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FIXING EDUCATION POLICY.

By Jim Ryan

Posted Tuesday, April 1, 2008, at 8:10 AM ET

With President Bush's approval rating hovering in the 30s, just about everyone has an opinion on what George W. has done wrong in the last seven years. But not everyone can explain what the next president must do to fix it. So we've called in some experts to tell us. **Fixing It** is a 10-part series to be published over the course of this week with contributions from some of our favorite writers, offering detailed policy prescriptions for the next president, whomever that may be, on how to quickly undo some of the damage. One of our contributors wryly describes the series as "News You Can Use. If You Happen To Be President." Read the other entries [here](#).

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It's worth noting here that the best high-school students already take national tests, though we don't call them that. We call them Advanced Placement tests. No one argues that it would be better to have 50 different AP tests in American history instead of one. Why should only our best students have the advantage of a high-quality, national testing system?

- **Administer fewer tests.** National tests should be given less often, perhaps in only fourth, eighth, and 11th grades. This would provide relief from the relentless test march that characterizes elementary- and middle-school years, which would give breathing room for subjects like music and art while concentrating attention on key thresholds in education. Reducing the overall amount of tests should also improve the quality of the tests themselves.

- **Rank schools; don't prescribe punishments.** The federal government should get out of the business of telling states how to reform and punish their schools, and we should drop 2014 as our rendezvous with perfection. It's a gimmick that has outlived its usefulness and is now causing more harm than good as states grow increasingly desperate to find ways to avoid the looming possibility that most of their schools will be labeled as failing. The federal government should instead, right now, create a system to rank every school within a state. A ranking system will provide both crucial information and create ongoing pressure for reform. It will also take away the incentive to game the testing system. Because some schools will always be ranked higher than others, there's no reason to try to make all students look as if they're from Lake

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Scores on national tests should be one factor in the rankings but not the only one. School quality should also be measured using value-added assessments, crediting schools that make exceptional progress with their students, regardless of where those students started. Other criteria should include graduation rates, measured fairly and uniformly; college-attendance rates; and parental satisfaction. Still other criteria, such as advancement from grade to grade, might be used for elementary and middle schools. Ranking systems aren't perfect, but using multiple criteria to rank schools should provide a much clearer and fuller picture of school quality. States can then decide on their own how they want to sanction or assist the low-performing schools.

If and when NCLB is fixed, the next president should concentrate on two key issues: teachers and preschool.

• *Teachers and money.* Math and science teachers are in short supply, and there aren't enough good teachers in high-poverty and high-minority schools. A partial answer to this problem has been known for a long time. It's called money. To attract more and better qualified teachers, and to attract them to particular subjects and particular schools, we need to pay them more. The federal government has money. You see where this is headed.

• *Teachers and prestige.* Money alone is not enough. Respect, prestige, and decent working conditions also matter. The federal government cannot monitor working conditions in tens of thousands of schools, but it can create a teaching program that restores prestige to the profession. Teach for America—which places recent college graduates for two-year stints in some of the most difficult schools in the nation—is inundated with applications. In recent years, they've had to turn down four out of every five applicants, most from very good colleges. Indeed, in one year, 10 percent of the entire senior classes at Yale and Dartmouth applied.

The federal government should create a similar program by agreeing to reimburse at least some of the college expenses of those who enter teaching. Colleges and universities should also chip in, much as law schools cover the student loans of their graduates who go into public service. The longer the service, the more loans forgiven. The federal government should use this as a model to encourage college graduates to go into teaching—and to stay there for more than two years.

• *Preschool.* It's clear that many children should start school before kindergarten. The benefits of high-quality preschool, especially for children from poorer families, easily outweigh the costs. States have recognized this and have pumped billions of dollars into preschool education over the last decade, but millions of children remain without access. The federal government, in conjunction with the states, should strive to provide access at least to all 4-year-olds whose families cannot afford a high-quality preschool on their own. This would be both a politically popular measure and one of the single best investments any level of government could make.

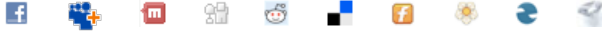
More could be done, of course, but this is plenty for starters. All of these fixes will take real leadership and real money. But they're worthwhile and certainly better investments than our current response to educational failure: building more prisons.

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Illustration by Jason Raish.

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