The Federal Role in Education - A Look Forward and a Look Backward: Commentary

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The Federal Role in Education—
A Look Forward and a Look Backward

COMMENTARY

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This is a watershed era in education as the states and the
nation move from the "old equity" of basic skills and minimums
to the "new equity" of excellence for all children at all schools
and the achievement of the national education goals. This his-
toric shift is being driven by the requirements of the knowledge
society and global economy, and is reflected in the education
sector by two major forces: the passage of national education
goals and the groundswell of school finance litigation.

For the first time in the nation's history, ambitious national
education goals (NEG) have been created, adopted and codi-
ﬁed into law. Two of the goals would bring all students to high
levels of thinking and problem solving in English, mathematics,
science, geography and history and have the U.S. rank first in
the world in mathematics and science. At the same time, a
groundswell of school finance litigation is sweeping the country
and propelling school finance reform to the top of state policy
agendas. Currently litigation is in process in two dozen states;
state supreme courts have rendered decisions in another
twelve states. The courts and litigants are calling for closing the
gap between the best and the worst funded education sys-
tems within a state. They suggest remedies that would give to
the many what has been reserved for the fortunate few—equal
opportunities for ﬁnancing excellence in education. An overrid-
ing issue for the balance of the decade is how to link the direc-
tions of the courts with the achievement of the national
education goals.

This year the Clinton administration and Congress have an
unusual opportunity to address this key issue, as virtually every
every federal elementary and secondary education program is being
considered for reauthorization. Already the administration's
major initiative for the schools enacted in the 103rd Congress,
Goals 2000: Educate America Act (P.L. 103-227), begins to
move in this direction. Goals 2000 codiﬁes the NEG into law,
provides $400 million to states for development and implement-
atation of a systemic improvement plan aimed at reaching the
ambitious national education goals, and establishes several boards—to certify and monitor progress towards voluntary
state/national standards and assessments; and to develop and
certify national occupational skill standards. Title III of the Act
provides grants to states for the development of: (1) state con-
tent standards that deﬁne what all students should know and be
able to do in speciﬁc subject areas; (2) performance standards
that deﬁne what students need to do to demonstrate proﬁciency
under the content standards; and (3) opportunity to learn stan-
dards (OLT) and strategies that deﬁne the resources and
services needed to assure that all students have a fair oppor-
tunity to attain the upgraded requirements. (See goals listed on
page 3).

New directions related to the federal role in education, as
evident in the Goals 2000 legislation, also surround the reauto-
ri zation of the majority of federal aid programs; and are dis-
cussed further in this volume of Educational Considera-
tions—including the major programs of assistance for postsec-
dary education and the schools, and rural/urban issues.

Most federal aid for postsecondary education is provided
by the federal government in the form of student ﬁnancial assis-
tance. The lion's share of federal aid for the schools is autho-
rized under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act
(ESEA) of 1965, with 80% of the funding provided under Title I,
Chapter 1 of the Act ($6.4 billion in FY 1999). Chapter 1 author-
izes the compensatory education program for economically dis-
ad vantaged children and youth. Other programs authorized
under the ESEA include: Title II—Eisenhower mathematics and
science state grants (Title II, $246 million) and Education Block
Grants for school improvement ($435.5 million); Title III—magnet
schools assistance ($108 million); Safe and Drug Free
Education Aid (Title V, S$82.1 million), Bilingual Education
assistance (Title VII, $213.4 million). Chief issues related to
these programs concern how they should interact with systemic
reform initiatives, what should be the federal role in these
efforts, and how federal aid might promote fiscal equalization
within states—to ensure federal aid supplements (not sup-
plants) interstate resource conﬁgurations, particularly in poor
districts.

Other major programs that are not in the ESEA but that are
likely to be considered for reauthorization this year include:
The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which
provides aid for children with disabilities and is the sec-
dond largest aid program for elementary and sec-
dory education ($2.1 billion); and the Impact Aid program
($140.2 million), which compensates school districts for lost
taxes due to the impact of federal activities. Chief issues related to
special education include the strengths and weaknesses of
"inclusion" programs, the high and growing numbers of students
entering the system and the associated costs, and the gap in
the federal commitment to special education assistance versus
actual appropriations.

An overriding reauthorization issue related to the federal
role in education relates to the amount of funding that is neces-
sary to stimulate states and localities to upgrade the education
system, achieve the national education goals, address the spe-
cial educational needs of students with disadvantages/disabili-
ties, and achieve other federal priority areas. The current fiscal
context for reauthorization of federal aid to the schools is one of
an expanding economy but it follows a decade of shrinking fed-
eral aid to elementary and secondary education.

Between 1980 and 1990, federal aid to education fell from
9.2% to 6.2% of total school aid from all sources. In real terms,
federal aid increased less than one-tenth of 1% over this time
(when inﬂation is taken into account). Total aid to education
from the federal government for the ten year period was $20 bil-
lion lower than what it would have been if it had stayed steady
at FY 1980 levels. Over the ten-year period from FY 1983 to 1993,
it was $10 billion lower than what would be expected if it stayed
at FY 1980 levels. Between FY 1980 and 1990, the low mark in
federal aid to education was in FY 1983; FY 1981 marked the
high point in federal support. (See federal aid table on page 4).

One of the persistent myths concerning federal aid to edu-
cation is that because it comprises about 6% of total school aid,
it represents only a small amount of revenue to the schools and

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limits the federal role in education. This is not the case. In fact, contrary to the implications suggested by this myth, federal aid does not provide 6 cents for every $1 of school aid because it is not spread evenly across all children and all schools. Federal aid is targeted to special population groups, numerical minorities, and other individuals that have historically been underrepresented at the state/local level, or have been left out or left behind in the realization of the American dream. It, therefore, represents a larger share of funding for these children, youth, and program priorities. Likewise, reductions in federal school aid are borne disproportionately by these special population groups and by the programmatic areas that reflect the federal interest in education. Importantly, reductions in aid have characterized federal support of education over the past decade.

Between FY 1980 and 1990, federal aid fell -14% on average (when inflation is taken into account). This compares to a real increase of 57% percent during the 1970s, and a 78% increase during the 1960s. During the decade of the 1980s, most states experienced double-digit percentage reductions, but large variations were present within and across the states. For example, total federal aid fell -30% in Massachusetts, -35% in Pennsylvania, -44 percent in North Carolina, -40% in Michigan, -37% in Nebraska, -41 percent in Arizona, and -31% in Idaho. However, federal aid rose in Vermont (10%), New York (56%), Colorado (78%), and Nevada (35%)

In per pupil terms the reductions are less drastic on average, but still substantial. This is because in certain regions and parts of the country there were reductions in the number of students entering the system, thus providing more aid behind each student. But, again, variations are present across and within the states. For example, in Arizona, federal aid per pupil fell -55%, between FY 1980 and FY 1990. Reductions were -40% in North Carolina, -33% in Nebraska, and -40% in Alaska. Again, a majority of states experienced double digit percentage reductions.

These data indicate that substantial federal aid increases will be necessary if past losses are to be restored, provisions are made for all eligible recipients, programs are fully funded, and authorizations provide for prevention in addition to remediation activities. Issues facing Congress therefore include not only federal strategies to guide and drive the achievement of equity and excellence for all students and at all schools, but also the necessary level of federal support to stimulate a state-local response to the federal interest, and the implications of the federal role for coherent policy across all levels of the education system aimed at high-quality education systems.

In the pages that follow, these and other important issues and research findings concerning the federal role in education are presented, analyzed, and discussed. The authors bring a wide range of expertise and experience to bear on the research studies reported herein. Their efforts focus on student financial aid for postsecondary education, Title I (Chapter 1) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (compensatory education), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (special education), rural and urban issues, implications of the North American Free Trade Agreement on education, and state responses to the "education reform" movement of the past decade.

I am hopeful that you will find the articles in this volume both stimulating and informative. Moreover, I am hopeful that you will enjoy this special education on the Federal Role in Education as much as I did when conceptualizing and editing it.

Deborah A. Verstegen, Guest Editor
Charlottesville, Virginia
September 22, 1994

Endnotes
1. Data source: National Education Association (selected years). Estimates of School Statistics. Adjusted by the implicit price deflator for state and local government purchases of goods and services (1960=100) using a school year index. Aggregate dollars were used to hold enrollment fluctuations constant.
NATIONAL EDUCATION GOALS

The six National Education Goals adopted by the nation’s Governors in 1990.

SCHOOL READINESS. By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn.

SCHOOL COMPLETION. By the year 2000, the high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND CITIZENSHIP. By the year 2000, all students will leave grades 4, 8 and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography, and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to sue their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our Nation’s modern economy.

MATHEMATICS AND SCIENCE. By the year 2000, United States students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement.

ADULT LITERACY AND LIFELONG LEARNING. By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

SAFE, DISCIPLINED, AND ALCOHOL- AND DRUG-FREE SCHOOLS. By the year 2000, every school in the United States will be free of drugs, violence, and the unauthorized presents of firearms and alcohol and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.

The two additional National Education Goals included in the Goals 2000 legislation.

TEACHER EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT. By the year 2000, the Nation’s teaching force will have access to programs for the continued improvement of their professional skills and the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to instruct and prepare all American students for the next century.

PARENTAL PARTICIPATION. By the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children.

Six national Education Goals were originally adopted by the nation’s Governors in 1990. On March 31, 1994, President Clinton signed into law eight National Education Goals as part of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act. The underlined text indicates language added to the original goals in the Goals 2000 legislation and the two additional goals. Please note that one of the new goals addresses teacher education and professional development.
### Federal Aid to Education Cross Time Comparisons, 1980–90 and 1983–90

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