

An Analytical Review of the Fiscal Policy and Education Initiatives of American Presidents, Since 1980

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Abstract

This paper analyzes and examines federal educational programs by reviewing a significant time period in American history, 1980-2021. Secondary data are used to show national educational fiscal and public policy, high school graduation rates, high school dropout rates and college graduation rates within the United States to demonstrate literacy initiatives and their influence on the overall quality of education in America.

Keywords: fiscal policy, education policy, educational attainment, student completion and student success

1. Introduction

Before the civil rights movement, the American federal government played a minimal role in financially supporting states by means of improving primary, secondary and higher education (Vinovskis, 2015). In fiscal year 2019, the nation spent \$752.3 billion on its 48 million K-12 children which is a 4.7% increase from the previous year and the most per pupil in more than a decade (Chen, 2021). Despite the funding effort, American students consistently score lower in mathematics and science than students from many other countries based on a World Education ranking (World Population Review, 2021). More so, a Business Insider report in 2018 ranked the U.S. educational system, 38th in math scores and 24th in science. In recent education research and news, there has been discourse on why America's education rankings have fallen by international standards over the past four decades. The consensus points out that government spending on education has failed to keep up with inflation (Mantz, 2019).

Over the last century, formalized education has been known as an investment in human capital which improves economic performance and a better quality of life in American society (Goldin, 2016). Presently, the American educational system must meet the demands of e-learning, new knowledge, and a productive global economy. Now, is the time to take advantage of the opportunity to identify the aims of education and reasons of declining social skills, moral values and spiritual strengthening in the world today.

Traditionally, American federal education funding is distributed to states and to local school districts through a variety of formula and competitive grant programs. In his education research study, Baker (2021) documented why money matters in education and how in recent years, federal contributions to elementary and secondary education nearly reached 8%; how the states and local governments provide most school resources. This present study reviews federal funding in education and the impact of federal government initiatives on student needs and academic achievement. Previous research studies show secondary education and college completion rates vary along the line of access to financial resources, as well as racial and ethnic lines.

Ideally, the federal government can improve its effectiveness in education by creating programs that will uplift areas in education where there is a high need such as access to technology, teacher training, teacher support services and development, and overall health and safety on school campuses. High need areas also include school building improvements, curriculum development, school counseling services, career development, testing and assessment services, special education and bridge programs to higher education. Further attention is needed in supporting the arts and music education; providing more support for STEM and after school programs; supporting nationwide free lunch programs for all students; creating programs to help eliminate student loan debt; developing programs for building parent/guardian and community relations; school board training and assistance; principal support and training. Present research studies in education show that other high need areas include support for textbook purchases, drop out intervention and juvenile delinquency prevention, literacy initiatives, language and speech development, medical studies, online learning, accelerated learning, and alternative learning environments. More support is further needed in such fields as biology, law, and computer science. Finally, more attention is needed for supporting private institutions, trade schools, and minority serving institutions of higher education.

2. Methodology

The purpose of this descriptive research study is to review the literature as an examination of an important time period in history, 1980-2021 where there was a pivotal shift in the global economy, American politics, and a major public concern for “Quality” education and reform. Meaningful data in the study show federal influence on education by the passing of legislation, government funding of educational programs, and by the American government establishing national education priorities. The data collection approach stems from an extensive literature review, data retrieved from the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S Census Bureau, education policy books, articles, literature from state education boards and local school districts. Specific data concerning federal expenditures on educational programs and initiatives were examined. Census and other statistical data which characterized student dropout rates, educational attainment and graduation rates were reported.

3. Literature Review

During the 19th century, the federal government involvement in education included vocational training, land grants, and the establishment in 1867 of the Office of Education (Jenkins & Hill, 2011). The purpose of this newly created office was to collect information on schools and teaching that would help states establish effective school systems. In terms of prioritizing education, prior to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, federal government involvement in elementary and secondary education was nonexistent. Early groundbreaking education related Supreme Court lawsuits included, 1896 Plessy v Ferguson and Brown v the Board of Education of Topeka. Over the years, the Office of Education operated under many titles and under many agencies. Advocacy for creating a cabinet level Department of Education began with President Carter in 1979. Burke and Butcher (2020) noted that Carter’s plan would transfer most of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare’s education related functions to the Department of Education. Table 1 below depicts significant educational legislation since 1965.

Table 1: Significant Historical U.S. Educational Legislation

Year	Legislation	President
1965	Education and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)	Johnson
1965	Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA)	Johnson
1974	Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)	Ford
1974	Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974 (EEOA)	Nixon
1975	Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA)	Ford
1978	Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment	Carter
1980	Department of Education Organization Act	Carter
1984	Equal Access Act	Reagan
1990	Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy & Campus Crime Statistics Act (Clery Act)	Bush
1994	Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994	Clinton
2001	No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)	Bush
2004	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)	Bush

2005	Higher Education Reconciliation Act of 2005 (HERA)	Bush
2006	Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act, 1984 – various reauthorizations	Reagan/Bush
2007	America COMPETES Act	Bush
2008	Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA), amended 1965-reauthorization	Bush
2009	Race to the Top	Obama
2009	Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act	Obama
2010	Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010	Obama
2015	Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)	Obama
2019	FUTUREAct	Trump
2020	Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act of 2020	Trump
2021	American Rescue Plan Act of 2021	Biden

Source: Original data compiled by the researchers, 2021

The U.S. Department of Education is a fairly new government division. It was formed in 1979 which was only 41 years ago. Since the Department of Education began operations in fiscal year 1980, its mission has included promoting student achievement and ensuring equal access to educational opportunity (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). It was originally created as an area in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, an umbrella deeply connected to providing public health and social services (Ruth & Marshall, 2017). Kraft and Furlong (2019) found that advancing the Office of Education to cabinet-level status was overwhelmingly opposed by many members in the Republican Party, especially Ronald Reagan. Once President Reagan gained the office, he significantly reduced the U.S. Department of Education's budget (Clabaugh, 2004). At present, the Department of Education is administered by the United States secretary of education. Government records report that as of 2016, the Education Department has an annual budget of approximately 68 billion. U.S. fiscal data shows that the 2019 budget supports \$129.8 billion in new postsecondary grants, loans and work-study assistance to help an estimated 11.5 million students and their families pay for college (U.S. Secretary of Education, 2018).

4. Results

4.1 An Evaluation of the Social, Economic, Political and Educational Climate during 1980-2021

On the brink of the 1980s, there was a major socioeconomic shift due to advances in science, technology and a universal diversion from planned economies and towards free-market capitalism where the government basically stays out of business affairs and the economy entirely (Schwab, 2021). An economic deconstruction increased in the developed world and the era of Reaganomics begins. Research shows that the AIDS epidemic became more recognized in the 80s and has since become one of the world's most serious health challenges with approximately 38 million people currently living with HIV (KFF, 2021). Global warming became well known to the scientific and political community. Also, the high-tech personal computer experienced explosive growth in the 80s. Arcade games and video games became a popular trend, but by the end of 1989, home computers became the new trend. Correspondingly, MTV and music videos began to have a larger effect on the public (Hunt, 2012).

More importantly, the main concern in the 80s was the quality of American education. Various studies documented the poor performance of students in every subject area. In comparison with those of the past and with those of other countries, studies warned about the folly of failing to educate poor and minority children. As a consequence of failing to provide quality education for all, student scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT; the measure by which most colleges evaluated applicants) had been on a downward spiral since 1962. Drew (2015) noted that declining trend continued at the beginning of the decade. Studies also showed that American elementary and secondary students consistently tested lower in science and math than their counterparts in Japan, and in what was then West Germany and Russia. Evidence was clear that students were learning less in school environments filled with rising drug use and violence. By the end of the 1980s, America was faced with broken economic promises and broken families. From 1980-1995 violent crime, youth violence and drug abuse were on the rise (Blumstein & Rosenfield, 2008).

4.2 American Presidential Educational Initiatives

In terms of American presidential educational initiatives and research included within this study, the 2000s show major federal involvement, legislation and involvement in education as shown in Table 1. Beginning in 2001, President George W. Bush pushed through the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) which included Title 1 provisions applying to disadvantaged students (Jaiani & Whitford, 2011). Also, NCLB supported standards-based education reform based on the premise that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals could improve individual outcomes in education. The Act required states to develop assessments in basic skills. To receive federal school funding, states had to give these assessments to all students at select grade levels. While serving in office January 20, 2001 to January 20, 2009, President George W. Bush undertook various educational agendas, specifically, the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA). During his presidential term, Bush was well known for taking on the task of shaping educational programs to strengthen knowledge in the sciences and mathematics.

From 2009 to 2017, as part of the American Jobs Act, President Barack Obama proposed investing \$25 billion to make the American education system the best in the world by rebuilding and modernizing K-12 schools so young people can compete and maintain American economic power abroad and to build a strong middle class at home. Shortly after taking office, Obama set the goal of having the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020. According to U.S. census data on education in 2018, 34.9% of Americans attained a college degree (see Table 2).

Table 2: Educational attainment in the United States, age 25 and over (2018)

Education	Percentage
High school graduate	89.8%
Some college	61.20%
Associate degree	45.16%
Bachelor's degree	34.9%
Master's degree	13.05%
Doctorate or professional degree	3.5%

Source: [U.S. Census Data on Higher education in the United States, 2018](#)

Data from the American Community Survey (ACS) revealed that in 2018 there were 2.1 million status dropouts between the ages of 16 and 24.

On January 20, 2017, Donald Trump assumed office as the 45th President of the United States. During his term, President Trump signed H.R. 5363, the FUTURE Act or the Fostering Undergraduate Talent by Unlocking Resources for Education Act and it became a law in December 2019. This important landmark legislation permanently extends mandatory funding for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), and other Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) to increase their science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) outcomes, among other initiatives. Additionally, the law eases the burdens on low-income, first generation college students by simplifying the steps and the process for applying for student financial aid. The bill permanently provides more than 225 million a year to MSIs and HBCUs. Research conducted by Valley and Howard (2021) acknowledged the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act (CARES ACT) that was passed by the 116th Congress and signed by Donald Trump in March 2020, which provided a \$2.2 trillion economic stimulus package in response to the COVID-19 health emergency.

Jaffe (2021) reported that in March 2021, President Joseph Biden signed the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 which is a 1.9 trillion coronavirus rescue package designed to facilitate the United States' recovery from the devastating economic and health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Backed by bipartisan support, the nearly \$2 trillion price tag makes this economic rescue legislation one of the most expensive in American history. It is a part of President Biden's Build Back Better Plan, which also includes the American Jobs Plan and the American Families Plan. This package includes direct stimulus payments of \$1,400, extending unemployment

compensation, continuing eviction and foreclosure moratoriums, and increasing the Child Tax Credit. This plan also provides funds for state and local governments to help compensate for lost tax revenues, money for schools from kindergarten through 8th grade to safely reopen amid the pandemic and subsidizes COVID-19 education, testing and vaccination programs.

4.3 Future Schools and Child Care Block Grants under the Biden Administration

The current proposed President Biden's Build Back Better Agenda (2021) is scheduled to set aside \$122 billion for K–12 education through September 30, 2023 (Tempest et al., 2021). These earmarked funds will be used to reduce class sizes, improve ventilation, purchase personal protective equipment, and fund other steps to help schools reopen safely. Also, research shows an additional \$15 billion will go to child care providers through the Child Care and Development Block Grant program through September 30, 2021. For future action, the proposed act also includes \$1 billion for the Head Start program through September 30, 2022.

4.4 Addressing Educational Needs, Since 1980

Over the last 40 years, American presidents have addressed education initiatives through legislation, regulation, funding and guidance in curriculum planning, after school programs, disability programs, recruiting teachers, providing funding for teacher development and providing resources for more technology in the classroom. Table 3 displays American presidential educational initiatives and the specific needs addressed.

Table 3: American Presidential Initiatives and the Educational Needs Addressed, since 1980

President	Educational Initiative	Educational Need Addressed
Jimmy Carter 1977-1981	Created a centralized Department of Education, increased the number of early childhood education programs and increased financial support to the national Head Start programs.	Early Childhood Education
Ronald Reagan 1981-1989	Called for the end of free tuition for state college and university students, DOE personnel cuts, decrease funding in Bilingual education; increase standards for teacher quality and accountability; more rigorous emphasis on math and English.	Accountability within schools; Evaluations; Teacher Training
George H.W. Bush 1989-1993	In 1990, the 41st President Bush signed 2 significant laws for people with disabilities. The 1st was (IDEA) which required schools to provide special education, and it also allowed parents more of a voice in decisions about their children's education. The 2nd priority was the (ADA), which guaranteed equal rights to people with disabilities. This legislation covers equal rights in school, at work and in public spaces. The Jeanne Clery Act requires colleges and universities to disclose crime stats and information.	Disability Accommodations and Special Education Campus Security
William Clinton 1993-2001	In 1994, Bill Clinton signed the Goals 2000: Educate America Act into law. This law outlined 8 key goals for improving public education. One was to better prepare young children for kindergarten through high-quality preschool programs. Another initiative was to increase the number of children who graduate from high school. Other priorities included making schools safer and	Pre-school education and school preparedness

	helping teachers with more training. Goals 2000 also offered grants to help states create higher academic standards.	
George W. Bush 2001-2009	The second President Bush who was the 43 rd President pushed for the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). The primary goal of NCLB was to improve the education of kids who are disadvantaged. This important law focused on students receiving special education services. It emphasized the needs of kids living in poverty, minority students and English language learners. NCLB used annual tests to check how well kids were learning.	Improve education for low income students and focus on special education, math and science
Barack Obama 2009-2017	In 2015, President Obama, the 44 th President signed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This law replaced No Child Left Behind. ESSA also focuses on the learning progress of kids who are often underserved. That includes kids in special education. However, it uses more than test scores to evaluate how schools are doing. ESSA calls for the creation of a national center that focuses on reading issues. It also authorizes grants to states and local schools to help fund reading instruction.	Addresses Literacy, Reading and Reading Instruction; Teacher Effectiveness
Donald Trump 2017-2021	Trump's education policy agenda aimed at weakening federal oversight and reversing Obama's commitment on civil and student rights in public schools and school choice. President Trump signed the FUTURE ACT to help HBCUs and MSIs and the CARES ACT to aid during the COVID pandemic	Modifying the role of Federal government in Education; Provisions to strengthen Higher Education during COVID-19 Pandemic; suspend student loan payments during the pandemic
Joseph Biden 2021-	President Biden's legislation will provide billions to support early childhood education, K-12, community colleges, and other institutions of higher education. The Biden administration currently plans to act swiftly to work with all of the states and school districts to start addressing the gaps in teaching, connectivity, resources, social-emotional well-being, and student engagement.	COVID-19 Pandemic Invest in STEM Fight Racism Strengthen Community Colleges; partner with Higher Ed institutions for teacher training; cancelation of \$10,000 student loan debt; funding for HBCUs and MSIs

Source: Reference data from national education sources compiled by the researchers, 2021

5. Discussion

The intention of this research study was to describe American educational policy which demonstrates prioritized literacy initiatives of U.S. presidents and their influence on the overall quality of education in America. We reviewed significant U.S. federal educational legislation signed in the 1960s where the nation finally starts to witness more federal involvement in funding education programs and initiatives. Moreover, research shows that, there was a national commitment to improving literacy in view of school dropouts which involved enhancing strategies through the provision of guidance counselors in schools that were supported in part from a financial award from the Presidential Emergency Fund under the administration of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, who announced to the nation that school dropout was a serious problem (Meyerhoff, 2019). As a provision,

guidance counselors assisted with recovering dropouts to complete school. Enacted in 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) marks another longstanding federal commitment to education and equal opportunity for all students. Other historical literary and educational initiatives such as The No Child Left Behind (2001) legislation provided school districts assistance in their efforts to increase graduation rates. The government's School Dropout Prevention Program or High School Graduation Initiative (HSGI) supports state and local educational agencies in implementing interventions through grants.

Currently, there are several Department of Education funding and competitive grant initiatives. Among grants are the Race to The Top (RTTT) where attention is focused on improving dropout factories or schools with high dropout rates (USDE, 2015) and the 21st Century grants awarded to state education agencies for developing community learning centers to support academic experiences of students enrolled in high poverty and low performing schools (USDE, 2018). A federally sponsored program, the New High School Initiative Program, provides funding for developing strategies to address the needs of Hispanic youth at risk of dropping out (Wallace, 2016).

Today, many national reports show increases in student outcomes in terms of performance scores reading, math, and some subject areas, as well as high school graduation rates (Nation's Report Card, 2015, 2019; NCES, 2019). According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, NCES (McFarland et al., 2017), the dropout rate decreased: (a) for all non-institutionalized students ages 16-24 from 10.9 % in 2000 to 5.9% in 2015; (b) from 13.1% to 6.5% for Black students; and (c) from 27.8% to 9.2% for Hispanic students. Evaluations of programs with and without federal funding have also identified positive student outcomes to include program features that assist in reducing dropout rates. The U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse (WWC, 2015) reported a positive impact of various programs on literacy development and models for reducing dropouts. Chappell et al. (2015) reported strategies that showed a mean effect size to predict successful dropout prevention outcomes including academic support, family engagement, literacy development, behavioral intervention, service learning, work-based learning, health and wellness, and school and classroom environment.

6. Conclusion

The study aims to highlight U.S. education policies and federal funding initiatives to show outcomes on the overall quality of education in America. O'Day and Smith (2016) noted the disparities that young children and adults face in the American educational systems due to well documented lack of resources and poor learning environments amongst other dysfunctional policies and practices which exist and impede the overall quality of education in the United States. While looking at the total global educational landscape, the results of the U.S. education system are not where they should be in demonstrating student success amongst all ethnicities and racial groups. A 2020 report from the Center for American Progress listed between 2000 and 2017, the United States slipped from fifth to 10th among Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries in its rate of postsecondary degree attainment. As cited in the Digest of Education Statistics (2017), the American education budget in 2016-2017 was \$1.3 trillion dollars, at all levels public and private. Statistical data from a U.S. News report (2021) revealed that compared to other countries around the world, the U.S. ranks #1 for the best country in Education for having a well-developed public education system with the United Kingdom ranking #2.

In 2021, the American investment in Education exceeds \$1 trillion. However, when reviewing overall quality of education, more investments are needed in science and mathematics studies at the middle school, high school and collegiate levels. The National Center for Education Statistics (2021) determined that some indicators of quality education include the student's health and readiness for learning, the learning environment, teacher preparedness, the curriculum and the school environment.

Lastly, although educational initiatives remain a top priority for American presidents, the nation continues to see the effect of systemic and structural barriers to educational opportunities for special needs and minority children, not to mention the ongoing segregation and isolation of students from families with low incomes and students that attend under resourced schools.

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Source: Original data compiled by the researchers, 2021

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Source: U.S. Census Data on Higher education in the United States, 2018

Table 3: American Presidential Initiatives and the Educational Needs Addressed, since 1980

	Educational Initiative	Educational Need Addressed
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Ronald Reagan 1981-1989	Called for the end of free tuition for state college and university students, DOE personnel cuts, decrease funding in Bilingual education; increase standards for teacher quality and accountability; more rigorous	Accountability within schools; Evaluations; Teacher Training

	emphasis on math and English.	
George H.W. Bush 1989-1993	<p>In 1990, the 41st President Bush signed 2 significant laws for people with disabilities. The 1st was (IDEA) which required schools to provide special education, and it also allowed parents more of a voice in decisions about their children's education.</p> <p>The 2nd priority was the (ADA), which guaranteed equal rights to people with disabilities. This legislation covers equal rights in school, at work and in public spaces.</p> <p>The Jeanne Clery Act requires colleges and universities to disclose crime stats and information.</p>	<p>Disability Accommodations and Special Education</p> <p>Campus Security</p>
William Clinton 1993-2001	<p>In 1994, Bill Clinton signed the Goals 2000: Educate America Act into law. This law outlined 8 key goals for improving public education. One was to better prepare young children for kindergarten through high-quality preschool programs.</p> <p>Another initiative was to increase the number of children who graduate from high school. Other priorities included making schools safer and helping teachers with more training. Goals 2000 also offered grants to help states create higher academic standards.</p>	Pre-school education and school preparedness
George W. Bush 2001-2009	<p>The second President Bush who was the 43rd President pushed for the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). The primary goal of NCLB was to improve the education of kids who are disadvantaged. This important law focused on students receiving special education services. It emphasized the needs of kids living in poverty, minority students and English language learners. NCLB used annual tests to check how well kids were learning.</p>	Improve education for low income students and focus on special education, math and science
Barack Obama 2009-2017	<p>In 2015, President Obama, the 44th President signed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This law replaced No Child Left Behind. ESSA also focuses on the learning progress of kids who are often underserved. That includes kids in special education. However, it uses more than test scores to evaluate how schools are doing.</p> <p>ESSA calls for the creation of a national center that focuses on reading issues. It also authorizes grants to states and local schools to help fund reading instruction.</p>	Addresses Literacy, Reading and Reading Instruction; Teacher Effectiveness
Donald Trump 2017-2021	<p>Trump's education policy agenda aimed at weakening federal oversight and reversing Obama's commitment on civil and student rights in public schools and school choice.</p> <p>President Trump signed the FUTURE ACT to help HBCUs and MSIs and the CARES ACT to aid during the COVID pandemic</p>	<p>Modifying the role of Federal government in Education;</p> <p>Provisions to strengthen Higher Education during COVID-19 Pandemic;</p> <p>suspend student loan payments during the pandemic</p>
Joseph Biden 2021-	<p>President Biden's legislation will provide billions to support early childhood education, K-12, community colleges, and other institutions of higher education.</p>	<p>COVID-19 Pandemic</p> <p>Invest in STEM</p> <p>Fight Racism</p>

	The Biden administration currently plans to act swiftly to work with all of the states and school districts to start addressing the gaps in teaching, connectivity, resources, social-emotional well-being, and student engagement.	Strengthen Community Colleges; partner with Higher Ed institutions for teacher training; cancelation of \$10,000 student loan debt; funding for HBCUs and MSIs
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Source: Reference data from national education sources compiled by the researchers, 2021

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