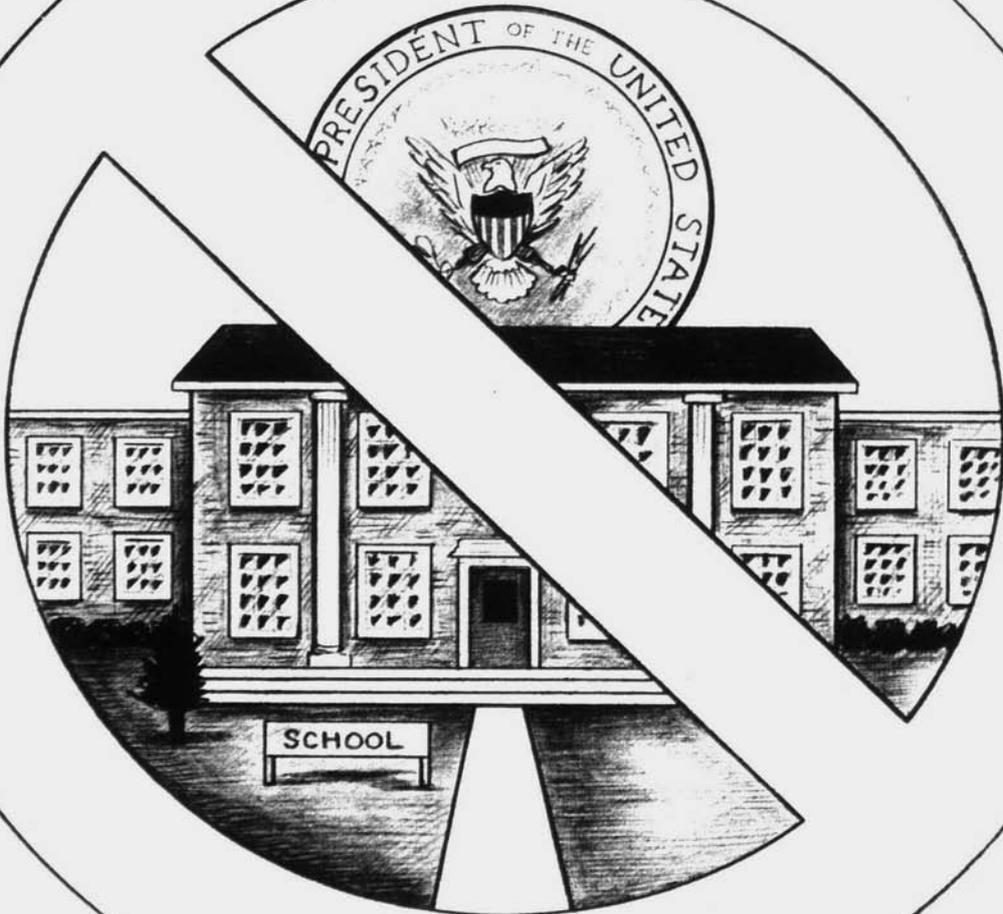


Presidents Don't Make

ANNE LEWIS



Education Policy

The Washington education scene of the past few years—the one most visible to the public—has focused more on personalities than on policymaking. Small talk among education interest groups centered on just when Education Secretary Terrel Bell would leave administration in-fighting and return to Utah. Or the topic would turn to the latest outrageous statement or attempted coup by Reagan appointees in the Department of Education. And for the past year, President Reagan himself provided grist for party chatter, as he stumped the country with bully-pulpit speeches about merit pay, school discipline, and academic standards, primarily local issues.

Some would disagree with this assessment, feeling that the Reagan administration's actions have spoken louder than words. Civil rights advocates are justified in believing the administration has scuttled the programs and policies that gradually were fulfilling the promises of American democracy. Association lobbyists probably will not be satisfied until the education budget cuts suffered in 1981 are restored. And those looking for federal education grants and contracts have worked harder for leaner pickings. By and large, however, educators are still climbing Capitol Hill to discuss the same major programs that existed before this administration took office. Rachel Tompkins,¹ pragmatic former head of the Children's Defense Fund and one who might be expected to be a leading alarmist about Reagan administration policies, points out that despite the budget cuts and talk about change, "the basic programs are still intact." Denis Doyle,² director of edu-

cation projects for the American Enterprise Institute, the "thinking man's" center for conservative policy analysis, probably would like to say the Reagan administration has made things different. But three years into the new administration, Doyle conceded that other than budget cuts and some consolidation of programs, with resultant reduction in federal paperwork, not much has changed. The administration missed its opportunity to radically alter the federal role in education because of a few failures—the defeat of tuition tax credits, the inability to find a Congressional sponsor for dismantling the Department of Education, and energy wasted on the school prayer controversy.

Why has the federal role in education been so resistant to change? Education lobbyists would like to claim credit, but the pattern for current federal education policy was established more than 60 years ago.

In 1917 Congress approved the Vocational Education Act to encourage occupational training for specific fields. After World War II, the School Lunch Act and the impact aid program came along, targeted at problems perceived to be national requiring solutions that crossed state lines. Except for the paperwork associated with the commodities provided under the School Lunch Act, these federal programs attached few strings to funding, and neither did the National Defense Education Act a few years later. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 continued this policy of pinpointing federal education aid on national priorities, focusing on the disadvantaged and on improving the leadership of education agencies in order to make improvements.

The circumstances were changing, however. According to Michael Resnick,³ federal specialist for the Nation-

The Reagan administration may talk about drastic changes, but Congress will continue to decide.

al School Boards Association, in the 1970s the federal role in education was considered essential to an enforcement role for civil rights, which Congress had established as a national priority in response to legal, political, and moral mandates. Also, as the ante became higher, Congress began to build accountability into the program language.

Another new ingredient was that Congressional committees were waking up to the political importance of education. Jack Jennings, counsel for the elementary, secondary, and vocational education subcommittee in the

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House since 1969, notes that leadership on the education committees for years had been dominated by a coalition of Southern Democrats and Republicans. In 1958 House Speaker Sam Rayburn broke up that cozy voting block by appointing more liberal members to the committee, including John Brademas of Indiana, Roman Pucinski of Illinois, and Jim O'Hara of Michigan. "The new group stayed on the Committee until the late 1960s and early 1970s and contributed heavily to the evolution of the federal role in education," Jennings explains.⁴ Although they have asked more questions and expected more accountability, new committee members have continued the commitments, guided until summer 1984 by the same chairman since 1967, Rep. Carl Perkins of Kentucky.

Further, attempted budget cutting by the Nixon/Ford administrations convinced Congress that it should not trust an executive branch inimical to education; therefore, its legislation became increasingly prescriptive, according to George Kaplan, now retired from the Institute of Educational Leadership. Only rarely in the 1970s, he notes, "did the heavily Democratic Congressional committees concerned with education bother, beyond the staging of pro forma hearings, to consult with the executive branch. Senior Congressional aides and executive branch officials once met informally and found common ground that often evolved into federal education policy; by the early 1970s, the practice had all but disappeared."⁵ Buoyed by the gradual strengthening of education committee staffs on both sides of the aisle, Congress became and has remained the whole show on education policy in Washington. All else is backdrop.

No one on Capitol Hill ever sat down and wrote out the scenario for the tradition that was accumulating as the national policy on education; but it evolved in a steady, consistent pattern. As Resnick points out, Congress linked education to defense, the economy, poverty, and civil rights and "was not willing to leave to haphazard change that state and local government could or would upgrade their educational funding priorities to meet those federal priorities."

President Reagan's first year in office temporarily blemished this Congressional record. The Education Consolidation and Improvement Act was adopted as part of the Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1981 with no studies, hearings, or written record to indicate the thinking behind the lawmakers' actions. It crammed many small priorities and one big one—desegregation aid—into a consolidated block grant, replacing federal priority setting with that of local school districts and states. Overall education spending was reduced by \$400 million. However, that was just about the end of major changes in education policy.

President Reagan's budgets since then have proposed slashing education funding considerably—and have been ignored. For fiscal 1985, he proposed a slight overall increase in funding with major shifts within the budget, mostly to increase the Chapter 2 block grant—a formula distribution program whereby every school district shares in the pork barrel. Congress, at press time, agreed somewhat with the idea but designated funding priorities so much that Chapter 2 is beginning to look like a loose configuration of new categorical programs. The steamroller on domestic programs temporarily may have flattened the influence of education interests in Washington and the willingness of Congress to protect

the programs it created. Yet in the past two years Congress has rejected education budget cuts, turned back tuition tax credits and school prayer, and begun to reconsider targeting funds at specific needs, proposing and holding hearings on a variety of new categorical aid programs. There have been bills to fund a concentration on math and science (tacked-on to one of these is a renewal of separate funding for desegregation), to focus monies for basic skills on high schools, to encourage and support education initiatives, to encourage more academically qualified candidates for teaching, and to provide incentives for expanding day-care services. If an appropriations measure passes this year, education has a real chance to recoup some, but certainly not all, lost ground.

Congress has done its reading of the public mood. Public opinion polls show consistent support for increased federal aid for education. Every commission study or report on education has cited a federal role. Through resolutions and reports, governors and state legislators have endorsed an appropriately designed and funded federal presence in education. Few thoughtful leaders buy President Reagan's argument that declines in student academic achievement parallel the rise in federal aid over the past two decades; lawmakers recognize this assertion as simplistic.

But, three blocks down from Capitol Hill, the Department of Education epitomizes the personality factor. Only beginning to sense what it was and could do as the Carter administration left office, the department was like a toddler raising itself off the floor to take its first steps—when the Reagan administration zapped it from behind. It has since found it safer to hold on to broadly worded commission reports and paper awards.

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Under the Reagan administration, department leaders have gone to Capitol Hill to argue for budget cuts in education programs. They tell committee members concerned with the impact of technology that schools and the private sector can adequately take care of the problem. The department produced a scare memo on discipline problems⁸ in schools as unfair as it was outdated. For a time, proposed research agendas at the National Institute of Education sounded like manifestos from the Far Right.⁹ These activities do not inspire confidence on Capitol Hill, where committees and their staffs are accustomed to prolonged, deliberative study of complex problems and proposed policies (except, sometimes, in political campaign years when they mix religion and politics).

What is perhaps most unsettling to Congress and throughout Washington is that the administration frequently has appointed people to administer programs they do not support. From those advising about the small sex equity grants to the massive Chapter 1 program for the disadvantaged, many appointees consider that they are administering the welfare state; and if the programs cannot be consolidated as they wish or eliminated, as often is the goal, they must be altered into something more acceptable. For example, Washington has heard proposals to turn Chapter 1 into a voucher program for poor parents. The department refused to establish guidelines for allocation and evaluation of Chapter 2, leaving the purposes of the program open to 50-plus interpretations and probably to eventual conclusions by federal studies that the program is a mess. Department officials¹⁰ unashamedly say that educational standards began to deteriorate when certain groups such as minorities began to get

attention in educational programs. State officials often see program audits as harassments.

Some of those who speak for and administer at the Department of Education not only philosophically distrust policy making at the federal level but also couch their views in terms of their definition of “family policy.” This so-called policy is the wellspring of attitudes favoring tuition tax credits or the conversion of other programs into parental choices. The family policy views sometimes seem narrow and oblivious to changing family needs. For example, advocates outside the government support an administration policy proposal that single teen-age mothers who receive Aid to Families with Dependent Children be required to remain at home with their parents.

Keeping outsiders guessing whether he is victim or villain, Terrel Bell maintains his integrity primarily by capitalizing on the attention to the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, which he appointed early in his term.¹¹ He personally cleaned up the excessive politicking at the National Institute of Education; and while the new director, Manuel Justiz, has made some mistakes, they stem more from unfamiliarity with the politics of education in Washington than from an ideological agenda.

Bell and Reagan claim a turnaround in education standards because of *A Nation at Risk*, but most educators and the media view the report as an executive summary of the reasons that changes already were taking place. Bell's emphasis on recognizing quality—in schools, principals, teachers, and students—has been welcomed by an education community more accustomed to a slap in the face by the media than a pat on the back by national leadership.

However, many observers feel that giving Academic Fitness Awards to more than 200,000 graduating high school seniors and their families, and giving excellence awards to various schools, principals, and teachers with ceremonies in Washington, serve a purpose beyond honoring excellence in education. It is again the bully-pulpit solution in a presidential election year, superficial answers to substantive issues that require more understanding of the evolving role of the federal government, one dictated by future needs and not past practices.

Great presidents “didn't revile the government,” former Senator Adlai Stevenson III said last year. “They recognized that it was our only means of collective action.” Education—especially the action or lack of it taken by the Reagan administration—is now a campaign issue. The Democrats talk about new—and categorical—thrusters. President Reagan continues to push tuition tax credits and school prayer and may yet contend that schools could be improved by putting more drama into saying of the Pledge of Allegiance. And Congress next year will look at the huge budget deficit and at the unfinished or new agendas and unfurling national needs in education and decide what the collective action can be. □

¹Interview, Rachel Tompkins, June 1984.

²Press Conference, Denis Doyle, American Enterprise Institute, February 14, 1984.

³Michael Resnick, *The Federal Role in Education, A Foundation for the Future*. (Alexandria, Va.: National School Boards Association, 1982).

⁴Institute for Educational Leadership, *Educational Policy in the Carter Years*. (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Educational Leadership, n.d.).

⁵Ibid.

⁶“The Presidency—1984,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 14 (Winter 1984), p. 18.

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