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Introduction

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Introduction

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IN MAY 1999 the annual conference of the Brown Center on Education Policy of the Brookings Institution was devoted to a close examination of major components of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The discussion was timely because the act was due to be reauthorized in 2000. This discussion, and the papers in this volume, provide a valuable opportunity to reflect on the evolving federal role in K-12 education. Until 1965, the federal government's involvement in elementary and secondary education was circumscribed and small; now, with the multiplication of federal programs and the demand for them, drawing the line between federal, state, and local roles in education has become increasingly difficult.

One of the enduring themes in the history of American education has been the effort by many educators and public officials to get the federal government to provide direct aid to public elementary and secondary schools. In the late nineteenth century, and then again in the early decades of the twentieth century, supporters of a substantial federal role in education attempted and failed to pass legislation. A modest federal role was established by passage of the Smith-Hughes Vocational Education Act in 1917. An even larger role was briefly assayed during the Great Depression of the 1930s, when the federal government created the Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Youth Administration, both of which were quietly eliminated during World War II at the urging of the leaders of public education, who wanted aid to public schools, not federal programs that were independent of the public system. Following the Soviet launch of *Sputnik* in 1957, Congress enacted the National Defense Education Act, which was intended to spur enrollments in science, mathematics, and foreign languages.

The general aid to education that educators sought remained elusive until 1965, when Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in response to public concern about the schooling of disadvantaged children. This law, which represents the major federal commitment to the nation's elementary and secondary schools, has been reauthorized regularly since then, and it is up for reauthorization in 2000. No other single piece of federal legislation reveals so clearly the peculiar strengths and weaknesses of the federal role in education.

In higher education, the federal government has supported the expansion of educational opportunity by underwriting the cost of tuition for students who could not afford it. Beginning with the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (known popularly as the "GI Bill of Rights"), the federal government assumed a clear responsibility for making higher education available to qualified students. Providing grants and loans to college students is no longer controversial, and policy debates are limited to deciding how much federal aid should be available for students at different income levels.

In precollegiate education, however, the uses of federal authority continue to stir heated controversy. In large part, this is because the federal role in the schools reaches far beyond questions of financing to unsettled issues of curriculum, method, and control. Although the federal government supplies less than 10 percent of the nation's K-12 education budget, federal legislation and regulations have a large impact on the cost and functioning of the public schools, in some instances (such as special education) mandating costly programs without supplying full funding for them. Unlike higher education, where federal aid goes to students in the form of scholarships, federal aid for K-12 education goes to states and school districts.

Historically, opponents of federal aid to the schools worried that the immense power of the federal government would be used to impose federal solutions on local schools and that children in Catholic schools would not receive a fair share of federal funds. Southern members of Congress opposed federal aid to the schools as well, fearing that the federal government would use its authority to end public school segregation. These fears were overcome by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965, who shepherded the ESEA legislation through a Congress with large Democratic majorities in both houses. President Johnson assuaged the concerns of urban representatives by insisting that the aid would benefit needy chil-

dren, including those in Catholic schools; this key compromise was later voided by the U.S. Supreme Court.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act has always been viewed as a vehicle for equal educational opportunity, funding programs and supplying revenues for disadvantaged students. It defines the role of the federal government as a guarantor of educational equality. The legislation promptly fulfilled the worst fears of segregationists. Soon after its passage, federal officials threatened to withhold ESEA funds from southern school districts until they dismantled the dual system of racially segregated schools. Working in tandem with enforcement of the Civil Rights Act by the federal judiciary, federal officials used the ESEA program as leverage to end state-imposed racial segregation.

Since 1965, ESEA has grown to encompass dozens of different programs. Altogether, the various programs authorized by ESEA receive appropriations of about \$11 billion annually. The largest of these programs is Title I, which sends money to local school districts based on their enrollment of poor students and is especially popular because it allocates federal funds to almost every congressional district. Among the other programs in ESEA are bilingual education; the Eisenhower professional development program (teacher training); aid for technology programs; the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities program; Goals 2000 (aid to states to strengthen their standards); and research, assessment, and statistics. In addition, there is a program called Impact Aid (for communities presumably burdened by their proximity to military bases or other federal facilities); a program to aid the development of charter schools; a program to advance “women’s educational equity”; the Even Start family literacy program; and programs to support the education of Native Americans, Native Hawaiians, Native Alaskans, migrant children, homeless children, the gifted and talented, and migrant children, as well as civic education, arts education, and various forms of technical assistance. This list does not exhaust the full menu of programs encompassed in ESEA but suggests its wide reach and random nature.

Because it was not possible, and possibly not very useful, to examine all of these programs, some of which are small, this volume of *Brookings Papers on Education Policy* looks closely at those programs that appear to have the largest impact, both in terms of cost and in what they may suggest about the general principles that characterize the federal role in education. (Other major federal education programs, most notably

special education and Head Start, are not part of ESEA.) The topics discussed in the papers are a reconsideration of the federal role in schools; the Title I program; the bilingual education program; the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Community program; the Technology for Education program; professional development of teachers; Goals 2000; and federal support for education research. Each of these papers is followed by two commentaries.

Paul T. Hill's discussion of the federal role in education raises fundamental questions about how federal programs effect the schools. An analyst for many years at the Rand Corporation, Hill observes that the federal role as currently defined, with extensive reliance on categorical programs, each of which has separate funding streams and discrete personnel, has disrupted the coherence of schools. The multiplication of programs, which once seemed to be a good idea, has led to unforeseen and undesirable consequences. The more federally funded programs in a school, he argues, the weaker is the authority of the principal and the less able is the school to focus relentlessly on teaching and learning. Instead, the school becomes entangled in directives, regulations, and contradictory missions. Federal programs have also had the unintended consequence of "colonizing" state education departments, by placing a majority of the department's employees on federal payrolls. The negative consequences of the federal role in schooling are not, Hill suggests, what its earlier opponents feared; the federal government has not imposed nefarious schemes on local schools. Instead, the real burden of the federal role stems from its structural rigidity and its inflexibility. He proposes a way out of this dilemma, while recognizing that interest groups have been aligned to keep the status quo intact, regardless of its egregious effects on schools.

George Farkas and L. Shane Hall assess the Title I program. (Farkas developed and implemented a well-validated reading program for disadvantaged children.) They find that the Title I program has yet to produce consistent improvement in the reading and mathematics achievement of poor children. This stems in part, they note, from Title I being a funding stream, not a program with distinctive features. They point out that school districts regularly use these funds to pay for expenses that would otherwise come from district sources, despite clear congressional requirements that districts must maintain their own level of effort and must use the Title I funds to supplement, not supplant, their own funds. They pay

particular attention to the 1994 reauthorization of Title I, which encouraged schools to adopt “whole school” reforms and allowed funding to cover children in all grades. Some in Congress and the Clinton administration have hailed the success of these changes, but Farkas and Hall report that their true effect was to reduce the money and attention devoted to the poorest and most disadvantaged children in the early elementary grades. They contend that the most effective use of federal funds would be to concentrate singularly on the children who have fallen far behind, and to do this in preschool or in the first three years of schooling. But this is precisely what Title I no longer does, according to their analysis. Their proposals for reform emphasize the importance of training tutors to use scientifically validated methods of teaching reading. Absent this training, they believe, Title I funds will continue to be diverted in ways that subsidize the whole school but fail to help the neediest children, who are on a dangerous downward trajectory unless they get direct, personal attention.

Lawrence W. Sherman subjects the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities program to withering analysis and reveals the inherent flaws of what he calls “symbolic pork.” The program is popular because it addresses subjects about which the public is deeply concerned: school safety and substance abuse. Yet Sherman shows that, despite public perceptions and despite several recent incidents of horrific gun violence, the schools are very safe. Violence in the schools, he finds, is not a widespread problem. The schools with the greatest number of violent events are those in the most dangerous communities, and their problems should be addressed in the streets, not in the schools. Furthermore, the most popular programs in the schools to promote safety or combat drug and alcohol use with the help of federal funds are ineffective. Most of the current appropriation of about \$600 million, he holds, is wasted on activities that have no bearing on the problems. Nonetheless, Congress and the administration continue to support the program and to avoid responsibility for changing it. While acknowledging that a politically popular program is generally evidence-proof, Sherman nonetheless makes specific proposals to tie future funding to evidence of effectiveness. Sherman’s paper suggests an important principle: Having a well-named program is more important than having an effective program. No member of Congress is likely to stand up and oppose a program that promises safe and drug-free schools.

Robert B. Schwartz and Marian A. Robinson evaluate the effects of the Goals 2000 program, which was first authorized in 1994. Although it is difficult to isolate the effects of this particular federal program from ongoing state activities, Schwartz and Robinson conclude that Goals 2000 has made a genuine contribution by encouraging states to set academic standards and by infusing the language of standards into other federal programs as well. They describe the continuity of purpose from the Bush administration's America 2000 program to the Clinton administration's Goals 2000 program but note the erosion of political support among members of both parties in Congress around these issues. Having stimulated the states to set standards, the federal effort appears to have reached a stalemate. In light of these political realities, Schwartz and Robinson predict that the responsibility will pass from the federal government to the states and the private sector. This may be an example of a successful federal policy whose longevity was limited by the fact that it had no interest groups, no constituency to fight for its survival.

Christine H. Rossell evaluates the federal bilingual education program. Based on her studies of the implementation of bilingual education in California, Massachusetts, and New York City, she concludes that the program is of dubious value. She finds that the means by which children are assigned to it are arbitrary and can be easily manipulated by states and districts to raise or lower the eligible population and that the definition of "bilingual education" varies widely from place to place. She concludes with specific ideas to make the program more valuable for the language minority children who are its intended beneficiaries by fundamentally transforming the program.

Julia E. Koppich examines the Dwight D. Eisenhower Professional Development Program, which is one of many teacher training programs funded by the federal government. She notes that its earlier emphasis on mathematics and science kept it admirably targeted to specific school subjects, making it a valuable resource for states and local school districts that wanted to strengthen teachers' knowledge of their subject. Since its last reauthorization, however, recipients were able to use the funds for other school subjects, thus diluting its focus. She urges a rededication of the program so that it specifically aims to improve teachers' subject matter knowledge.

Gary Chapman measures the impact of the federal investment in technology in the schools. Whether this is a worthwhile investment, he notes,

depends on one's view of technology as a learning tool. After carefully considering the case for and against technology in the schools, Chapman comes out for a balanced approach; he recognizes the enormous importance of technology in the workplace of the future but raises serious questions about children's need for learning experiences that computers cannot provide.

Maris A. Vinovskis examines the disappointing history of the federal Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI). Vinovskis finds that OERI, originally known as the National Institute of Education, has never been able to attract a distinguished group of education researchers, nor has it ever been able to escape the suspicion on Capitol Hill that its research is affected by political considerations. This perception has been strengthened, he notes, by the lobbying activities of the federal regional education laboratories, as well as by the Clinton administration's surprise decision not to reappoint the well-regarded commissioner of education statistics in 1999. Vinovskis offers suggestions for strengthening the research agency and considers proposals for reconstituting it as a quasi-independent agency with its own bipartisan board but warns that the agency may not survive unless it can command broad respect for the quality of its research.

These papers raise fundamental questions about how to improve the federal role in education. A theme that runs through several of these papers is that powerful interest groups can protect an ineffective program, regardless of poor evaluations. This rigidity guarantees that federal programs cannot be changed unless those who receive dollars from them are protected in the future. Even if evaluations show that federal dollars have not made a difference, it does not matter when it comes time for reauthorization. The losers are the children who were supposed to be the beneficiaries of federal programs and, indirectly, the nation, which thought that it was investing in needy children, not the status quo. Once the federal dollars start to flow, the program is safe. No matter how ineffective the program, no matter how many evaluations document its failure, it gets reauthorized on the hope or claim that the next five years will be better than the last five. Particularly powerful is a program with a swell-sounding name such as Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities or the tiny Women's Educational Equity Program, which still provides funds for "gender-fair" materials more than twenty years after the nation's publishers began to scour their products for any evidence of

gender bias. How many members of Congress will go on record against “women’s educational equity” when only a few million dollars are involved? It seems that the way to achieve eternal life is to become a federal program with a name that states highly laudable purposes.

Certain questions must be asked again and again: What should the federal government do that only the federal government can do well? What is the federal government doing now that it should stop doing? What is the federal government doing now that it should do differently because what it is doing is not working?

Certainly, the federal government must be responsible for statistics and research, and it must continue its financial aid to disadvantaged youngsters, though the present formula for distributing that aid must be revised to make sure that it helps the children who need help, instead of adding to the bureaucracy and paperwork of state and local school districts. What is it doing that it should not be doing? It should certainly not sustain programs that waste money or that cannot show any measurable benefit for children. What is it doing now that should be done differently? Most of the essays in this volume propose concrete changes that could improve the way that the federal government dispenses financial aid to education.

These issues become urgent in the year 2000 because of the proliferation of proposals to expand the federal role in education. Should the federal government subsidize school construction (and relieve states of that burden)? Should it pay to add more teachers to the nation’s schools? Should it pay for teacher training? Should it pay to put computers and Internet access in every classroom? Should it pay for after-school programs? What the nation seems to have lost is any sense of principle with which to answer such questions. If Americans say, “Yes, the federal government should pay for all this and more,” then they must figure out how to avoid the inflexibility and rigidity of federal regulation, how to preserve local autonomy, how to make sure that public schools are something more than the sum of whatever federal programs have been passed. Ultimately, schools are not just a conglomeration of programs; they are institutions that are responsible for the most vulnerable members of society. The adults in schools must have the power and authority to make decisions on the spot, decisions that may differ from school to school, depending on the circumstances and the individual children involved. As the federal role in schooling continues to grow far beyond anyone’s imaginings, the need to make sense of it grows, too. Federal education policy

should be based on clear evidence of effectiveness, not on wishful thinking and the need to satisfy interest groups. Congress must be prepared to attend to rigorous evaluations of its programs and to eliminate those that fail. Until that happens, the role of the federal government in education is likely to remain disappointing.