JACOB-

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middle and upper income parents, school prayer won't improve math scores and abolishing the Education Department would just put the seal on the government's abdication from its educational leadership responsibilities.

But even beyond the Adminsitration's lack of response to the urgency of those reports is the question of whether educational reforms will benefit minority and poor children.

Tougher standards, stiffer courses and all the rest make a lot of sense as medicine for a system that pushes out so many kids and fails to bring so many others up to minimum levels of literacy.

But only if all students get the attention and assistance they need to excel. Otherwise, the medicine prescribed could turn out to be poison.

All the calls for excellence could boomerang, helping to create a two-tier system of education in which an elite are prepared for the

complex world of computerized economy while the rest are taught only enough to read the directions for sweeping floors.

Improving the schools will take a lot more dollars, and federal ones at that. It will take changes in the institutional rigidity that keeps school systems from demanding - and getting - the maximum results from all students and teachers.

What all those reports
- and the Administration
- fail to highlight is the
fact that children from
minority and disadvantaged backgrounds are
filling a higher proportion of classroom seats.

Without a massive effort to upgrade their schools and their learning experiences, without enrolling the community to help motivate and guide them, and without making full use of the human resources they represent, educational reform is doomed to failure.

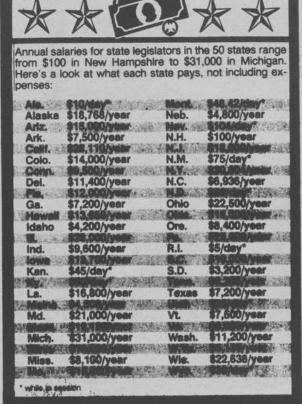
The pursuit of excellence must go handin-hand with the pursuit of equity.

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Source: Council of State Governments, 1962

By Heldi Ehrligh, USA TODAY