

## JFK's Lessons for ESEA/NCLB Reauthorization

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President Kennedy recognized that our country “requires *a citizenry that understands our principles and problems*. It requires skilled *manpower and brainpower to match the power of totalitarian discipline*. It requires a scientific *effort which demonstrates the superiority of freedom*. And it requires an electorate in every state with sufficiently broad horizons and *sufficient maturity of judgment to guide this nation safely* through whatever lies ahead.”

— Final Special Message to the Congress on Education, January 29, 1963

Is what this nation requires from public education today any different than what JFK had proposed?

Kennedy's first appeal to Congress on behalf of public schools in 1961 was for support of his “twin goals”: “a new standard of excellence in education and the availability of such excellence to all who are willing and able to pursue it.”

By April 11, 1965, over two years after JFK's assassination on November 22, 1963, his “twin goals” became the aim of national education policy when President Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA),

### **An Act**

**“To strengthen and improve educational quality and educational opportunities in the Nation's elementary and secondary schools.”**

Today we struggle under the weight of the federal accountability law, No Child Left Behind, whose goal — to “**close the achievement gap through accountability, flexibility, and choice**” — set the federal mandate for high-stakes yearly standardized tests. Costly and with detrimental consequences particularly for the students the law intended to help, this country must reconsider what we aim to achieve.

Kennedy emphasized *the need to address* “depressed areas” and “slum neighborhoods” where children are known to have: poor diets, unaddressed speech, dental and visual disorders, and where older students are in need of job guidance and proper recreational activities.

The first titles of ESEA addressed Kennedy's concerns for a spectrum of disadvantages:

**Title I** – *Education of Children of Low Income Families* to provide financial assistance to support educationally-deprived *children*.

**Title II** – *School Library Resources, Textbooks, and Other Instructional Materials* to provide for access to educational materials *for all students* in the State.

**Title III** – *Supplementary Educational Centers and Services*, available to the *entire community*, to provide services not currently offered but deemed vital to educational improvement.

Kennedy stressed that unlike in the health and agricultural fields where they “have established the worth of systematic research and development,” the education profession “*lags behind in utilizing the results of research.*”

To remedy the problem;

**Title IV** – *Educational Research and Training; Cooperative Research Act* to provide research, training, and dissemination of information *aimed* at improving the quality of teaching.

With variability of the states recognized, ESEA’s last title clarified the intent of federal education law.

**Title V** – *State Departments of Education* aimed to stimulate and assist in strengthening the *leadership* resources of State educational agencies.

In each special message to Congress on education JFK expounded further and further on the proper federal role. He declared, “Let us put to rest the unfounded fears that ‘Federal money means Federal control.’” And he held up the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, the Morrill Act of 1862 that established the Land-Grant College system, and the National Defense Education Act of 1958 as examples where “*the Congress has repeatedly recognized its responsibility to strengthen our educational system without weakening local responsibility.*”

And the 35 page bill was completed with a statement limiting the boundaries of federal power:

**“Federal Control of Education Prohibited**

*Nothing contained in this Act shall be construed to authorize any department, agency, officer, or employee of the United States **to exercise any direction, supervision, or control** over the **curriculum, program of instruction, administration, or personnel** of any educational institution or school system, or over the selection of library resources, textbooks, or other print or published instructional materials by any educational institution or school system.”*

With the passage of ESEA, the major ideas that Kennedy and his advisers believed would strengthen and improve public schools were preserved, temporarily.

Today both our federal boundaries and guiding principles are unclear. Today, we are taking aim at teachers but with accountability schemes rather than the high-quality preparation and the continuing education that most people believe is necessary. So 50 years after the death of President Kennedy, let us recall how he wished to succeed.

Acknowledging that the quality of the students depends on “both the quality and the relative quantity of teachers and facilities,” he emphasized *class size, teachers’ salaries, and adequate classrooms as common problems particularly in need of assistance in states with limited financial resources.*

Focusing on teachers, JFK felt “*our immediate concern should be to afford them every possible opportunity to improve their professional skills and their command of the subjects they teach.*” He believed “*teachers would profit from a full year of full-time study in their subject-matter fields. Very few can afford to do so.*” The funding then proposed was to “*begin to make such opportunities available to the elementary and secondary school teachers of this country and thereby accord to this profession the support, prestige and recognition it deserves.*”

And quoting Thomas Jefferson, “*Let us keep our eye steadily on the whole system,*” Kennedy asked that his final education proposal “*be considered as a whole, as a combination of elements designed to solve problems that have no single solution.*”

The nations’ goals were to be met “on the basis of three fundamental guidelines:

- A. An appraisal of the entire range of educational problems...;
- B. A selective application of Federal aid - aimed at strengthening, not weakening, the independence of existing school systems and aimed at meeting our most urgent education problems and objectives...; and
- C. More effective implementation of existing laws...”

To honor limited federal involvement in education, the “appraisal” is a necessary first step because federal “participation should be *selective*, stimulative and, where possible, transitional” and “the proper Federal role is to *identify national education goals and to help* local, state and private authorities build the necessary roads to reach those goals.”

Today, we will only be able to finish building the necessary roads by first removing the road blocks. We must put an end to the Bush-era, test-based, federally-mandated accountability law. We know No Child Left Behind did not live up to its name but the title is a worthy endpoint.

With our distribution of quality education unequal, why do we fail to focus on problems where they exist? With the availability of resources and supports limited in financially depressed areas, why do we spend on unnecessary tests while ignoring the real needs of children? When we know how to improve teacher quality, why do we not do it?

Did we take our eyes off the target? Or do we struggle to succeed because the target was changed?

Improving schools requires we understand the problems, understand the principles, and set the right goals. That is the lesson left behind.

Today, because an inept and dysfunctional congress has failed to act on No Child Left Behind (ESEA), we have the opportunity to demand that President Kennedy's twin goals be put back into the long-overdue renewal of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

There is nothing stopping us from taking this small but essential step back.

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