

# The Way I See It

We Can't Get There From Here\*

Samuel Halperin

Our present federal aid system is inadequate and has not yet obtained sufficient results to justify the substantial public investments in it. It is inconceivable that federal aid programs and federal education agencies, as structured today, can meet tomorrow's demands. In short, we can't get there from here.

## Overload: Too Much Complexity, Too Much Change

I am an unreconstructed champion of federal aid to education generally, and of categorical aid in particular. But sometimes a good thing can be carried too far!

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there are now almost 1,100 federal education and training programs. Depending on how they're counted, the U.S. Office of Education manages at least 130. This amount of programming is counterproductive, because educators and implementing bureaucracies are faced with a degree of complexity that must ultimately be self-defeating. True, these programs can be "managed" in the sense that the agencies can pass out their appropriations on time, with complete compliance to managerial rulebooks. But so many programs—spreading dollars, expectations, and dreams a mile wide and an inch deep—can never measure up to their potential. The human mind cannot comprehend



*Samuel Halperin is Director, Institute for Educational Leadership, The George Washington University, Washington, D.C.*

that degree of complexity. The mind focuses on a few central tasks and defaults on a host of others. *Everything* can't be a priority.

As the president of California's State Board of Education, Michael W. Kirst has written: "The question becomes how much change can an organization take, and continue to deal effectively with its clients?" This is a particularly cogent question, since the way we Americans seem to cope with change is by loading a new reform or innovation onto the old system, scarcely ever reducing the original burdens. Shall we have Minimum Competency Examinations, School

Site Management, Individual Educational Plans? Yes! Let's add them to Team Teaching, Early Childhood Programs, PPBS, MBO, ZBB, Flexible Scheduling, Open Classrooms, Educational Television, and so on, and so on. And then we mandate or promote new curricula for every new problem or emphasis of society: Intergroup Relations, Driver Education, Sex Education, Drug and Alcohol Education, Consumer Education, Metric Education, Environmental Education, Career Education, Global Education. The list continues.

Federal aid objectives are far too ambitious in scope for the amount of actual assistance they render to educational institutions. In a country as large as ours, we cannot hope to achieve large goals—such as educating all handicapped, educationally disadvantaged, and non-English speaking children—as long as our resources are as widely dispersed and our personnel as thinly stretched as they are today.

A major re-assessment and re-evaluation of categorical programs is long overdue. However, that process must be based on goodwill. It should start from the assumption that the goal is not to reduce the amount of federal assistance but, if at all possible, to increase it in the interest of more effective learning. Increase it to the point that the federal contribution is large enough that one can legitimately

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measure what difference it makes in the achievement of school districts—and maybe even individual schools and students. Not like the present mode in which we appropriate \$5-10 million in Washington and then expect “results” in the academic lives of 50 million Americans!

#### How the Congress Can Help

In my opinion, one of the most important ways the Congress could help American education meet the changes and challenges of the

1980s would be to develop a few clearly articulated themes or roles of federal aid and then to pursue them consistently and in a financially responsible fashion—over a period of years, not subject to the ups and downs of educational whim and fancy.

This last point deserves underscoring. School systems throughout the country still regard federal aid programs as “temporary.” Perhaps a new administration will wish to de-fund an “old” program? Perhaps a new Congress will change its tastes in federal aid

fashions? Even with forward funding, what assurance is there that the Executive Branch won't try to impound or rescind an appropriation? Since the Congress reauthorizes programs virtually every two or three years—and HEW's guidelines and regulations lag one to three years behind the new law—educators and administrators scarcely know whom to believe: their educational associations in Washington who faithfully report what the Congress has authorized and promised for the future? Or

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scribes specific skills and knowledge areas, suggests questions to pose in planning or assessing a school reading program, and gives examples of activities that will help fulfill program objectives. Developed with funds from the National Institute of Education, it is available at \$1.50 per copy from Publications Sales, California State Department of Education, P.O. Box 271, Sacramento, CA 95802.

## Principles

To what extent does your curriculum reflect any or all of the so-called "guiding principles" enunciated by the National Academy of Education in *The Appropriate Federal Role in Education*? This 1979 publication suggests that "the people of the U.S. have important educational concerns that can and should be expressed by their federal government, and they have social goals that can legitimately be sought through educational-related federal programs."

Evidently the federal government has legitimate concerns/actions in these areas: (a) Reducing gross disparities in educational opportunity; (b) Providing the nation with a broad view of the purposes and possibilities of education in our society; and (c) Encouraging and promoting the creativity, strength, and diversity of state, local, and private educational institutions.

For the full report, send \$3.50 plus 50¢ handling cost to National Academy of Education, 11 Dupont Circle, NW, Washington, D.C. 20036.

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## Quote

"I do not think special training for women entering leadership positions is necessary. As this training is usually conceived, it assumes that women do not know how to handle power and authority and need to have this deficit 'fixed up' in a training program. Anyone observing a mother of a large family directing and organizing would realize that the problem does not lie in an inability to wield power over those who are subordinate and dependent. Leadership training also assumes that there is a set of skills characteristic of organizational leadership which can be learned and transferred across a variety of tasks and situations. The social psychological studies of leadership do not bear out this assumption; leadership appears to be task-specific."—*Elizabeth G. Cohen, Professor of Education and Sociology, Stanford University.*

## Rural Teaching

The first lesson for revitalizing rural schools is that any effort to improve them must begin in the mold of traditions, values, and beliefs in which the school is set. Rural teachers need to be aware of the many innovations which might enrich their instruction, but their top priority must be to get to know their own community.

That's not bad advice for any innovator, incidentally. But the quote comes from a modest paperback called

*Schooling in Isolated Communities* by Tom Gjelten. Chapter headings include "The Setting," "The Model," "The Curriculum," "Modern Methods," "Moving Out," "Switching Places," "It's OK to Stay," "The Teacher," and "Resources." Some 104 pages of readable, nonpedagogical prose describe a project located on an island off the Maine Coast. To order, send \$3 to North Haven Project, Box 13, Portland, ME 04112.

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the Executive rulemakers who, sometime in the future, will have much to say about the substance of those plans and promises?

I believe it would be highly desirable for the Congress to consider a moratorium on reauthorizations of major educational programs. We need to get away from the syndrome identified by a former U.S. Commissioner of Education in which the Congress routinely pulls programs up by the roots in order to see how they are growing. We need to send clear signals to the people in the field, assuring them—as much as humanly possible—that at least certain central federal aid programs are here to stay. We need to encourage state and local educational leaders to integrate federal aid into their own long-range planning and into their own comprehensive school finance programs.

Only in that way can the dreams of the past and the challenges of the future be merged into a credible present for all who care about the federal aid system in education.

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