

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE DEPT. OF EDUCATION?

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In a recent *Washington Post* guest op-ed column (June 9), Margaret Spellings took her stand against national education standards and a national uniform testing apparatus.

In what can be construed as either deep-dyed naïveté or shameless hypocrisy, Spellings briefly introduced her column by characterizing the Bush-Spellings regime as “a quiet revolution of [*sic*] accountability” that has produced “improved student achievement and a narrowing achievement gap across most of the country.” According to her, “we’re on the right track” at last.

After such introductory bravado, Spellings asked whether “the academic bar has been raised” truly, after which she alluded—with cavalier dismissiveness—to the lowness of state standards by comparison to the standards set by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

Did she raise these issues—the academic bar and the NAEP—in order to face squarely the deficiencies in the Bush-Spellings legislation and in state control of curriculum and testing? She did not. Rather she did so in order to argue strongly for state/local control of public education. Thus, quintessential Spellings wrong-headedness pranced to the forefront.

In the face of the gap between states and the NAEP, Spellings fears that awareness of the gap might lead to “a Beltway-based movement for ‘national standards’ and a national test.” From her point of view, such a movement would be—to paraphrase Hamlet—a consummation devoutly to be abhorred. Spellings justifies her antipathy by asserting that national standards actually would “lower the academic bar” and “do little to address the *persistent* achievement gap” (*italics mine*).

The grounds for her opposition to national standards were twofold—historical and prudential.

Historically, she claimed that local control of schools is a long-standing American tradition based on the Constitution’s bestowal of governance of public education upon “states and localities.” Not satisfied with such a broad statement, she goes so far as to say that “neighborhood schools deserve neighborhood leadership.” In other words, she is opposed—in the final analysis—not only to national control, but even to state or city control. Let neighborhoods rule!

Why, then, do we have an Education Department in the cabinet? According to Spellings, the function of the U.S. Department of Education is not legislatively mandatory but merely informationally advisory.

Responding to such a condensed jumble of misinformation and misconception is daunting.

First, one must wonder to which Constitution she appeals. It cannot be the U.S. Constitution, which is silent on the subject of control of public education. Perhaps she has in mind a possible negative justification based on the 10th article of the Bill of Rights: “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.”

However, the most that one could construe from this is that the states may—not must—control education. But so too may “the people,” i.e., the singular collective for which we could justifiably substitute “the nation.” Clearly, the Secretary of Education has some serious gaps in her education.

Second, the appeal to an American tradition of local control has some merit. However, it must be understood in context. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, there was—because of travel and communication limitations—local control of schools. Nonetheless, because of a cultural homogeneity that lasted at least until World War I, there was a *de facto* uniform national curriculum assessed by remarkably uniform and challenging tests. Anyone who doubts this need only go to the Library of Congress and study the textbooks used then and the tests from a variety of locales that are contained in its archives.

Times have changed. Paradoxically, now that technological advances have been made in travel and communication—advances that should render a uniform national curriculum easy to promulgate—our schools have become atomistic pockets of incapacity and incompetence.

Prudentially, Spellings asserts that national standards “would become an exercise in lowest-common-denominator politics.” The irony here is that it is precisely our current governance structure that has produced lowest-common-denominator education practice and policy.

Instead of the trickle-down effect that Spellings claims for her policies, what we have is a drag-down effect in which all students are short-changed. Furthermore, the current crop of teachers and administrators is largely a product of this system and cannot see beyond it.

Only a national system can bail us out and keep our educational ship from sinking irretrievably.

However much Spellings tries to cast a beautification spell over this shameful ugliness, reality keeps intruding. The only question is when we will have the courage to face that reality.