

Editorial: Betsy DeVos, Radical

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The education secretary sees where the problem lies - in her own department.

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On January 17, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos told us what she's really up to. She was the keynote speaker at the American Enterprise Institute conference "Bush-Obama School Reform: Lessons Learned." There she gave a tough-but-fair appraisal of the costly failed federal attempts at education reform that preceded her. As a Trump appointee ought, she told an uncomfortable truth that D.C.'s avoided for decades. When it comes to school reform, none of what Washington's done has worked.

"The bottom line is simple: federal education reform efforts have not worked as hoped," she said. The landmark policies of the Bush and Obama education departments were No Child Left Behind and Common Core State Standards, respectively. And they were ambitious failures, hardly the department's first. "The lesson is in the false premise," she said, "that Washington knows what's best for educators, parents, and students."

Bipartisan Bush-era No Child Left Behind failed its promise of universal proficiency. In practice, it forced schools to "teach to the test" or lie about scores. Today, proficiency only slips further from reach with 8th grade reading scores in decline. With Race to the Top, the Obama administration put states in competition for federal grants and enticed them to adopt flawed Common Core State Standards. Most did. The clearest change has been a decline in globally competitive math scores, which experts peg to needless disruption brought on by the standards' adoption.

The opposite of Bush-Obama education reform means no longer putting federal interests first. "Federally mandated assessments. Federal money. Federal standards. All originated in Washington, and none solved the problem. Too many of America's students are still unprepared." The opposite approach aims to restore trust in local control. As DeVos said at AEI, "Federal mandates distort what education ought to be: a trusting relationship between teacher, parent, and student."

We're told the president will, as if by reflex, embrace any strategy billed by advisers as the opposite of what Presidents Bush or Obama would have done. It's an object of Oval Office ridicule in Michael Wolff's *Fire and Fury*, and a stale laughline around Washington. It's also one of the few theoretical threads holding together an uncertain Trump doctrine. But as one of his most principled and ideologically honest appointees makes clear—in the right hands, it's enough.

And what, precisely, are the lessons learned from her predecessors' mistakes? Mainly to fight off federal bloat and to challenge districts and states to improve schools according to the changing needs of their local constituencies. Late in the Obama years, the Every Student Succeeds Act restored policy-making authority to the states. What counts now, DeVos said, is what they'll do with it.

The lessons of past failures also steer her back to an era before her job existed. The department DeVos leads is itself a product of misplaced federal authority. Its creation—“President Carter’s giant nod to union bosses,” she said—came with the “ironic charge to ‘prohibit federal control of education.’”

The department’s right-sized roles in public life are to approve state plans and to ensure that schools are safe. Those aren’t negligible. But the work of reversing technocratic arrogance lately dominant in federal education reform is a more daunting task. It will require, more than anything else, a rollback of federal funding. As long as states receive hundreds of millions of federal dollars every year in No Child Left Behind money, as long as they’re eligible for even more in Race to the Top grants, state lawmakers and policymakers aren’t going to try anything that will jeopardize that money—even if they want to. Pulling federal largesse out of public education is a stupendous task, but Betsy DeVos has both the will and intelligence to begin.