

# *The Educational "State of the Union," 1979*

Steve Hallmark

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*The critical issues of 1978 will be back in 1979. American education should call a halt to the politics of irresponsibility.*

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The tradition of using the turning of the year as a time to review the events of the past 12 months and to reflect on the direction we are going is part of our national culture. Not only do millions of Americans look at their own lives, formulating "new year's resolutions" for self-improvement, but the nation as a whole takes an official look at itself in the President's *State of the Union* message. This annual review is a Constitutional requirement, institutionalizing the concern of the nation's founders that a periodic reflective report on the "big picture" by the chief executive is essential to responsible government. They realized, as we all do intuitively, that it is easy to forget who we are and where we are going.

In this national tradition, I would like to share with you my observations on the state of education as seen from the vantage point of the nation's capital, at the beginning of a new year. What I see is not entirely pretty to look at; but if we fail to tell the truth, we cannot even begin to think constructively about where we go from here.

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### What Appeared to Happen Last Year

At first glance, the biggest educational issue of 1978 was *money*. The voters of California were more interested in keeping their property taxes down than in funding public services—including schools—at the levels most educators believe is necessary. Money was mostly what education associations and their representatives in Washington talked about much of the time in 1978. As ASCD's government relations representative, I could have gone to meetings, panel sessions, symposia, and hearings almost daily to talk about money and education. The fear generated by "Proposition 13" in Washington was almost a palpable thing—a cold, chilling wind from California (thought to be a trend-setting state) hitting the nation's capital just as Washington's annual summer heat wave was about to begin.

Proposition 13 was not the only money story. Even as voters were struggling to put some kind of lid on local and state taxes, the education lobby in Washington (now more than 300 associations strong) was bombarding the Congress and the Administration with plaintive cries for a bigger share of the federal tax dollar. Not only were education groups clamoring for more, but state governments, universities, foundations, and other interested parties also papered the halls of Congress with tons of position statements and official resolutions on why this or that special cause deserved a bigger share of the public purse.

### Drowning in Complexity

As special interests fought to increase their own appropriations and to institutionalize their concerns in provisions of this or that measure

before the Congress, the same groups could be heard bitterly complaining about the complexities, red tape, and bureaucratic tangle generated by the narrow categorical programs other groups had succeeded in establishing in past years.

These concerns led to a brief flurry of interest in consolidating some of the proliferating federal programs when the Congress debated reauthorization of the massive Elementary and Secondary Education Act last spring. The high point of the debate came in early May when the Senate Human Resources Committee voted 8 to 5 against authorizing a four-state voluntary experiment in consolidating selected federal educational programs among the states. This modest experiment, originally suggested by Senate Republicans Domenici (R-NM) and Bellmon (R-Okla.) and cosponsored by a number of Democrats (including Human Resources Chairman Randolph of West Virginia and Magnuson of Washington) failed mainly because of the fears of special interest groups. If the experiment succeeded, they reasoned, the **entire** edifice of special interest legislation might **begin** to fall apart.

### Creating New Special Interests

Even as the Congress voted down this modest experiment in paperwork reduction and consolidation, **new** categorical programs were added to the Special Projects Act, bringing the number of narrowly conceived federal programs to an all-time high. When the Congress complains that it is being overrun by special interest lobbies, both members and staffers seem to forget that each new special purpose written into law creates a new lobby group dedicated to expanding the new program and demanding additional funds in subsequent Congressional sessions.

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The major proposal of the Administration—to bring coherence and focus to education at the national level by consolidating education-related programs in a new Department of Education—was cut to pieces on Capitol Hill by categorical groups who *did not want* the Administration and the Congress to put all of these logically related programs in the same agency with the same appropriation. They feared, probably with good reason, that this would make it easier to pare down duplication of programs. By the time everyone who did not want to be in the new department had been excluded from the measure, there was little left that was **not already** part of the present Education Division of HEW. In the final hours of the 95th Congress, opponents prevented a floor vote in the House (which surely would have enacted the measure if it had come to a vote) by threatening to debate more than 200 amendments to the measure. That would have kept the Congress in session through the November elections.

### **Public Distrust of Educators— Is This the No. 1 Problem?**

In an off-the-record briefing called by the White House for education groups supporting the Education Department proposal, Vice-President Walter Mondale characterized the "lack of public confidence in education as an institution" as the number one problem facing educators. There is something to be said for his analysis. "Proposition 13" fever as it spreads through the states is fueled partly by a growing public consensus that government spends money irresponsibly. Resentment against perceived "waste" is matched by national opinion polls that show an increasing percentage of the electorate believing that edu-

cators cannot be trusted to police their own programs.

This distrust was reflected nationally in the strong showing made by supporters of tuition tax credits. They failed to enact a national program of deductions for taxpayers who send their children to nonpublic schools, but it was only because House and Senate conferees could not agree on whether to include elementary and secondary schools along with colleges and universities in the program. The national trend to establish statewide competency testing of students reflects the same suspicion—that public education is not quality education.

If this assessment is accurate, the decision of the National Education Association to mount a half-million dollar national media blitz to alter public perception of the value of public education programs may turn out to be a good idea. Some Washington observers have dismissed the campaign out of hand as a belated attempt to "buy back" a disenfranchised constituency. Others feel, perhaps cynically, that "advertising sells soap; maybe it can sell bond issues." Personally, I don't think it will work, whatever its intention.

### **What Experts Say**

As the year moved on, people who make a living as the gurus of the education industry had plenty of analyses to sell their clients in and out of government. Some blamed the President for lack of leadership. These observers, while acknowledging that this Administration had proposed (and Congress had enacted) the largest federal aid to education measures in history, sharply criticized the way the Administration put its proposals together and especially the inept manner in which Administration loyalists pre-

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sented the President's case to the Congress. "Too little, too late" was the phrase used time and time again to characterize the inability of Carter's people to come to agreement on their own proposals in time for Congress to consider them seriously. The Department of Education bill—promised by the President in his *State of the Union* message—did not show up in the form of a specific legislative proposal until it was almost too late for the House and Senate to consider it. The delay certainly made it easier for opponents of the measure to use their own tactics to prevent passage. The Administration's ESEA proposals, drafted with much fanfare in six months of open hearings across the nation, reached the House Education Committee so late that members spent, literally, only a few minutes debating the proposals before dismissing them out of hand and passing their own committee version of reauthorization. The President's people then spent months playing "catch-up" trying to get their ideas included in the bill piece-meal, provision-by-provision, as amendments. That the Congress was finally able to pass the measure during its final hours was an impressive display of determination and sleepless nights that might have been avoided had the Administration's legislative homework been turned in on time.

Other experts took a more reflective view, pointing out that the very diversity and differentiation of responsibility for educational administration among the 50 states precludes any substantial federal role in educational policy making—with one conspicuous exception: issues of equity and equality. These academicians and think-tank consultants argue that the very diffusion of legal responsibility for education limits the federal role to an essentially negative influence: "Thou shalt not segregate," "Thou shalt

not separate the handicapped," and so on. These observers argue that federal policy is an inherently limited instrument that can promote equity, but that cannot, by its very nature, effectively promote quality.

### Prospects for 1979

None of the major issues discussed by either the experts or the Congress was resolved definitively in 1978. The national tax limitation movement is moving forward at break-neck speed in the states, with a growing number of groups calling for enactment of a Federal Constitutional Amendment permanently limiting national government spending. Advocates of tuition tax credits, tasting victory, have promised a major campaign to enact legislation that some feel might destroy the historic concept of "public education" as a vehicle for promoting civic virtues needed in a pluralistic society. Education interest groups in Washington are girding their loins for what many public educators feel is the coming "Battle of Armageddon" against the forces favoring what Senator Moynihan, the architect of tuition tax credits, calls euphemistically "freedom of choice" in education.

### A Debate on National Purpose?

There is a growing belief, widely shared by a diverse community of thinkers, that America is adrift from its moorings, lacking clear direction and purpose. These commentators are saying that America is suffering from "me-ism," a shift away from caring about others towards a more selfish appraisal of how this or that governmental program benefits "me" personally.

Fifty-nine of the nation's legislators (a new

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record) threw in the towel, wringing their hands in helpless fury at what they saw as domination by the politics of selfishness. Voluntarily relinquishing their positions in Washington, they went home to stay, choosing not to stand for re-election. With the exception of Senator Edward Kennedy's outspoken advocacy of national health insurance, there is not a single major political figure advocating new programs designed to assist lower income people. I can speak about this personally, having served as Operations Director of Veterans for McGovern-Shriver during the 1972 campaign. Few of the people I have worked with over the years I have spent following national politics are openly willing to call themselves a "liberal" or an idealist any longer.

This shift, seen as "conservative" by some, is still a new phenomena—too new to draw premature conclusions. To date, conservatives do not seem to be faring much better at the polls than anyone else. Instead, the trend seems to be away from any disciplined, organized conception of what should be done. The new national mood seems to be "leave me alone."

I suspect that the present low-key debate on our apparent loss of direction will grow louder during the course of 1979. We will see more editorials calling for a "rededication to patriotism" or to the needs of the community as a whole in the coming months.

### Where Do We Go From Here?

I would like to conclude by sharing with you my own assessment of what is going on and what role there is for educational leadership in 1979.

I believe we are witnessing the *enshrinement of the politics of irresponsibility* in education. The underlying problem facing American education is

neither the lack of money, nor selfishness per se. These are symptoms. The disease is the unwillingness of anyone to accept responsibility for our collective experience that conditions in schools are unsatisfactory to many people. Parents blame teachers and the system. Teachers blame administrators, school boards, and the media. State legislators and the Congress blame collective bargaining, teachers, administrators, and the Supreme Court.

No one has volunteered to step forward and say, "The buck stops here. I am responsible—at least in part—for the present state of affairs." The national pastime in education has become name-calling.

The insidious evil of this point of view is not obvious to the many well-intentioned educators who participate in the fruitless endeavor to assign responsibility to someone else. If you as an educator are not, at least in some measure, responsible for what is happening, *there is nothing you can do to change things.*

I am not saying that others do not share in this responsibility. Ultimately, we all share in the responsibility for anything we have the power to change or influence. But the starting point for you and me personally and for educators collectively is a willingness to acknowledge that in some way what we have done or have failed to do has contributed to the present state of affairs.

I believe that the tide will begin to turn in favor of a humane school environment, in favor of opportunities for each child to reach his or her full potential, only when some major actor in the national melodrama of heaping the blame on others calls this unproductive display to a halt. I would like to think that our association and our profession will in the coming months seriously consider publicly acknowledging that we have not yet realized our ideals and that we have fallen

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short of the mark we set for ourselves when we chose education as our vocation.

Such a public "confession of faith" in our capacity and power to do differently in the future will give us a base of credibility from which to engage our contemporaries in the kind of cooperative community renewal process needed to transform our nation's schools. I like to think of the willingness to make this call to renewal as the essence of educational leadership.



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