function provided by government, somewhat akin to police protection, important but taken for granted; under the newly defined role, education would be inextricably linked to the maintenance of democracy and economic competitiveness.

### Goals 2000: National Education Standards

The Department of Education has already taken an important step toward achieving national consensus on the performance standards that all students should be able to achieve. The movement toward national standards began at the first national education summit in 1989 where President Bush and the nation's governors (including then-Governor Clinton) met to discuss the need to reform education and, to a larger extent, reverse the deteriorating position of the United States in the global economy.<sup>25</sup> From this meeting came the establishment of National Education Goals, a conference report which defined standards of knowledge for students in each subject area, objectives for performance improvement in those subject areas, and assessments to measure student performance.

The Bush Administration took the conference report and translated the language into a legislative proposal known as America 2000, the first federal effort to establish national standards for all students that would lift public schools out of "mediocrity, social decay, and national decline."<sup>26</sup>

Although this legislation was not passed, a modified version of the bill, renamed Goals 2000: Educate America Act and known as Goals 2000, passed with bipartisan support during President Clinton's administration. The legislation acknowledged the need for a federal voice in creating a comprehensive and coherent system of education. Of equal importance to this new federal role was a reaffirmation of the responsibility of states and localities for adapting these goals to suit the needs of their communities.<sup>27</sup>

The social and economic factors discussed earlier in this article are an integral part of Goals 2000. The National Education Goals use adult literacy rates, children's health risks, and participation in postsecondary enrollment as social and economic indicators to measure national progress. For example, Goal 6 of the National Education Goals addresses the need for all adults to have adequate

skills and knowledge to compete in a global economy.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in dealing with problems of crime, Goal 7 specifically promotes a safe, disciplined, and drug-free school environment.<sup>29</sup>

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Although Goals 2000 has provided an important framework for designing national standards, the legislation was also designed to ensure that standards of education are comparable to international standards.<sup>30</sup> Goals 2000 calls for all high school graduates to have world-class understanding of mathematics and science and be proficient in English, social studies and foreign languages on the theory that students who meet these national standards can compete with the best students internationally.<sup>31</sup>

Despite its lofty ambitions, Goals 2000 has been criticized as an unnecessary and unwanted intrusion into states' rights. Opponents argue that national education reforms such as Goals 2000 represent an unprecedented and insupportable assumption of power by the federal government in an area where the federal government does not belong. However, the original intent of Goals 2000 was not to promote federal intrusion into local schools but to define education policy for this nation while remaining flexible in allowing states and local governments to put reforms in place.

Goals 2000 is a voluntary guide for states to follow in implementing national education goals in return for a small amount of federal funds. Secretary Riley stated that Goals 2000 is:

[t]op-down support for bottom-up reform. We want to give the support [the states] need to reform and restructure. Then we must get out of your way so [the states] can do [their] jobs.<sup>32</sup>

The broad statements listed in Goals 2000 give states a standard to which they can conform their own goals and, as a result, bring all states to an equally high level of student performance. Those who would argue that this responsibility for setting standards is more appropriately addressed by individual states fail to realize that the education of students transcends each state and is instead an issue the nation as a whole must address.

## Public-Private Partnerships

There is no plausible way the federal government can operate the education system; such a function is neither fiscally nor politically practical. Through public-private partnerships, the federal government has recently challenged corporations to become more actively involved in providing the educational opportunities necessary for students to compete in the 21st century. American corporations have responded positively through such initiatives as NetDay '96, in which companies such as MCI, Apple Computer, and America Online contributed resources necessary for connecting California schools to the Internet.<sup>33</sup>

In the current political climate, changes are not only occurring in our culture and economy but in our very system of governance; indeed, public officials at the highest levels, including President Clinton, have acknowledged that the role of the federal government must change. Increasingly, policies established by the federal government will reflect the need for partnerships and greater collaboration among all levels of government and business.

To underscore this point, in a 1996 education summit, business leaders agreed that "no matter how much states improve their schools, they will still be at a disadvantage in winning new businesses if their quality does not measure up to other states."<sup>34</sup> In essence, business leaders are calling for congruence among the states in educational standards; the only way to ensure such national conformity is

through federal action.

## Conclusion

Education is a public good which benefits not only individuals but the American society as a whole. Schools should be encouraged to develop innovative teaching methods and apply various forms of educational reforms; however, a national framework must be refined and implemented in order for all schools to reach high standards of academic achievement. The most basic educational reform lies in articulating a set of commonly-agreed-upon goals for students at all educational levels, including the acquisition of a common body of knowledge and a set of universally approved skills. To support these goals, a system for measuring student performance that has broad national applicability must be created.<sup>35</sup>

Goals 2000 is the first step in uniting the current fragmented system into one national educational framework. States need to look beyond their own boundaries to define educational reforms according to national goals. The federal government, primarily responsible for ensuring that our nation moves into the 21st century with a prepared workforce and educated population, needs to promote the participation of schools, state and local governments, and businesses in achieving an educational system which enhances national integrity. ★

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup>Senate, *Department of Education Organization Act*, Conference Report, 96th Cong, 1st sess., 1979, S. Rpt. 96-326, 1516.

<sup>3</sup>Alf J. Mapp, Jr., *Thomas Jefferson: Passionate Pilgrim* (Lanham, Maryland: Madison Books, 1991), 211-212.

<sup>4</sup>Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, "Intergovernmentalizing the Classroom: Federal Involvement in Elementary and Secondary Education," *The Federal Role in the Federal System: The Dynamics of Growth* (Washington, DC.: ACIR, March, 1981), 14.

<sup>5</sup>"Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy Launched at

White House," *Publisher's Weekly*, 24 March 1989, 12.

<sup>6</sup>Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, 14.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>12</sup>President Jimmy Carter, *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, vol 15, no. 42, Oct.- Dec. 1979, 1959.

<sup>13</sup>Senate, Committee on Governmental Affairs, *Department of Education Organization Act of 1979*, 96th Cong., 1st sess., 1979, S. Rpt. 96-49, 10.

<sup>14</sup>Larry Cuban, "Four Stories about National Goals for American Education," *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 1990, 269.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>16</sup>Tamar Lewin, "Behind Prison Walls Poor Reading Skills Also Pose a Barrier," *The New York Times*, 17 March 1996.

<sup>16</sup>Anthony Downs, *New Visions for Metropolitan America* (Washington, DC.: The Brookings Institution, 1994), 87.

<sup>17</sup>Anthony P. Carnevale and Jeffrey D. Porro, *Quality Education: School Reform for the New American Economy* (Washington, D.C.: American Society for Training and Development, 1994), 7.

<sup>18</sup>Secretary of Education Richard Riley stated that by the year 2000, 60 percent of all new jobs will require advanced skills and only 20 percent of the American workforce will possess these skills. (See Richard W. Riley, "Education: The Gateway to America's Future," State of American Education Address, St. Louis, Missouri, 28 February 1996.)

<sup>19</sup>A 1992 study by the National Education Testing Service found that the school performance of the bottom level of the students in the United States ranked next to last among 15 nations. (See Carnevale and Porro, *Quality Education: School Reform for the New American Economy*, 1994, 9.)

<sup>20</sup>Ray Marshall and Marc Tucker, *Thinking for a Living* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 52.

<sup>21</sup>Competitiveness Policy Council, *Report of the Training Subcouncil* (Washington, DC.: Competitiveness Policy Council, 1993) as cited in Carnevale and Porro, 1994, 8-9.

<sup>22</sup>Jay Mathews, "Major Companies Vow to Focus on Grades in Hiring High School Graduates," *The Washington Post*, 27 March 1996.

<sup>23</sup>Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources, *Hearing on Examining the Need to Improve National Education Standards and Job Training Opportunities*, 103rd Cong., 1st sess., 24 February 1993, 13.

<sup>24</sup>House Committee on Governmental Reform and Oversight, *The U.S. Department of Education: Working for Learning*, 23 May 1995.

<sup>25</sup>Cuban, 268.

<sup>26</sup>Sarah Lindenfeld, "Goals 2000 Plan Slips from Consensus to Controversy," *The Baltimore Sun*, 23 July 1995, 4.

<sup>27</sup>Section 319 of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (Public Law 103-227) clarifies that the control of education is reserved to the states and local school systems, and the federal government cannot impose standards on the states.

<sup>28</sup>Goal 6: Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning states that "by the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship." (See National Education Goals Panel, *The National Education Goals Report: Building A Nation of Learners* [Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1995] 12.)

<sup>29</sup>Goal 7: Safe, Disciplined, and Alcohol- and Drug-free Schools states that "by the year 2000, every school in the United States will be free of drugs, violence, and the unauthorized presence of firearms and alcohol and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning." (See National Education Goals Panel, *The National Education Goals Report: Building A Nation of Learners* [Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1995] 13.)

<sup>30</sup>In his 1994 State of the Union address, President Clinton reiterated this concept by promoting Goals 2000, which he said "links world-class standards to grass roots reforms." (See Charles S. Clark, "Education Standards," *CQ Researcher*, Congressional Quarterly, 11 March 1994, 219.)

<sup>31</sup>The National Education Goals Panel, 15.

<sup>32</sup>David Hoff, "Riley Says ED Goals 2000 Role Won't Step on Local Turf," *Education Daily*, 18 April 1994, 1-2.

<sup>33</sup>"MCI set for NetDay '96," *PR Newswire*, 9 March 1996.

<sup>34</sup>Jay Mathews, "Corporations Vow to Favor States That Boost Academic Standards," *The Washington Post*, 28 March 1996.

<sup>35</sup>Marshall and Tucker 1992, 112.

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