

# Tread on Me—but Lightly

## *The Era of Big Government Is Complicated*

As I write, the National Conference of State Legislatures has just decreed that the federal No Child Left Behind act is an unconstitutional, unworkable, and undesirable federal power grab that should be rolled back—while the National Governors Association has made the contrary suggestion that NCLB’s core principles and mechanisms be extended to cover high schools.

How much government is too much, and what is a workable balance between leaving people and institutions (and states and cities) free to make their own decisions and compelling them to behave in ways that someone else, usually someone higher on the federalism hillside, decides is good for them?

This issue of *Education Next* vividly illustrates these dilemmas and shows how such hoary questions of political philosophy are now entangled with interests and ingrained practices.

No Child Left Behind arose from the premise that America’s public schools weren’t doing well enough and states ought not to be left to their own devices to improve them. So Uncle Sam created a new web of requirements, incentives, and sanctions aimed at boosting school performance and student achievement.

Some see this as an unwarranted and ultimately futile extension of federal authority into matters properly left to states and communities. Yet NCLB left the biggest decision of all to the states: how high to set their standards of academic achievement and the passing levels on their tests. And now we see, thanks to Paul Peterson, Frederick Hess, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (see page 52), that many states have set their standards shamefully low, which gives the citizens of those states a false sense of comfort—and shields their educators from criticism. These jurisdictions may be complying with the letter of NCLB, but not its spirit. Yet as states pay most of the education bill, why shouldn’t they set their own standards?

“Complying” with a complex federal statute carries other costs, too. In this issue’s *Forum* (page 55), Theodore Sizer

contends that charter schools need the freedom to innovate and distinguish themselves, while Michael Petrilli explains why charter schools, too, should be subject to NCLB’s core accountability requirements.

Academics aren’t all that schools do or that Washington meddles in. Feeding children (via school breakfast, lunch, and commodities programs) is now a \$10 billion federal enterprise. It began as a way to feed the hungry, but the biggest issue today is slimming down chubby kids and improving their nutritional habits. That classic “nanny state” impulse collides, however, with ingrained cafeteria practices, powerful agribusiness interests, and, perhaps especially, children’s tastes. What if they prefer to chow down on pizza and fries? Will someone force them to eat broccoli and grapes? By what authority and with what consequences? Yet the debate on the Potomac’s shores, as Ron Haskins expertly elucidates (see page 10), is overshadowed by political and corporate considerations that have little to do with

what’s good for kids. Healthful or not, school food is not always good to eat, according to restaurant critic Mark Zanger’s delectable review (see page 18) of six school-cafeteria meals in Massachusetts.

Washington is not the only locus of government complexity. Joe Williams skillfully recounts the ways in which New York City and New York state, pushed by an activist private group called the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, have tied themselves in judicial, legislative, and budgetary knots for 12 years now—and with no end in sight. In the latest turning of this wheel of fortune, a judge has commanded that another \$5.6 billion per year be added to the Big Apple’s already massive public school budget—to ensure that young New Yorkers receive an “adequate” education. But he’s left it to the legislature and the governor to figure out how and where to find the money.

The moral: Beware of minefields when you push on government—any government—to mind people’s business and try to alter their behavior.

— CHESTER E. FINN JR.

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**MISSION STATEMENT** In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.

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