SKETCHING A NEW CONSERVATIVE EDUCATION AGENDA

Make Reform Voluntary: State-Level Competitive Grants

By Andy Smarick

July 2020

Key Points

- States should pause the adoption of new uniform, statewide K–12 policies. Instead, over the next decade, if state governments want to change the direction of their public schools, they should use competitive-grant programs.
- In many cases of education policy, states can incur virtually no costs while forcing schools and districts to do things. Competitive grants force state governments to put some skin in the game.
- An era of state-level competitive grants would enable local practitioners and social entrepreneurs to lead the charge—by either innovating within the parameters of a state-level incentive grant program or forgoing such programs entirely and setting off on their own.

Possibly the defining feature of K–12 policy reform over the past several decades has been the growth of state-level decision-making. Although there has been much talk about the increase of Uncle Sam's role, most of the power seeping from schools has come to rest in state capitals, not Washington.

Indeed, in ways probably unimaginable 40 years ago, states have developed comprehensive policies—often uniform and applied across all public schools—in areas such as standards, assessments, teacher credentialing, district accountability, school interventions, educator evaluation, graduation requirements, seat time, discipline, school calendars, and transportation. In fact, the bill of particulars against Washington's meddling in schools typically includes initiatives that actually consolidated *state* power. For example, No Child Left Behind strengthened states' hand on tests and accountability, Race to the Top was a state-level grant competition, and Common Core was about state content standards.

In fairness, there is a rationale for this type of centralization. Under state statutes and regulations, state governments are given great authority over public education because state governments are ultimately responsible under state constitutions for ensuring the provision of public schools. Generally, districts are creatures of state policy; they are public bodies to which state governments delegate day-to-day control of a state-level duty. As public demands for better and fairer public schools grew over time—and as courts increasingly held states accountable for delivering on their constitutional obligations—state governments understandably exerted more influence.

This, however, comes at a steep cost: Different communities are less able to make different decisions about their schools. This leads to a level of standardization that ill fits American pluralism. It also decreases local initiative, agency, and efficacy, which increases local frustration. And it hinders citizens'

acquisition of civic virtues, such as participation, civility, accommodation, and compromise—the skills and dispositions of self-government that are fostered by engaging in difficult public discussions about meaningful public decisions.

If state governments want to change the direction of their public schools, they should use competitive-grant programs.

My contention is that states should pause the adoption of new uniform, statewide K–12 policies. Instead, over the next decade, if state governments want to change the direction of their public schools, they should use competitive-grant programs. I will use character education as an example of why this approach is preferable and how it would work in practice.

Given current conditions—as of writing in spring 2020—this recommendation may seem inapt. Because of COVID-19 (a public health emergency requiring a heightened degree of swift, certain, state-level authority), our tolerance of, even appreciation for, centralized power is probably at its peak. But my argument takes the long view, and it is based on general principles related to decentralized authority. When this crisis ends, we will have the chance to think anew about where governing power should reside. And it might well be the case that our nation's response to this pandemic makes us more aware of the downsides of decision-making that takes place far away and produces uniform policies.

State-Level Competitive Grants

In a competitive-grant program, a state government identifies an activity it would like schools or networks of schools to take on. Instead of mandating the activity, the state would make new money available that recipients could use for that purpose. Participation is voluntary. If potential recipients want to take on the activity, they can; if the activity doesn't match their vision or priorities, they can pass. And rather than distributing the money to everyone by formula, the state assesses applicants' proposals, chooses the most promising (using explicit criteria), and distributes funds based on applicants' requests.

For instance, a state could launch a character-education competitive-grant program. The state would make new funds available, say, the equivalent of half of 1 percent of the state's annual investment in schools. (So, if the state sends $1 billion to schools annually, this grant's total budget would be $5 million.) Eligible applicants could include schools, districts, charter networks, and nonprofits that partner with one of the other eligible entities. No school would be required to engage; if it decided other things needed to take precedence over character formation, it could simply ignore the grant program. The state would lay out clearly what would constitute character education and what would be allowable uses of funds (e.g., staff, instructional materials, or assessments). The state would rate applications and award grants to the most promising proposals.

This approach has many benefits. First, there's humility. With federal competitive education grants, Uncle Sam entices states or districts to do things he likes but doesn't have the power to require. So he uses competitive grants to increase his reach. But with state competitive grants, state leaders merely encourage activity that they *could* require. That is, states use a light touch when they could be heavy-handed. So instead of mandating a statewide character-education curriculum or requiring a character-education course for high school graduation, they incentivize participation.

Second, there's respect for local prerogatives and differentiation. Competitive grants recognize that school and system leaders have their own priorities and constituencies. These differ by location, and they often differ from those of the state's leadership. With character education, there are legitimate differences of opinion about which elements should be prioritized in instruction. Public service or self-actualization? Honesty or loyalty? Epistemic humility or the courageous pursuit of justice?

Under a competitive-grant program, a state could choose a narrow definition for character (if it believes only one approach is worth funding) and then make awards to just those applicants that hew to that vision. Or the state, if it believes any explicit

character-related initiative is better than no character initiative at all, could promulgate more flexible criteria and make awards to a variety of approaches. Either way, local decision makers could follow their own values.

Third, unlike a "local control of all matters" approach, competitive grants allow state leaders to influence key issues. State governments provide a great deal of money to public schools and have serious constitutional obligations; they should have the ability to influence what happens in schools. A state's leadership might well conclude that it has focused too narrowly on reading and math for too long and has neglected the role schools should play in forming citizens. A character-education grant program would be a way for the state to publicly signal its priorities and shape what schools do.

Lastly, and maybe most importantly, competitive grants force states to put some skin in the game. In many cases of education policy, states can incur virtually no costs while forcing schools and districts to do things. For example, a statute can require districts to hire teachers with certain credentials, a regulation can mandate that schools offer certain courses, a state-board ruling can require districts to follow certain discipline procedures, and a guidance letter can force administrators to compile data and submit reports. These are easy decisions, in a sense, for the state, because they can be made without breaking open the checkbook or taking responsibility for implementation. But school operations get distorted when distant leaders make decisions with minimal appreciation for budgetary and operational effects.

With competitive grants, a state must find new money—beyond existing per-pupil dollars distributed according to a state funding formula—for its priority. And since state-government budgets have to be balanced annually, and since most state leaders just want to increase formulaic dollars, a state's leadership must *really* believe in a policy if it is going to fund a competitive-grant program. So before launching a character-education competitive grant initiative, state leaders will have to believe this issue is important enough to warrant new money, to spend that money outside agreed-upon formulas, and to elevate it above other causes seeking funds. We should want state education leaders to have this kind of focus before pressing ahead with new programs.

Except for school choice and charter school laws, state policy developments over the past two generations have tended toward centralization and uniformity. Some of this was valuable. But it is worth asking whether we've now wrung all—or at least most—the utility out of this approach. We should expect much of that framework to stay in place for some time; I, for one, am not in favor of a massive rollback of standards, assessments, and accountability. The question is whether future policies should rely on state-level solutions or energize local initiative and differentiation.

New Way of Doing Business

Although my example was character education (which I do believe deserves greater attention), states may decide that arts, civics, career and technical education, gifted education, history, early-childhood education, STEM, or something else deserves prioritization. Importantly, the mechanism of state-level competitive grants is agnostic about content. Instead, it establishes a way of doing business. It allows the state to shape public schooling, but it substitutes incentives for mandates, and it requires the state to put skin in the game. At the same time, it respects local leaders' smarts, energy, and preferences, and it trusts that on many K–12 policy matters, a degree of local differentiation is both inevitable and valuable.

Vigorous efforts to improve America's schools should continue. But reform needn't always come as requirements from distant authorities. An era of state-level competitive grants would enable local practitioners and social entrepreneurs to lead the charge—by either innovating within the parameters of a state-level incentive grant or forgoing such programs entirely and setting off on their own.

About the Author

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