

New Federal Education Rules Seem Not To Have been Well Thought Out

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According to a CNN Education web page of December 2, 2002, new federal rules governing school transfers within and between “failing” schools in public school districts seem fraught with problems. It appears either that these new guidelines have not been well thought out or that there are bureaucrats who care little about preserving quality schools and caring for succeeding students to serve other schools who are doing poorly and their students who are in need of help. In many ways, good process and outcome is being sacrificed to compensate for bad process and outcomes.

The CNN report [<http://www.cnn.com/2002/EDUCATION/12/02/education.reform.ap/index.html>] states, among other rule changes, that if a school is “failing,” parents of that school’s pupils will have an automatic right to transfer to other schools even if these schools are filled. Such a rule is defended by claiming that it will prevent good schools from refusing to take students from lower performing schools using overcrowding as an excuse. The new ruling does not address the reality of overcrowding, a condition that educational research shows to place stress on teachers and student progress. It seems counterproductive to move children from a school with definable problems and in doing so create problems for a new receiving school. I suspect that the receiving school’s teachers will have little or no experience – or interest – in serving students whose background and experience is incongruent with their new classmates. Such pressures might well hurt such incoming transfers as they could face social and academic pressures equally as deleterious as those faced in their previous academic environment. In extreme cases, most or all parents from one badly performing school might elect to transfer to one or more schools leaving one facility abandoned and other schools overwhelmed with poorly prepared newcomers. This cannot be seen as effective pedagogical management!

Another facet of the new federal rules include a provision that a failing school might be obliged to pay for the costs of transferring and transporting eligible students to their new schools. Receiving schools will be mandated to hire added teachers and build additional classrooms to accommodate new incoming students. Since such transfers will be determined on a year-to-year basis and are virtually unpredictable due to failing schools’ individual parental choice and to yearly school performance, knowing how many class-

rooms, books, and teachers are required by each school or district presents a situation doomed to failure. Incoming schools are mandated to accept these children without added funding to cover these expenses. Such a policy punishes the successfully administered and performing school and diminishes good schools' ability to continue to perform well. It may well come to a situation where such policies will politically exterminate public education as we know it today. Few administrators, teachers, students, and parents in a good educational environment will stand by while their hard work is diminished by indirectly rewarding others whose efforts have been sub par. Many families and communities likely will form private schools and push for public vouchers to fund some of these costs. Such private schools (common in the deep south) will invite the selection of the most academically qualified and financially able students. This would completely turn the efforts of federal rules upside down by creating a new segregated system worse than what we have now. The economically and academically poorest students will suffer even worse than they presently do and will be abandoned to a pathetic education system devoid of any political clout and a constituency mass that offers some level of influence.

It seems idiotic to assume that increasing good schools' class size, increasing their costs with no economic aid, stressing out teachers with unfamiliar conditions for which many may have insufficient training and experience, putting students in new and sometimes hostile social environments, placing poorly prepared students in competition with better prepared classmates will enhance anyone's education. The mental equation of policy makers seems to be: "fleeing a bad environment and overloading a good one will make everyone better." This is nonsense.

A huge deal is made on how schools rank in annual testing. I applaud frequent and valid testing, not for its own sake, but to help schools repair, improve, or enrich their offerings. It must be remembered that not all schools can be above average as they are in Lake Woebegone. We cannot allow test scores completely run educational policy lest our children are taught test-taking rather than academics. Tests need to be understood and valued as a tool, not as an educational end.

Changes have to be made, but the policies discussed above seem disastrously counter-productive. Better teacher training and in-service efforts; more frequent and demanding teacher evaluations with enforced negative consequences for unfit teachers; an infusion of top class leadership; merit incentives for

stellar teaching performance; and lowering class size in poor schools would be better remedies to poor performing students than those new policies proposed by the US Department of Education

You do not improve anyone's situation by lowering the standards, resources or potentials of others. This is so obvious that one has to wonder how it has escaped the Department of Education leadership.