



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on September 23, 2011

Romney Has Shovel-ready Rhetoric for Schools

It's amazing that most of the presidential candidates manage to find time to run for president when they're so busy running for national superintendent of schools. Republican candidates typically tell us in one breath they want to get the federal government out of education and in the next that they have some really swell ideas for educational reform they'd like to implement (impose?) once they're in charge of the federal government.



Take Mitt Romney, if you can. (I know, he can be pretty hard to take at times.) At Thursday night's (more or less) [debate in Orlando](#), Mitt was his usual glib and sure-footed self as he danced around the question of what to do about Washington's reach into classrooms all across this great land of ours. The question, presented in a video clip, came from a teacher in Atlanta who offered the following observation and question:

I see administrators more focused on satisfying federal mandates, retaining funding, trying not to get sued, while the teachers are jumping through hoops trying to serve up a one-size-fits-all education for their students. What as president would you seriously do about what I consider a massive overreach of big government into the classroom?

The question was addressed to all the candidates. Ron Paul and Gary Johnson (who was finally allowed into a debate) were unequivocal in calling for an end to any federal role in education.

"I am going to promise to advocate the abolishment of the federal Department of Education," said Johnson, the former New Mexico governor, drawing applause for resurrecting a promise Republicans had been making since Reagan the Gipper parted the waters of the Potomac and walked dry shod into the White House. Then, doing a little grade school arithmetic, Johnson explained why federal aid to the states is costly — to the states.

"The federal Department of Education gives each state 11 cents out of every dollar that every state spends, but it comes with 16 cents worth of strings attached. So what America does not understand is that it's a negative to take federal money. Give it to 50 laboratories of innovation, the states, to improve on, and that's what we'll see: dramatic improvement."

"If you care about your children, you'll get the federal government out of the business of educating our kids," Ron Paul said. The Texas congressman said the best thing the federal government can do for school children is give tax credits to parents who "opt out of the public school system." Georgia businessman Herman Cain also wants to "get the federal government out of trying to educate our kids



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at the local level."

Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich said education would be improved "if most states offer the equivalent of Pell Grants for K through 12, so that parents could choose where their child went to school whether it was whether it was public, or private, or home-schooling, and parents could be involved." But Gingrich came up short with his recommendation to "dramatically shrink the federal Department of Education, get rid of virtually all its regulations."

Shrink it? Shrink the department that Newt voted to create as a freshman congressman in 1979? Maybe we should shrink it the way Steve Forbes wanted to "shrink" the income tax — "virtually" kill it, drive a stake through its heart and bury it so it can never rise and torment us again. That ought to shrink the thing. Dramatically.

Rep. Michele Bachmann of Minnesota would visit the Department of Education long enough to turn out the lights and lock the doors. Let us hope she would also bring a "For Sale" sign. No point in letting a valuable piece of Washington, D.C. real estate go to waste.

And then there was the Mittster, who — in a play off Bill Clinton's remark about "not inhaling" marijuana that he smoked while at the University of Oxford — "didn't inhale" during his four years governor of Massachusetts. (Yes, the air quality in the Northeast can be quite hazardous at times.) Romney's answer had something for everyone. It had, in fact, everything but consistency.

"Let me tell you what I think I would do," Romney said. (He's not sure yet?) "One, education has to be held at the local and state level, not at the federal level. We need get the federal government out of education. And secondly, all the talk about we need smaller classroom size, look that's promoted by the teachers unions to hire more teachers. We looked at what drives good education in our state, what we found is the best thing for education is great teachers, hire the very best and brightest to be teachers, pay them properly, make sure that you have school choice, test your kids to see if they are meeting the standards that need to be met, and make sure that you put the parents in charge."

Now if Romney really wants to "get the federal government out of education," why is he, as a candidate for the highest federal office, concerning himself with whether and how much "your kids" are tested, how bright your teachers are and whether they are paid "properly." Aren't those things the local and state school boards and voters can deal with without any coaching or hectoring from a Nanny-in-Chief in Washington?

"And as President I will stand up to the national teachers unions," Romney pledged. But if the federal government is out of education, the teachers unions would have no reason to be lobbying in Washington and Mitt would have no opportunity to heroically "stand up" to them. That again would be something for local and state education authorities to deal with.

Texas Governor Rick Perry called for "promoting school choice all across the country," but he also used the education question as an opportunity to take a shot at Romney for praising President Obama's Race to the Top program. "And I think that is an important difference between the rest of the people on this stage and one person that wants to run for the presidency," Perry said. But Romney professed not to know what Perry was talking about.

"I'm not sure exactly what he's saying," he replied. "I don't support any particular program that he's describing. I think that the President — I think the Secretary of Education Arne Duncan is doing a good thing by saying, you know what, we should insist that teachers get evaluated and that schools have the opportunity to see which teachers succeeding and which ones are failing and that teachers that are not



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successful are removed from the classroom. Those ideas by Secretary Duncan, that is a lot better than what the President did which is cutting off school choice in the Washington, D.C. schools."

Now was Romney speaking there of just the DC schools? The question was a good deal broader than that and the former Massachusetts governor seemed to be saying the whole nation benefits from having the federal Secretary of Education going about the land telling us what we need to do in terms of evaluating teachers and seeing to it that the unsuccessful ones are "removed from the classroom." And since Mitt has said, "We need to get the federal government out of education," we don't really need a Secretary of Education, do we? Arne Duncan could be more usefully engaged in a race to the unemployment line.

But there is more to it than that. It would appear that Mitt was either fibbing or having a memory lapse when he said he did not support "any particular program" that Perry was describing. Perry specifically mentioned the President's Race to the Top initiative, offering states \$4.3 billion for programs to boost student achievement. For which, considering all the money our government has to borrow these days, the states and the students might wish to turn to the east and thank China.

In Friday's [New York Times](#), Mitt Landler and Trip Gabriel pointed out that Romney, just the day before he denied supporting the program, did just that. At a town hall meeting in Miami on Wednesday, Romney said: "I think Secretary Duncan has done some good things," he said. "I hope that's not heresy in this room. He, for instance, has a program called Race to the Top, which encourages schools to have more choice, more testing of kids, more evaluation of teachers. Those are things I think make sense."

Well, Romney is entitled to his opinions, including the mutually contradictory ones he holds simultaneously. Altogether they are far less interesting than Gary Johnson's timeless observation that his neighbor's dogs regularly create more shovel-ready jobs than Obama has with all his stimulus programs.

True enough. But in that regard, the political speeches this campaign season are creating an abundance of shovel-ready work for all of us.



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