

Educational Policy in the Clinton Administration

Zach Lynn

This paper will examine the most visible education policy pursued by President Clinton, Goals 2000. Specifically, this paper will examine the process by which Goals 2000 came to be, the reasons why it did not work in practice, and the positive and negative effects that it had on future education policy in general, and the later education policy of President Clinton in particular. In addition, attention will be paid to the interesting way that education policy served as a useful lens with which to examine the larger issues confronting the candidates in the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections.

A preliminary analysis of Goals 2000, which was Clinton's plan to raise academic achievement through standardization, reveals that it failed for several key reasons, which this paper will examine: 1) the way that Goals 2000 was formed prevented it from being viewed as a Democratic victory and gaining partisan support that way, as many of the ideas in the bill were supported by both parties; 2) it ignored the history of educational policy-making in America, which relied heavily on local control; 3) people were afraid of a national standards-making body, in much the same way they were afraid of nationalized health care; 4) the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was up for reauthorization after the 2000 election, so that everyone knew wholesale education reform would occur after the Clinton presidency, regardless of Goals 2000; and 5) wholesale reform of any system is difficult.

Nonetheless, this paper does not diminish the important role that President Clinton played in putting education back on the national agenda, and the inherent value in having a president committed to improving education. Many of his other education initiatives (which are in a sense pieces of Goals 2000) were successful, such as lower class size and school construction.

Education policy, as this paper will make clear, is also an interesting microcosm through which to examine the 1992 and 1996 campaigns. The problems that President Bush and Senator Dole experienced in the 1992 and 1996 campaigns, respectively, with positions on education policy can be seen as indicative of larger problems with their

campaigns.