

# The Proper Federal Role in Education Today<sup>1</sup>

Keith Goldhammer

*"Essentially, the federal government has an obligation to assist in maintaining the responsiveness of the educational system and its programs to the human needs of our society." Five areas through which this federal role can be accomplished are discussed here.*

Although it is well established that education is a state and local responsibility in the United States, almost from the beginning of this nation, the federal government has been neither indifferent nor unresponsive to educational needs and developments. The efforts of the federal government to provide for a system of public education, establish a better foundation of support, encourage the extension of schooling to neglected populations, and stimulate programs that help build the human resources needed in the national interest are well documented and need no elaboration here. The controversies surrounding these issues have also been well presented.

Two significant conclusions emerge out of the analysis of the federal government's role in education: First, both the educators and the general public have been inclined to recommend that the federal government provide resources for education, but leave everything else alone—don't, in other words, associate any aspects of central control with the provision of funds!

The second conclusion is that generally, where the federal government has provided categorical assistance for the development of specific types of programs, these "stimulative" grants

have been in areas of significant social and community needs where little, if anything, was being accomplished by local communities and educators. The public response to these programs has been interesting. Both educators and public leaders have been quick to accept funds from the national treasury, while they have complained bitterly against the rules, regulations, and restrictions that have accompanied these "donations." Implicitly, if not explicitly, the federal government has adopted the role of attempting to arouse greater responsiveness on the part of both educators and public leaders to the community problems that can be solved or alleviated through education.

Over the long haul, the accomplishments have not been meager. With federal assistance, a university system, designed to broaden the curriculum and to provide for professional development in a wide range of fields, has been created. Vocational education has been established and built into programs at most levels. Special programs for the handicapped and disabled have emerged. Innovative practices, both in schools and universities, have been encouraged. New curricula

<sup>1</sup>With the assistance of Bruce Weitzel, Graduate Assistant, Michigan State University, East Lansing.

in the sciences have been implemented. Bilingual programs have been stimulated. Programs for out-of-school youth have become part of the responsibilities of local school districts. Adult and continuing education has become generally available throughout the land. Schools have had to respond to the needs of minority students within the framework of the American Constitution and system of values.

The federal impact upon education has been considerable, and it has been accomplished in 150 years by the federal government, which has been plagued with the ambiguities between control and stimulation. In all honesty, it must be admitted that the history of federal grants without control has not been inspiring; whereas, federal grants with some regulations and control have led to a greater accountability on the part of educators and public, along with the introduction and continuation of programs that have been of untold benefit to individuals formerly neglected within the educational system.

The federal government entered the arena of educational policy-making and control long ago. This has not always been good, but neither has it been universally bad. The essential point is that, regardless of the impact on the control of education and its consequent limitations of policy-making on educators and the local publics, countless citizens and their children have been the beneficiaries of this federal effort, and American schools are playing a more responsible and responsive role with respect to critical issues confronting our society.

### Federal Role in Five Areas

Given this background, what is the proper federal role in curriculum development today? Essentially, the federal government has an obligation to assist in maintaining the responsiveness of the educational system and its programs to the human needs of our society. I believe there are five discrete areas through which it can effectively accomplish this end.

#### 1. Identification of Critical Issues in Education

At the present time there is no agency in American education or American society in general that is dedicated to the identification of critical needs in education. The fragmentation of the

educational profession and the emergence of powerful pressure groups in the broader community have resulted in the identification of particular concerns to special interests, but there is little or no effort made to clarify those issues that are of utmost importance to the public interest or to the proper educational development of all children and youth. Without a disinterested identification of pressing human and societal needs related to education, the field is adrift and subject to the pressures of self-seeking interest groups.

There is no agency other than the federal government which can, at the present time, bring

Five ways in which the federal government can help the educational system and its programs to meet the needs of our society:

1. Identification of Critical Issues in Education
2. Syntheses of the State of Knowledge
3. Research To Extend and Fill-in Gaps of Knowledge
4. Application of Knowledge
5. The Preparation of Personnel To Perform New Roles in Education

together the resources and expertise that are needed to chart the future course of education, identify the most significant problems that need to be resolved, and propose the essential remedies. At one time in our recent history, these functions were performed through studies undertaken by both the U.S. Office of Education and the Educational Policies Commission. For many years, the O.E. has not engaged in such a program, and the Educational Policies Commission was the victim of the growing militancy of teachers' unions and the fragmentation of the educational profession itself. A major concern of federal educational agencies should be the establishment of the means through which both the public and the profession can be helped to identify those issues that need public and professional attention within the general configuration of educational programs and available resources.

#### 2. Syntheses of the State of Knowledge

Education, along with all other academic and

professional fields, has been affected by the explosion of knowledge; in fact, knowledge about learning, teaching, and the interrelationships of education with society has expanded beyond the ability of the profession or the public to absorb. The vast amount of available research and publications on education exceed the capability of educators to keep abreast of significant developments. Congress has been concerned with what seems to be a serious lag between the production of new knowledge about education and the adaptation of educational practices to accommodate it. Yet, without means through which syntheses of

---

*"The essential point is that . . . countless citizens and their children have been the beneficiaries of this federal effort, and American schools are playing a more responsible and responsive role with respect to critical issues confronting our society."*

---

knowledge can be made, that lag is likely to become greater rather than narrower.

One of the ways in which federal agencies can help to reduce the enlarging gap is to provide the means through which research and development in education become more readily accessible and interpretable to all levels of educators. Recent efforts of NIE in this regard should be well received, but their publications seem to be directed more to the researchers than to practitioners, who should constitute the primary audience for such publications. Some years ago, the Association of Classroom Teachers and the American Educational Research Association published a series entitled, "What Research Says to the Teacher." This worthy effort, too, was the victim of the growing militancy and fragmentation of the teaching profession. It seems today that only the federal government might be in a position to re-establish such a program.

### 3. Research To Extend and Fill-in Gaps of Knowledge

Every professional field that maintains relevance to the needs of its clientele must stimulate

intensive research on the most critical issues confronting it and must be concerned with the gaps in knowledge that result in what Dewey called "indeterminacies" of practice. Primary support for educational research has come from the federal government in recent years. Some research on a modest scale has been supported by universities, but public agencies that operate educational programs have made little effort to support or maintain fundamental research endeavors.

There are four essential areas of activities in which the federal government should be involved. First, the federal government should help to develop a stronger community of education researchers who can help to improve the quality of research in education and who can bring to bear upon educational problems the research technologies and theoretical bases of a broad variety of academic disciplines. Second, the federal government should stimulate and support the development of comprehensive research programs in areas that are basic to the improvement of performance in schools. Third, the federal government should maintain and support systems for the storage and retrieval of education research. And fourth, the federal government should expand its programs for the dissemination of the findings and implications of research in forms accessible to users and related to the programs for which they are responsible and the problems with which they must cope.

### 4. Application of Knowledge

Probably one of the most serious deficiencies in education today is the absence of discrete systems for the application and utilization of knowledge. Curriculum development has been characterized more by an existential dependence upon intuition and experience than a sound application of knowledge about teaching and learning. There are four essential areas of information that are needed in curriculum development for a school. First, there should be available to the curriculum workers detailed knowledge about the individuals to be educated; second, detailed information about the community in which the individuals live and the needs of that community as a part of the broader society should be available; third, the curriculum developer needs to know how the subject matter of the field relates to the objectives

of education and the expectations for the learners; and last, the research related to the problems of teaching and learning the particular subject matter and how it relates to the developmental needs of learners must be taken into consideration. The process of synthesizing all of these elements into a meaningful program of studies is very complex and probably approximates as much an art form as a scientific process. Nevertheless, the maximization of program benefits to learners depends upon the expertise employed in guiding this process, as well as upon the creativity in putting it all together.

The federal government has made little effort to support this type of activity and has seemed to shun the risk of capital investment that should be involved. It has had some experience in funding scholars of scientific fields to develop common school curricula, but with far less than desirable consequences. A major contribution that the federal government can and should make will be in helping to improve and refine this process of curriculum development in local schools.

I firmly support the contention that the federal government should not prescribe the curriculum. It can help to improve the ability of local educational authorities to develop more relevant and meaningful curricula by supporting three types of efforts: first, by supporting projects that show an understanding of how to incorporate the four essential elements into the process of curriculum construction; second, by supporting projects through which local school personnel will be better able to prepare community and individual-specific programs and materials; and the third way is my next major point.

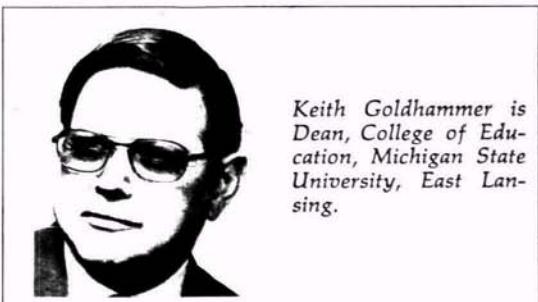
##### *5. The Preparation of Personnel To Perform New Roles in Education*

Given the state of our present knowledge, experience, and the state of human needs, not all traditional roles in education have retained their relevance and viability. The state of the art in education demands some new roles or modified definitions of traditional ones. In individual schools, for example, we need people who can appraise practices in the light of new knowledge. We need clinical diagnosticians who can help teachers both understand and prepare techniques for dealing with critical educational and adjust-

ment needs of children. We need curriculum specialists who understand both the science and the art of curriculum development. We need program evaluators and information specialists who can gather and interpret the types of data that teachers, curriculum developers, administrators, and school boards need for decision-making.

To make a decided impact upon the improvement of education in this country, the federal government should assist local agencies, universities, and state departments of education in the identification of these new roles and preparing individuals to fill them. Personnel development programs financed by the federal government have tended to be idiosyncratic. They have not been conducive of a cumulative impact in the furtherance of specific educational objectives or the resolution of serious problems. They have sometimes been unrelated to major instructional and curriculum needs and trends. A targeted program of personnel development harmonious with other identified thrusts is necessary.

The issue of control over education may be one of those straw men that tend to obscure the real issues with which we should be concerned. Educators as well as the general public should be accountable as well as responsive to current needs and problems. The entrance of the federal government has been in part an evidence of a lower level of accountability and responsiveness than our society needs. In part, it has come about because of the availability of resources on the federal level, while education has not been able to compete for scarce resources on the state and local levels as well as might be desired. Hopefully, a healthy partnership among all levels can become the means through which the needed educational improvements can take place. *EL*



Keith Goldhammer is  
Dean, College of Education,  
Michigan State University, East Lansing.

Copyright © 1978 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.