Can More Money Make Schools Better?

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President Bush is celebrating the first anniversary of his No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Education bill and hopes it will give a significant boost to his re-election in 2004. Speeches about improving public schools are always crowd-pleasers because it is common knowledge that they desperately need major improvement.
The public school establishment, however, is developing acute paranoia as accountability deadlines in the bill start creeping up on them. By the end of this month, states must give the U.S. Department of Education their plans for holding schools accountable and for reporting progress in student proficiency.

Under NCLB, states are required to test students three times in reading and math during their K-12 schooling. Beginning in the fall of 2005, states must give reading and mathematics tests to every child each year in grades 3 through 8.

Schools with scores that don't measure up will get more money, but their students must be offered the option of transferring to other schools. If the school is judged to be failing for three years, the school district must pay for tutors (called supplemental service providers) chosen by the parents.

NCLB was far and away the most expensive federal education bill ever passed, but Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) refers to it as a "tin cup" appropriation and claims public schools cannot overcome their problems "on the cheap." He would make the same complaint if NCLB doled out double the money.

Billions of dollars of federal money poured into public schools over the last 20 years show no correlation to improved performance or better scores. The government's own evaluations report that Title I, the mammoth program for disadvantaged children, is a failure.

Congress created a program called E-Rate in 1996. It offers subsidies of 20 to 90 percent for schools to buy telecommunications services such as Internet connections and wiring for classrooms.

The E-Rate program is paid for by a tax on everyone's telephone bill, dubbed the Gore tax. According to a new report by the Center for Public Integrity based on Federal Communications Commission investigations, the $2.25 billion program is "honeycombed with fraud and financial shenanigans."

The current passion for accountability doesn't seem to cover how money is spent. But quite apart from who may or may not have been lining his pockets with easy E-Rate money is the question, did it advance education?

Did computers improve students' performance or grades? We can't find any report about that.

England's Department for Education, however, has just completed a comprehensive study on this very subject and found that equipping schools with a million computers connected to the Internet has had little if any impact on education standards. Despite the government spending more than a billion pounds over

the past five years, "no consistent relationship" was found between computer use and pupil achievement in any subject at any age in primary or secondary schools.

Technology is wonderful, but it's not the key to remedying the problems with U.S. public schools or raising students' scores. The major, crucial, overriding problem with schools is that they fail to teach children to read in the first grade.

Teaching children to read in the first grade doesn't even appear on the agenda of education reform! It was not one of the famous education goals of Goals 2000, and all Republican and Democratic politicians pontificating about school reform consistently say that they want children to be able to read by the third grade.

So what are they doing in kindergarten, first and second grades? Spending their time on sex education or playing with computers? Teaching children to read is not rocket science and it doesn't require expensive equipment, materials or professionals; any parent can teach his child to read with a good $50 phonics system.

Teaching a first-grader to read requires teaching the child the sounds and syllables of the English language so he can put them together like building blocks and read multi-syllable words like hamburger or toothbrush. For decades, schoolchildren have been taught to guess at the words by looking at the pictures, a fraud called Whole Language.

That's why third graders can't pass reading tests and why students fall farther behind each year as their schoolbooks contain more and bigger words. Of all the injustices that have been perpetrated on minorities, none is as devastating to their chance to live the American dream as keeping them in failing schools for 12 years without teaching them to be good readers.

NCLB requires schools to administer reading tests to students in the third grade. But no real progress will be made in improving scores until schools teach children to read in the first grade by a systematic, logical, straightforward phonics system.