

five percent of our gross domestic product. Given the growing size and importance of the nonprofit sector, it's time for the federal government to find a role that supports its health and capacity. An "SBA" for the nonprofit sector—adapted to today's fast-changing environment—is the right response. ▀

## After-School Coupons

*Andrew Rotherham*

**A** major political and substantive divide in education policy is the question of what to do for kids stuck in persistently low-performing public schools. Republicans are generally quick to see the market as a powerful change agent. But to date, the evidence indicates that it takes more than market forces to improve public schools. While choice plans have sometimes resulted in modest gains in achievement for participating students, they have not yet generated the transformational changes that advocates promise. Democrats, on the other hand, favor various public initiatives to "turn around" failing schools. Yet these efforts have an inconsistent record, too, and, even in good circumstances, lengthy timelines make them almost meaningless for parents.

The No Child Left Behind Act contained the seeds of a compromise, requiring low-performing schools to offer students tutoring at public expense. Called "Supplemental Education Services," or SES in Washington jargon, the idea gave Republicans an education marketplace and Democrats a school-improvement strategy other than vouchers. But SES has been hamstrung because the same low-performing school districts it ostensibly is intended to hold accountable are also expected to administer it. Predictably, the districts have proven sluggish about enforcing a program that essentially redirects money they would otherwise control entirely. A Department of Education analysis found that in 2004-2005, of the 2.4 million students eligible for tutoring during that school year, only 19 percent actually participated. Further, the Bush Administration left quality control up to the states, and while some providers are excellent, and evaluations of the program have found some modest results, even supporters say quality is wildly uneven and states are not rigorously policing quality.

At the same time, the federal government spends about \$1.2 billion annually on after-school programs, up from just \$1 million about a decade ago. In practice these programs include anything from effective academic enrichment

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to dodgeball. The evidence, as well as common sense, indicates that good after-school programs can benefit students, but today federally funded programs are a mixed bag in terms of improving student learning.

Yet the two ideas embodied in these programs are vital ones. Giving students additional learning time can improve outcomes, if that time is used well. And, trying to do something immediate for students in persistently failing schools rather than asking them, and their families, to wait years on unproven school improvement schemes is simply the right thing to do.

That's why Congress should merge the SES and after-school programs into a new program of After School Coupons for parents with children in low-performing schools. This would achieve the goals of both programs, provide at least \$1.2 billion in funding with no increase in current spending, and it would use market

forces as well as the leverage of public regulation to push newfound attention to quality and real choices for parents.

Under this plan, low-income parents of students in persistently low-performing schools would get state-provided coupons for after-school services, but they would be free to choose how to spend the money at a state-approved

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list of providers. States would be required to certify eligible programs more aggressively than they do today, and schools and school districts would be allowed to compete to serve students along with non-profit and private entities. Parents could use the funding at a single provider, say, for extra help in math, or break it up among several different services. By means-testing the program policymakers could ensure that the funds are used to help the students who need them most. And school districts would not be expected to administer a program that in effect penalizes them for low performance.

Who could be against such an idea? For starters, the rapid growth of the federal after-school program has spawned an entire after-school industry. They are loath to see control of the program shifted from providers to parents. And focusing after-school dollars on students in failing schools won't sit well in some communities. But limited federal education dollars should be targeted toward the neediest students. For their part, SES providers see the massive \$13 billion federal Title I program as a huge opportunity and will not be happy to see SES funding decoupled from it.

Regardless, a new national initiative to ensure that students in struggling schools get help while policymakers and educators are simultaneously trying

to improve those schools is a good compromise in the federal school voucher debate. That it would improve two important but problematic federal programs is all the more reason for policymakers to embrace After School Coupons. **D**

## A Third Age Bill

*Gara LaMarche*

**W**ith respect to aging, the accomplishments of past presidents focused on the needs and particular vulnerabilities of older citizens. Under Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Social Security system was initiated to assure that one's later years are not spent in dire poverty. Under Lyndon Johnson, Medicare expanded the safety net to provide post-employment health coverage. Even George W. Bush made an effort, however ill-conceived and unworkable, at helping older adults deal with staggering prescription drug costs. With the children of the 1960s entering their sixties and given the advances in medicine and life expectancy, it's time that federal policy starts also looking at creating opportunities for older Americans. There still remains, of course, a long agenda of aging issues, from improving training and pay for caregivers to strengthening geriatric specialties in medicine. But the next occupant of the White House should go further, recasting older Americans first and foremost as an immense societal resource, not just a subject of need.

We're familiar with second-career chapters for military officers, who typically retire before 50. But widespread advances in health and longevity mean that many millions of Americans who "retire" at 65 have decades of productive capacity ahead of them and no interest in spending it just on the golf course or in the garden. In fact, largely unnoticed by the press and policymakers, in recent years there has been a paradigm shift in the expectations and roles of older people that social policy has neither acknowledged nor capitalized on. America's 79 million Baby Boomers are not only eager to continue working, but they increasingly want to do so specifically by addressing challenges in the education, health, and not-for-profit sectors. In fact, 80 percent of boomers consistently tell pollsters that they plan to work long past traditional retirement age. And a recent survey of 1,000 Americans over 50 showed that fully half want work that would improve the quality of life in their communities. This is a potential human resources windfall, particularly in many areas dependent on human talent.

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