Don't Give Obama More Power Over Schools

by Phyllis Schlafly

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After spending most of June giving President Obama new authority to negotiate trade deals with low-wage countries in Asia, Congressional Republicans are now poised to spend July giving Obama new authority over education in America's public schools. This is a big disappointment for those of us who worked hard to elect a Republican Congress last November. We expected the new Congress to take power back from the president, not give him more.

For the past fifty years, the engine of federal control over local schools has been Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. It was the first in a series of socialist laws that President Lyndon Johnson promised would lead to a "Great Society" after we won his declared "war on poverty."

Johnson's Great Society legislation was speedily enacted by a Congress in which Democrats outnumbered Republicans by more than two to one (295-140 in the House and 68-32 in the Senate). Despite the trillions of dollars spent since 1965, we're no closer to achieving a Great Society; by many measures, America's education and social welfare are much worse today than when those programs were launched fifty years ago.

Republicans had an opportunity to dismantle the failed regime of federal control when they regained control of both Houses of Congress in 1994 and then elected a president in 2000. Unfortunately, George W. Bush campaigned on the slogan "Leave No Child Behind" as his signature domestic agenda item, and John Boehner, then chairman of the House Education Committee, produced a bill that rebranded the old ESEA under the new title "No Child Left Behind."

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) promised to bring all children (including all demographic minorities measured separately) to 100% proficiency by 2014. Of course that didn't happen, and nearly everyone now recognizes NCLB as a complete failure.

With their current historic majority in both Houses, there's a new opportunity for Republicans to dismantle the 50-year failure of money poured into local public schools with strings attached. Unfortunately Republicans, once again, are on the verge of just

rebranding the same failed programs with new and overly optimistic slogans: the "Student Success Act" (in the House) and the "Every Child Achieves Act," ECAA, (in the Senate).

Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN), has been speaking in front of a sign saying "Fix No Child Left Behind," as he touts the ECAA bill as a bipartisan "consensus about how to fix it." A former Secretary of Education in the Bush 41 administration, Lamar almost didn't return to the Senate this year after he won less than 50% of the Republican vote against an underfunded tea party challenger.

The claim that ECAA is somehow a "fix" for NCLB is laughable, and equally false is the claim that it gets rid of the hated Common Core. While it makes a great show of disavowing the name Common Core, Lamar's bill continues and extends the standards-and-testing mandate that Common Core was designed to satisfy.

The proof that ECAA will indirectly reinforce federal control is the way it requires states to force testing on students whose parents want to opt them out of that mindless exercise, as tens of thousands have already done.

One method the schools have used against students whose parents opt them out is to force kids to sit quietly at an empty desk – forbidden to read, write, or draw – while other students take the test. Parents call this form of punishment "sit and stare."

In Oldmans Township, New Jersey, 9-year-old Cassidy Thornton, whose parent opted her out of the mandated PARCC exam, was humiliated to tears by being excluded from the end-of-year cupcake and juice-box party with the rest of her class. Cassidy's mom called it bullying, but the school defended its decision to reward test-takers because federal rules require 95% of students to be tested.

Education has become a critical issue for 2016 presidential candidates. Even Donald Trump, in his speech at Trump Tower announcing his candidacy, made a point of declaring that "Common Core is a disaster. Education has to be local."

But Jeb Bush, whose foundation took millions from Bill Gates and Pearson to promote Common Core, remains unmoved by grassroots opposition. Two years ago, Jeb derided parents concerned about Common Core as people who are "comfortable with mediocrity," an insult that rivals Arne Duncan's slam at "white suburban moms who all of a sudden [realize that] their child isn't as brilliant as they thought they were."

Jeb actually praised the heavy-handed federal role in public education: "Look, I think Secretary Duncan and President Obama deserve credit for putting pressure on states, providing carrots and sticks. I think that’s appropriate."

No, Jeb, it’s not appropriate. Tell your U.S. Senators and your Member of Congress to vote No on any bill to reauthorize a federal role in public education.

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