

AEI HOSTS EVENT ON OBAMA ADMINISTRATION'S EDUCATION REFORM EFFORTS

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On Wednesday, January 27, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) hosted an event titled, "Education Reform: Reviewing the Obama Administration's First Year", which featured experts discussing the administration's progress and prospects relative to education reform.

SPEAKERS

- Frederick M. Hess, Director of Education Policy Studies, AEI
- Andy Smarick, Distinguished Visiting Fellow, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, Adjunct Fellow, AEI
- Mark Schneider, Former Commissioner, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education
- Kevin Carey, Policy Director, Education Sector
- Alice Johnson Cain, Education Director, Hope Street Group

SUMMARY

Andrew Kelly, a research fellow in education policy at AEI and a Ph.D. candidate in political science at the University of California, Berkeley, acted as moderator for the event. Noting the expectations related to that night's State of the Union Address, he cited the timeliness of the event and the opportunity to assess the nation's progress with regards to education reform. He outlined some of the administration's work to date and their future goals including increasing college completion rates, attempting to overhaul the student loan programs, and the expectations related to expanding the Race to the Top program (RTT) for additional years and to local school districts. Pointing to future legislative efforts, such as the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the final passage of the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act, and the proposed spending freeze, Kelly asked panelists their thoughts on these and other education initiatives.

Frederick M. Hess

Rick Hess, Director of Education Policy Studies at AEI, began his critique of the Obama administration with a series of what he considers "unanswered questions" crucial to fulfilling the promise of education reform. For instance, he said the administration wants to fund "what works," but "what works" so far, according to Hess, are elite charter schools that leverage

limited resources and cannot easily scale. Hess questioned whether the administration is able to fund what works without dedicating excessive funds to models that cannot scale. Hess said the president promised to “scrub” the budget of ineffective programs, but wondered which programs would be targeted. He said the administration wants state charter caps removed, but, given the many other obstacles to increasing the number of charter schools, such as unfriendly state and federal regulations, facilities headaches, and teacher certification issues, Hess wanted to know if the president would use the bully pulpit to urge reform at that level as well. Stricter national standards have also been promoted, but Hess wanted to know how confident the president is that such a reform effort would go well given the debate around the importance of “21st Century Skills.” Given that education saw a new investment of \$100 billion in FY 2010, and the accolades Secretary Duncan and the Department received, Hess argues that it is remarkable how little has been done. Later, Hess was asked his thoughts on RTT. In Hess’ opinion, through RTT, legislators chose to replicate the worst elements of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Like with NCLB, he said, states were given a list of requirements to meet, so money was spent on consultants to write applications to fit the requirements rather than rewarding states for implementing one or two initiatives very well. As a final grade, Hess gave the administration what he called a “Gentleman’s C.” He doled out credit for the rhetoric about teacher quality and standing up to interest groups, but took issue with the amount of money the Treasury had to borrow to pay for it all. He said legislators are sticking kids with the bill for programs that may or may not benefit them.

Andy Smarick

Andy Smarick, Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and Adjunct Fellow at AEI, divided his critique of the Obama administration’s education reform efforts into three categories: unquestionable successes, mistakes, and unknowns. Among the successes were RTT, which Smarick said caused more than two dozen states to change their education laws and policies for the better. Also in the success category was the administration’s general support of reforms like charters and increased teacher accountability, embracing the core principles of NCLB, and continued focus on improving the nation’s lowest performing schools. In the mistakes column, according to Smarick, was the proportion of funding that went to reform (\$5 billion on RTT, including \$1 billion for I3), compared to the roughly \$75 billion Smarick said was used to maintain the status quo via the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund. The dismantling of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program; the focus on turnaround efforts instead of start-ups and closures; as well as what Smarick deemed an incoherent position on federalism, were also mentioned as low points for the administration. Smarick mentioned a few unknowns, such as the uncertainty over what NCLB’s reauthorization will look like and how RTT will ultimately “play out.” Regarding RTT, Smarick said it is easier to pass legislation than to implement it, given past results from legislative education efforts, so it seems foolish to expect dramatic changes as a result of RTT. Smarick gave the administration a year-end grade of B/B+.

Mark Schneider

Mark Schneider, Former Commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics at the U.S. Department of Education, said some of the positives of the past year have been that RTT helped eliminate log jams in states over policy issues before the program even began. He also commended the administration for its focus on higher education and improving community colleges. He called on the administration to focus on pushing toward common standards and

national assessments and cited the discrepancy between Detroit's 4th grade math scores on the NAEP (3% proficient) and the state assessment (70% proficient) as evidence for the need. Later, Schneider was asked to clarify comments he made about whether or not community colleges were up to the challenge of meeting the administration's higher education goals. He said that students and parents want education to prepare them for the job market, but community colleges are aimed at providing a more traditional liberal arts education. Determining the purpose of community colleges has to come before embarking on big reform efforts, he said. Schneider gave the administration a grade of "incomplete" as the effect of the programs has yet to be determined.

Kevin Carey

Kevin Carey, Policy Director at Education Sector, said it had been a good first year for Obama administration considering when the President took office. Given the economic turmoil, Carey said, Obama could have easily put education off. Instead, the administration took an aggressive approach to education reform. Carey praised RTT's approach to education funding and said the competitive "venture capital" approach would probably yield better results than the more distributive approaches of the past. He also took issue with Smarick's suggestion that only a small proportion of the stimulus funds went to reform. Carey said the Stimulus worked to keep teachers employed, and that stemming job loss was its original purpose. Carey criticized some of Rick Hess' and Andy Smarick's logic on reform. He said Hess' argument that the states should have been asked to do more than check boxes and Smarick's assertion that many reforms are impossible to implement conflict with each other. The administration's final grade was an A-, although Carey noted that the designation was being awarded much like President Obama's Nobel Prize win: in anticipation of good things to come, including the opportunity of the Stimulus bill to change state policy and its focus on the institutions most students attend for college versus elite universities.

Alice Johnson Cain

Alice Johnson Cain, Education Director of the Hope Street Group and recent House Education and Labor Committee staffer, said the Obama administration has ushered in a new—and better—era of education reform. She said there has been no other time when a single piece of legislation (RTT) has helped fix "broken" laws across several different states. As evidence, she cited the firewall around teacher evaluation in California and the state's effort to remove it to compete for RTT funds. She also commended the administration for what she saw as a clear theme of "putting kids first". Cain gave the administration an A for putting children first; allowing charters to grow; and for reaching across the aisle in crafting reform efforts. If the administration wants to maintain this grade, according to Cain, they need to keep the bar high on qualifying for RTT funds and ensure that ESEA is as equally reform-minded as other reform efforts.

CONCLUSION

There was a brief discussion between audience members and panelists to close out the event. Much of this conversation revisited earlier comments. At the conclusion of the event, audience members were encouraged to visit the website to access the materials referenced by panelists throughout the discussion. For more information, visit: <http://www.aei.org/event/100187>.