

# Political Control: The Root of [the Roots](#) of Persistent Low Performance

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The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the first edition of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is an opportunity to widely focus attention on what we've achieved with a tripling of inflation-adjusted per pupil spending, higher standards, increased accountability (supposedly) and the "[ESEA's Blend of Idealism, Policy Tensions.](#)" [Test scores](#), [national commissions](#), and [mind-boggling anecdotes](#) about young adult skill deficiencies say, 'not much'. To be clear, less than ten percent of the current ~\$13,000 per pupil annual expenditure is federal money, and the current version of the ESEA, several editions removed from the 1965 first edition, is the 2002 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which has greatly improved our awareness of how many children continue to be left behind. NCLB is formally way overdue for revision, but Congress has been unable to agree on the outlines of the next edition.

The common denominator over those fifty years is more political control; more of the same – harder, plus local-state-federal fragmentation of control. A quick overview of how we got into the current, bigger-than-ever mess tells us that disappointment with the schooling outcomes of local politics led to greatly expanded state-level political involvement. When the resulting new mix of state and local politics also disappointed, we added national politics to the mix. That has been another disappointment. Will it take the addition of an international forum (the UN?) for us to figure out that political control (central planning; absence of market-provided price signals to inform and motivate schooling producers and consumers) is the problem, not the solution? Adding another layer of political control will not correct the problems caused by other political forums.

Hope that K-12 schooling can be the first adequately performing [price-controlled, centrally planned industry](#) continues to trump our extensive experience that says that it cannot be. The implied solution of less political control would mean more private, market-based resolution of decisions regarding what schooling options will be available, how will we provide them, where, and to whom. The revised, more limited government role would be to run district schools if they can find a choice-worthiness niche, provide transparency and oversight, document student outcomes, support research, and provide equal per-pupil subsidies for private and public school users alongside a parental right to top off subsidy dollars with personal funds.