

SEDUCTION BY FEDERAL FUNDS

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"We have the funds for that. . . ."

"There's plenty of money around. . . ."

"Sure it takes time, but think of the good all that money can do. . . ."

"I know—I know—you've got other things to do, but you have to decide on priorities, and right now these programs have priorities."

THESE and similar comments are what one hears, day after day. It is time to take a look at where we are going and how we are getting there. Let us agree at the outset that the sudden riches which have descended on education have wrought some good. That having been said, let us consider some of the problems which the various federal programs have precipitated in school districts and which must be resolved if the programs are going to stand in good repute and be continued.

A major difficulty lies in the amount of time and energy which already overburdened school personnel must devote to the formulation, organization and implementation of projects under various federal programs, whatever the relative legislation or aspects of the

legislation may be. It would appear that personnel in Washington or in state departments of education have little or no concept of inroads on time and personnel which participation in the new programs necessitates. This is true whether one is talking about Head Start, Vocational Education, NDEA, ESEA (with all its ramifications), or any other program.

Any given project requires long hours of meeting, of conferring, of planning, of telephoning, of writing on the part of many, many people. No provision of funds is made to school districts, at least in the planning stages, for personnel to perform these functions. The big question that arises is: who is assuming the responsibilities that the personnel involved in project planning used to assume—for example, visiting classrooms; conferring with individual teachers, staffs, administrators; working on curriculum development and the improvement of instruction; planning and implementing professional growth programs? The answer, all too frequently, is *no one*—and instruction and

curriculum, rather than being helped by the new affluence, are suffering.

Personnel and Time

A concomitant problem arises. Many of the new programs are applicable, through legislative restriction, to only certain areas of a school system, and even to only certain children in those areas.

What happens to the other areas and the other children? Is it reasonable that a child (who may well be, incidentally, economically and culturally disadvantaged) who lives in one part of a school district should not reap the same benefits from federal funds simply because he does not happen to live in a geographic area identified as being eligible for funds? Is it reasonable that teachers in a school in one geographic location should not have the same support in terms of consultant services, instructional resources, and special personnel as teachers in another location?

The problems increase. Many school districts, in order to qualify for funds, must initiate programs hastily. They are told, in effect, "If you don't use the funds by such and such a date, you will lose them." Aside from the hasty planning which such a mandate precipitates, perhaps an even more serious situation arises. Personnel must be found to staff the projects. Teachers who have worked with a group of children for the major part of the year suddenly leave their classrooms and assume new assignments. Oh, I know: the theory is that no one will be assigned unless the teacher and the principal agree to it. But what about the children? Are they asked? Or the parents? Are they? And there is the ever-present threat: "If you

don't use the money now, you'll lose it." So the project must roll.

(I have just received a note from a staff member relative to a Title II project for next year. A note is attached which reads, "There is urgency for this.")

All too frequently—in fact, most of the time—after staffs have spent hours in planning projects, they are told any number of things:

"There have been some changes in the regulations, and your project has to be re-written."

"There has been a cut-back in funds, so you'll have to do some slicing." (Does anyone in Washington have *any* notion of the multitudinous meetings that school personnel have spent in "slicing"?)

"You can assume that your project is approved, but we cannot give you official approval as yet." (What school system can possibly make plans, hire personnel, purchase materials and equipment, acquire space, on an *assumption*?)

"We can't guarantee you that any expenditures you have made can be reimbursed retroactively." (So who can afford to spend the money on this premise?)

"Your allocation will be fifty percent less next year than it was last year." (And this leads to all kinds of trouble. Programs have been launched, personnel hired, commitments made. Now what? Who can blame boards of education for not approving projects when there is a constant fear of the rug being pulled out from under them?)

Next Monday, our curriculum staff will convene to reduce our NDEA requests. This is only about the third time we have done this. It must now be done again without consultation with teachers or administrators, since the school year is ebbing. Many departments will be wondering what happened

to their projects, when they return to school next year. We will say, "We had to revise the projects and you weren't here for consultation,"—but this isn't going to make *anyone* any happier. And I'm getting a little tired of hearing, "But let's think about what we *did* get" (you know, if you can't have the whole slice, a crust is better than nothing), even though I've said it myself.

The more one thinks about it, the more the problems multiply. Just prior to my leaving for lunch, I overheard one side of a telephone conversation. It went like this:

We had this program ready in December. Our Board has approved it. We presented the project to the Board as a program which would be very beneficial. If you can't give me an answer, I'm going to have to go to the Board on June 14 and recommend that we drop the program—and I'm ready to do just that.

At least one half of the luncheon conversation centered on government projects. One comment: "The people in the area aren't satisfied with the way Title I money is being spent. They resent being identified as poor. They don't think they're culturally deprived; they think they're educationally deprived, and they want better education for their kids." Another comment: "Say, we've got to have those buildings ready by next Tuesday if that project is going to get started." Still another: "I have never had such a hellish year in forty years." And finally: "I've been to eight meetings on projects in the last two weeks and I've never felt so frustrated in my life."

The first comment quoted above reflects a problem that is going to have to

be resolved if the war on poverty is not to end in defeat. There are two points of view concerning the use of ESEA funds. One position is that the funds should be used primarily, if not exclusively, to improve instructional programs. The other is that more important than instruction are the social and psychological needs of the children and the communities the programs are to serve. Obviously, the two concerns are related, and it should be possible to work out a balance in the emphasis; but what is obvious is not always realized. Individuals involved in project development have their specialities and their biases, and these sometimes override consideration of the total needs of a school and community. The resultant tensions and hostilities are identifiable and depressing.

We face a problem in human relationships, too. When project funds are reduced, what happens to people who have left their regular positions to assume project responsibilities? I've been told, "We have no commitment to anyone," but that's no answer. When people assume new roles with enthusiasm and dedication, we *have* a commitment. We cannot shuffle human beings around as though they were items to be programmed into a computer.

Local Control

In providing increased funds for education, the federal government has attempted to circumvent any accusation of taking the control of education out of the hands of local school districts by insisting that the administration of funds is to be done by the state. Let me say, simply, that this has not solved the problem.

I received only today the Washington Outlook on Education report for May 25, 1966 from the NEA Division of Federal Relations. (We had to employ a man to coordinate federal projects. NEA apparently has had to set up a whole division). I read some most interesting statements in the report:¹

The report by the President's National Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children said . . . any tendency to convert the program into "general aid for the schools" should be curbed "at this time."

In an effort to spend the funds, schools have been faced with "an alarming lack of personnel."

More effort should be made to find new approaches to solving vexing educational problems.

Items 1 and 2 are related. In my opinion, a major reason for the bottlenecks in developing and implementing programs is that there are too many strings attached. I am forced to ask why we need to assume that the people who attach the strings are informed about the needs in local school districts.

I believe emphatically that if, in my own school system, we were granted general aid and allowed to use the funds where we saw the greatest needs, without the frustrations, evasions, delays and vacillations we have experienced during the past year, we could evolve programs which would be of great benefit to children.

Although I realize that many would not agree with me, I believe we have the talent, the skill and the knowledge in education to solve our problems, if we

¹"Congress Gets First-Year Report for Title I, PL 89-10." *Washington Outlook on Education* 13 (7):2; May 25, 1966.

had adequate funds to effect the solutions. We *can* develop new approaches; we *cannot* do so maximally if an office far removed constantly puts roadblocks in our way. The purpose, assumedly, of the federal programs is to stimulate innovation, not to stifle it.

Let me return to an earlier premise. There can be no doubt but that the funds now available to education can have an enormous impact for good. At least two things are going to have to be done, however, if this end is to be achieved.

1. *At least some of the funds allocated for education must be pinpointed for general aid.* Control must be really returned to the local districts in planning programs and putting them into operation.

2. *The red tape has got to be decreased.* Procedures need to be streamlined and guidelines must be firm for at least any given year.

I have not really cited all the problems the availability of federal funds has given rise to. I have not really told how to avoid being seduced by federal funds, either. I have hopefully suggested, however, that we ought to find some ways for making the experience of securing such funds less traumatic than it is at present. ☞

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