

The Listening Post

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Prospects for Federal Aid in This Session of Congress

"AT PRESENT, too many of our people are unable to make full use of their capabilities, whether in civilian employment or military service, because their opportunities for education and training have been limited. Schools are overcrowded, substandard instruction is common, and teachers' salaries continue low in many areas."

So noted President Truman in his 1952 Budget Message requesting urgent consideration by the 2nd session of the 82nd Congress of a \$300 million general federal aid to education measure. What are the prospects for such legislation in the current session?

Why Is Federal Aid Needed?

A discussion of the "prospects" for federal aid to education legislation must necessarily be preceded by a review of why federal aid is needed, and why it is needed now. The nation's school system is beginning to show effects of the weight of a huge increase in school population, reflecting the high birthrate of the war and postwar years. Elementary school enrollments began to climb in 1947-48 and the total will continue to mount year by year as this large group of children moves through the elementary and secondary schools. The increased number of school children, coupled with higher costs for services of all kinds, has placed a staggering financial burden on communities throughout the nation.

Not only are there many more school children to be taught, but there exists a critical shortage of qualified

teachers, particularly at the elementary level. High wages and patriotic inducements are claiming many teachers for defense activities. Many of the 19 to 26-year old men teachers in the elementary and secondary schools are now subject to military duty and many women teachers are likely to enter the women's armed services corps. These facts pose serious threats of heavy losses to the teaching force both now and in the future.

Perhaps the most effective way in which more people can be attracted to and be retained in teaching is through higher salaries. As of January 1952, the average salary for teachers was \$3290, or 3 per cent less than the average earnings of all other employed persons. If the average teacher's salary were in the same relationship to the wages of all other workers today as it was in 1939, this salary would be 15 per cent above present levels, or \$3800. Until steps are taken by local and state educational authorities with federal financial help to bring instructional earnings more nearly in line with those of employment in general, a continuing movement away from teaching is inevitable.

Another factor in making the case for federal aid to education is one vitally connected with the maintenance of national security. According to the President's Budget Message:

"In some States more than one-third of the young men called by the Selective Service System failed the educational tests for entrance into military



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service during the fiscal year 1951. The States with the highest rejection rate are precisely those low-income States which, despite heavier taxes in relation to income, are unable to provide a satisfactory education for their young people. Many of the men rejected for military service because of educational deficiencies are also unable to meet our needs for skilled workers in industry."

Federal Government Contributes to Problems of School Financing

In trying to find a solution to education's financial difficulties, it should be noted that the relative ability on the part of the states to pay their educational bills varies considerably. Many states are able to support a high level of education with comparatively little effort. On the other hand, a recent survey pointed out that "in 1947, fifteen

states made efforts greater than the United States average, yet all failed to provide expenditures per school-age child equal to the national average." By and large these are rural and sparsely settled states.

A further problem in this regard is that the federal government levies so high an income tax, that the states and school districts must depend chiefly on a tax base—the property tax—that is not readily expandable. As a result, school revenue does not vary appreciably with the level of business activity nor is it sufficiently flexible to counteract the detrimental effects of inflated costs. It has often been argued that the obvious answer to the dilemma of financing the schools is for the federal government to relinquish certain of its tax bases to the states and localities. Although a close analysis of federal-state-local fiscal relationships might

indicate limited areas in which this could be done, consideration should be given to the fact that by far the largest portion of the federal budget is earmarked for defense expenditures irreducible to any substantial degree at the present time, and billions of federal dollars are committed for years to come. It therefore appears that the federal government has a real responsibility to contribute towards the maintenance of an adequate level of education within the states.

The proposal to provide federal aid to education is neither new nor is it a partisan measure. Both major political parties have acknowledged the necessity of promoting education. Strong advocates of the federal aid principle are to be found on both sides of the political fence. During the 80th Congress in 1948, the Senate approved a so-called state's rights bill (S. 472), and, again in

the 81st Congress, the Senate passed a similar measure by an overwhelming majority—the Thomas-Taft bill (S. 246). In both instances, the legislation failed of passage in the House of Representatives.

Opposition to Federal Aid

The two primary reasons for the defeat of these measures were the religious and economic issues. The religious conflict was brought about by a determined stand on the part of some powerful sectarian leaders that federal aid legislation must include a provision that federal funds be available in each state for auxiliary services, such as transportation for parochial school children, regardless of whether or not the state permitted use of public funds for such purposes. The economic issue had its roots in a struggle on the part of certain vested interest groups to con-

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tinue the property tax as almost the sole source of a community's educational funds. The advocates of this position, upholding the principle of taxing for education only the real property of the districts in which the children to be educated reside, point to the inviolability and tradition of "home rule" and "local self government" as the rationale for their argument. The inevitable consequence of this position is that the children living within wealthy school districts enjoy a high level of education whereas those in poor or undeveloped areas receive a poor education.

Any survey of the prospects of federal aid legislation and a determination of the most feasible type of measure for this session of Congress must take into account the fact that the religious and economic groups mentioned above wield considerable influence and are adamantly opposed to the principle of federal aid to education as popularly conceived.

Pending Bills Proposing Federal Aid

Pending in Congress at the present time is a variety of bills to extend federal aid to education in various forms. Besides two measures embodying the Catholic position, there are a few bills that would permit the allocation of federal funds within the states, in accordance with the laws and constitutions of the states, and several "special purpose" measures. Falling within this latter category are the Barden bill (HR 4468) providing for federal aid only for teachers' salaries, maintenance and operation and laboratory equipment, and HR 4545, the Bailey school construction bill. Also before the Congress is the Hill "oil-for-education" amendment to S J Res 20, permitting the

use of royalties from the undersea oil deposits of the maritime belt to be devoted to grants for elementary, secondary and higher education.

At the present time, Chairman Barden of the House Education and Labor Committee is planning a highly important committee meeting to explore thoroughly the needs for general federal aid and aid for school construction and probably to determine which type of legislation will be given priority. Observers believe that many members of the Committee are determined that hearings be held immediately on school construction legislation, although there is a continuing interest in general federal aid and some talk of legislation providing aid exclusively for teachers' salaries. The anticipated drive for school construction assistance is largely attributable to the nationwide school facilities survey now under way, authorized by the 81st Congress in Public Law 816. The first phase of this inventory is expected to be completed in the very near future and a report made to Congress detailing school building needs of virtually every state in the Union.

Regardless of what measures are considered during the session, there is a growing conviction that the federal government has a very clearcut and important responsibility to strengthen the nation's educational system and to help the states and localities meet the financial burdens of education. An adequate education for all America's youth is the strongest and most durable weapon known for combating the enemies of democracy.

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